

Organizational Culture

# In the Company of Givers and Takers

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**Summary.** Reprint: R1304G Employees make decisions every day about whether to contribute to others—and their willingness to help is crucial to group and organizational effectiveness. But in a competitive, often zero-sum,... [more](#)

Every day, employees make decisions about whether to act like *givers* or like *takers*. When they act like givers, they contribute to others without seeking anything in return. They might offer assistance, share knowledge, or make valuable introductions. When they act like takers, they try to get other people to serve their ends while carefully guarding their own expertise and time.

Organizations have a strong interest in fostering giving behavior. A willingness to help others achieve their goals lies at the heart of effective collaboration, innovation, quality improvement, and service excellence. In workplaces where such behavior becomes the norm, the benefits multiply quickly. Consider a landmark meta-analysis led by Nathan Podsakoff, of the University of Arizona. His team examined 38 studies of organizational behavior, representing more than 3,500 business units and many different industries, and found that the link between employee giving and desirable business outcomes was surprisingly robust. Higher rates of giving were predictive of higher unit profitability, productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction, along with lower costs and turnover rates. When employees act like givers, they facilitate efficient problem solving and coordination and build cohesive, supportive cultures that appeal to customers, suppliers, and top talent alike.

But even as leaders recognize the importance of generous behavior and call for more of it, workers receive mixed messages about the advisability of acting in the interests of others. As the Cornell economist Robert Frank observes, many employees are subject to organizational reward systems that feel zero-sum: In promotion decisions, only one person advances, while the rest are left behind. In forced-ranking performance evaluations, for every employee who earns a five, another must be given a one. In competitive bonus pools, more money to stars means less for the rest. These situations pit employees against one another, encouraging them to undercut rather than support their colleagues' efforts. Even without a dog-eat-dog scoring system, strict delineation of responsibilities and a focus on individual performance metrics can cause a "not my job" mentality to take hold.

As employees look around their organizations for models of success, they encounter further reasons to be wary of generosity. A study by the Stanford professor Frank Flynn highlighted this problem. When he examined patterns of favor exchange among the engineers in one company, he found that the least-productive engineers were givers—workers who had done many more favors

for others than they'd received. I made a similar discovery in a study of salespeople: The ones who generated the least revenue reported a particularly strong concern for helping others.

But neither finding was that simple. When Flynn turned his spotlight on the top-producing engineers, he saw that they, too, were givers who did more favors than they received. Somehow they managed to produce large quantities of high-quality work while helping their colleagues succeed. And when I focused on the salespeople with the highest revenues, I found that they had unusually high scores on the desire to benefit others. These successful givers produced 50% more annual revenue, on average, than colleagues who focused less on helping others. In both cases, generosity appeared to sink some employees to the bottom while propelling others to the top.

This creates a challenge for managers. Can they promote generosity without cutting into productivity and undermining fairness? How can they avoid creating situations where already-generous people give away too much of their attention while selfish coworkers feel they have even more license to take? How, in short, can they protect good people from being treated like doormats?

## **Givers need to distinguish generosity from three other attributes—timidity, availability, and empathy.**

Part of the solution must involve targeting the takers in the organization—providing incentives for them to collaborate and establishing repercussions for refusing reasonable requests. But even more important, my research suggests, is helping the givers act on their generous impulses more productively. The key is for employees to gain a more nuanced understanding of what generosity is and is not. Givers are better positioned to succeed when they distinguish generosity from three other attributes—timidity, availability, and empathy—that tend to travel with it.

### **Overcoming Timidity by Becoming an Agent**

Let's begin with timidity. This trait needn't have anything to do with generosity, but it often plagues givers. Timidity is the opposite of assertiveness, which is easy to associate with takers: They know what they want, and they're not shy about demanding it. For a giver, however, the goal of acting in others' interests can make it difficult to assert one's own. Managers can help the givers in their organizations tease the two concepts apart and learn techniques for appropriate self-advocacy that feel compatible with generosity.

I saw a deft combination of generosity and assertiveness in action when a management consultant I'll call Erica put in for a transfer from Southeast Asia to New York. Erica was and is the model of a giver. She routinely volunteers for unpopular projects, gives up vacation time to help her manager, sacrifices personal time to go the extra mile for clients, and mentors analysts whom her colleagues view as lost causes.

After living abroad for several years, Erica was ready to return to the United States. Her ideal location was New York City, because she had family nearby. But she knew that the firm had a shortage of consultants in Asia and was overstaffed in New York. Like many givers, Erica was unwilling to impose on her employer and felt uncomfortable putting her own interests first.

At the time, Erica was enrolled in a negotiation course that I taught. To strengthen her resolve, I suggested that instead of advocating only for herself, she should consider how the request would benefit others. She thought about how much it would mean to her family to have her close to home. Suddenly Erica became more assertive: She initiated a conversation with a manager about her interests and successfully negotiated a transfer to New York.

Erica's triumph over timidity is illuminated by a fascinating study led by the Harvard professor Hannah Riley Bowles. Bowles and

her colleagues asked nearly 200 senior executives to sit down in pairs and role-play a salary negotiation, with one person acting as the boss and the other acting as an employee who was being promoted. The researchers were looking for gender differences, and they found them. The male “employees” landed salaries of \$146,000, on average, while the females got \$141,000, or 3% less. The women did not drive as hard a bargain as the men did; they were more inclined to be givers.

But another group of women bargained for an average salary of \$167,000, topping the men by 14%. What was different about them? Instead of playing the employee, they had been instructed to act as the employee’s mentor. It’s safe to assume that these women had the same tendencies toward giving as the first group. Because of the role they took on, however, those tendencies amplified, rather than detracted from, their tenacity at the negotiating table. When they saw themselves as agents representing the interests of others, being tough was completely consistent with their self-images as givers. Each was fulfilling her responsibility to a mentee who mattered to her.

Similarly, when Erica was vying for her transfer, casting herself as an agent enabled her to transform a weakness into a strength. The very concern for others that left her reluctant to fight for herself gave her the courage she needed to lobby for the transfer. It also gave her a legitimate way to ask without appearing to be a taker.

By explaining that she wanted to be closer to her family in New York, Erica made use of a “relational account”—a justification or an explanation for a personal request that emphasizes concern for others. In another study led by Bowles, when women requested higher salaries, using relational accounts increased the likelihood that their requests would be granted, without sacrificing their reputations for generosity. As the researchers explain, relational accounts signal that the requester is “other-oriented and caring, giving rather than taking in character.”

Researchers tend to emphasize advocacy as a valuable strategy for women, but it can be useful to male givers as well. One example is a Google employee named Brian, who volunteers large amounts of his time to orient and mentor new hires. According to a colleague, “Brian exemplifies what it means to be a generous, open person.” Like many givers, Brian hesitates to assert himself; for instance, he has never asked for a raise. Yet when he learned that budget constraints might prevent some colleagues from receiving a bonus for finishing a major project, he immediately stepped up and began negotiating with a vice president. “I don’t usually like to ask for favors,” Brian says, “but I can rationalize it when it’s for someone else.” Brian succeeded in getting the bonus for his colleagues—and he never told anyone he was behind it.

These examples suggest a strategy for managers who want to make sure the givers in their organizations don’t succumb to



timidity: They can teach employees who are uncomfortable with self-advocacy to shift their frames of reference and advocate for others using relational accounts. The first step is to ask employees to think of others who share their interests. A colleague, perhaps, or a customer, supplier, direct report, friend, or family member? Having identified a beneficiary, the employee might make a verbal commitment to help that person. Then it's time to target the right audience and begin to advocate, making all due reference to those relational accounts.

### **Setting Limits on Availability**

As we interact with networks of hundreds or thousands of people, numerous requests for help land on our desks. Many givers are inclined to accommodate them all—neglecting their own responsibilities, setting themselves up for burnout, or leaving their time at the mercy of takers.

At one *Fortune* 500 software company, a group of engineers worried that they had taken generosity too far. They had developed a norm of dropping everything to help their colleagues. The team was working on the code for a new laser printer, but frequent interruptions were delaying progress. To avoid falling further behind schedule, a few of the engineers stopped giving. One said, “I am careful not to establish a reputation for being helpful, because people would come to me all the time.” Another

made a habit of snapping at colleagues who interrupted with requests. “You have to be rude,” he confessed, “or people will walk all over you.” But most of the engineers knew that the success of the product depended on sharing expertise, and they ended up helping others during the day and working nights and weekends to finish their own tasks. This wasn’t a sustainable solution. Many sacrificed sleep and burned out, and the interruptions started spilling over into nights and weekends.

Leslie Perlow, a Harvard Business School professor, proposed a solution. The engineers could set aside windows during which they were not allowed to interrupt one another. After some trial and error, the team earmarked Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 9 AM until noon for quiet time, leaving the rest of the week for collaborative work, including helping one another solve problems.

Perlow found that the quiet time yielded above-average productivity for 65% of the engineers. Three months later the team launched the laser printer, right on schedule. It was only the second time in the history of the division that a product had launched without delays, and the vice president credited the quiet time as the reason.

Instead of accommodating every request for help, givers need to set boundaries. As the example of the engineers demonstrates,

employees should establish limits on *when* to help. Jason Geller, Deloitte Consulting's HR transformation leader, is a compelling role model in this respect. He offers to mentor every new hire in the practice—which could easily consume all his time. To guard against that possibility, he schedules his mentoring meetings for Fridays, reserving the rest of the week for his own work. The plan has been effective: Geller made partner at age 30, reaching that milestone in nine years instead of the traditional 12 to 15.

Geller also sets boundaries on *how* he helps. Instead of accepting every request himself, he often asks his managers to help mentor junior analysts. Over time this strategy has enabled him to develop a network of givers to share the mentoring load. Although many givers are uncomfortable seeking help for themselves, in this context Geller is an agent, asking on behalf of others. Indeed, studies led by the Carnegie Mellon psychologist Vicki Helgeson suggest that one of the critical distinctions between self-sacrificing givers and successful ones is the willingness to seek support. “It helps me scale a bit,” Geller says.

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## **successful ones is the willingness to seek help from others.**

It also makes sense for givers to be selective as to *whom* they help. It's probably unrealistic to expect that they will outright refuse to help others, even inveterate takers. But leaders can point out a middle ground: When dealing with takers, givers can be *matchers*. Instead of helping with no strings attached, matchers hold takers accountable for their behavior, helping them only if they will reciprocate by helping the matcher—or others—in return. Kathy, a senior executive at a financial services company, used to spend a great deal of time helping colleagues who failed to reciprocate. “Now I’m completely attuned to who’s giving in a similar way and who isn’t,” she says. “When I’m working with someone who could take advantage, I change up my style.” When a colleague with a reputation as a taker transferred to Kathy’s department, she decided to base their working relationship on a clear understanding. “I’ve heard some concerns about you being selfish,” she said to him. “Just so you know, that’s not how I operate, and I hope that’s not how we’re going to work together.” The colleague changed his stripes. “I don’t know that he changed with other people, but I definitely know that in our relationship, we established an understanding,” Kathy reflects, adding, “You might be the kind of person to do that to other people, but you’re not going to do it to me.”

When takers deny requests, they appear selfish. But givers often have latitude to decline without losing their colleagues' respect. Their track records grant them what the psychologist Edwin Hollander once called “idiosyncrasy credits”—the freedom to deviate from norms without being punished. Idiosyncrasy credits can provide givers with the discretion to set boundaries on when, how, and whom to help.

On questions of when to help, leaders and managers can encourage givers to cash in their idiosyncrasy credits by managing their schedules more proactively. This might involve designating windows of quiet time, as the engineers did, or stacking meetings in a single day each week, as Geller does. It could also mean using e-mail autoreplies to signal limited availability: “I’m working on an important project and will respond next week. If you have an urgent request, please call me.”

As for how to help, leaders can prompt reflection on the types of giving that are best aligned with employees' skills, interests, and values. The more an employee becomes known for offering specific kinds of help, the less likely people are to pile on miscellaneous requests. Over time the questions directed toward that employee will become more aligned with his or her expertise and enjoyment, making giving more sustainable. Studies by the psychologists Netta Weinstein and Richard Ryan show that when helping is based on a sense of mastery and personal choice rather

than duty and obligation, it's more likely to be energizing than exhausting.

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When it comes to choices about whom to help, giving may be less costly and more productive if employees ask people who have benefited from their help to pay it forward. Building a network of givers, as Geller has done, will enable employees to fulfill requests without accepting the entire burden themselves. Asking recipients to pay it forward also serves as a mechanism for sincerity screening, letting employees see who's willing to help and who isn't. They can then dedicate their time and energy to other givers, where the return on investment is greatest.

**Complementing Empathy with Perspective Taking**

Empathy is the third trap givers need to avoid. Although it is an admirable trait and a source of much useful insight, it can make life harder for givers. If a busy person is easily moved by empathy to spend time doing favors he or she cannot afford, that person

runs a serious risk of being manipulated by shrewd takers. This is the thoroughly documented finding of more than three decades of research by the psychologist Daniel Batson. When people feel empathy, they're willing to put others' needs ahead of their own.

How can managers help their employees avert this risk? A powerful answer comes from a clever experiment led by the Columbia psychologist Adam Galinsky. The study called for participants to role-play a compensation negotiation between a recruiter and a job candidate. Some recruiters were randomly assigned to be “empathizers” (making a special attempt to imagine what the candidates were *feeling*), and others were told to be “perspective takers” (trying to imagine what the candidates were *thinking* and what their *interests* were). A third group, the control, was not asked to do either.

The empathizers fell far short of an optimal solution. Feeling concern for the candidates, they sacrificed their own interests and let the candidates claim both high salaries and high bonuses. The perspective takers did significantly better. Pondering what would serve the candidates well—rather than how the candidates felt—led them to ask more questions and to spend more time analyzing various options. As a result, a greater number of the perspective takers discovered that the job candidates cared more about bonuses and moving expenses than they did, and they were able to offer large gains in those areas in exchange for concessions on

salary. In total, 40% of the perspective takers reached an optimally balanced agreement, whereas only 17% of the empathizers and the subjects in the control group did.

The implication is clear: By teaching people to be perspective takers—not just empathizers—when they are called on for favors, managers can help givers avoid leaving money on the table. At the same time, they can expect more-productive allocations of time that will benefit the enterprise as a whole.

Leaders and managers can ask employees to gather information about a counterpart's interests and to make a list of their own interests as well. From there, employees can examine the overlap to generate ideas for what negotiation experts call *compatible issues* and *logrolling*. Compatible issues are points at which interests align, and logrolling means that employees will let a counterpart win on issues that matter less to them so that they can win on the issues they value most.

A reorientation to perspective taking is likely to come more naturally to givers than shifts to greater assertiveness and bounded availability will. Givers excel at understanding other people's thoughts as well as their feelings, because concern for others involves getting to know their backgrounds and values. Givers allow themselves to become pushovers when they fail to gather and use knowledge about others' interests. By putting this



skill into action, it's possible to transform win/lose scenarios into win/win gains.

## **The Two Great Forces of Human Nature**

Look at any group of people you would characterize as givers. You'll find some who are reluctant to advocate for their own interests, some who are willing to drop everything to help anyone at any time, and some who are easily manipulated by empathy. But none of these behaviors is a necessary condition for generosity. To foster productive patterns of giving, leaders need to help employees understand these traps and provide strategies for avoiding them.

There are three payoffs associated with teaching employees about the power of agency, boundaries on availability, and perspective taking. The first is saving your best employees—those who exemplify collegial generosity—from being taken advantage of and helping them to gain stature as successful givers instead. The second is enabling employees who fear the risks of giving to contribute more to others and to the success of the enterprise. The third is creating a culture of and reputation for generosity that attracts more givers to your organization and appeals less to takers.

Developing a refined view of generosity will help resolve a fundamental dilemma that ambitious professionals face today: Although giving behavior is beneficial to organizations and ardently praised in the abstract by leaders, it often comes at the expense of those who engage in it.

As Bill Gates said at the World Economic Forum's 2008 meeting in Davos, "There are two great forces of human nature—self-interest, and caring for others." In many organizations, those forces come together with damaging effect. With thoughtful management, however, they can be yoked in such a way that caring for others becomes the best strategy for the most ambitious. Givers can become comfortable asking for favors as well as granting them. Time can be spared for others' projects but also protected for one's own. Generosity can be guided in the direction of greatest impact. And organizations can gain ever-increasing benefits from the constant give-and-take.

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