

## *Pushing Past Pushover*

Lillian's progress struck a chord with me. As a freshman in college, I accepted a job selling advertisements for the Let's Go travel guides. Written and produced entirely by Harvard students, the Let's Go guides were billed as the bible of the budget traveler, rivaling Lonely Planet, Frommer's, and Rick Steves' as the go-to resource for getting around a foreign country on the cheap. On my first day, my manager handed me a list of clients and said, "These people spent about \$300,000 last year on ads in the Let's Go books. Just call them up and convince them to advertise again." Then she turned around and walked away.

As I realized that I wouldn't get any training, I began to panic. I had no product knowledge and no relevant experience, and I had never left North America. I was only eighteen years old, and I had no business making sales pitches to senior vice presidents at major international companies.\*

I mustered up the courage to call one of Let's Go's longtime advertisers, a man named Steven who ran a travel agency. The moment he started talking, it was clear he was furious. "At first, I was glad to see that my agency was written up in the books, separate from my ad," he snarled, "until I saw that outdated contact information was listed. So your readers can reach me, I've had to pay hundreds of dollars to maintain old postal addresses and e-mail accounts." I gently explained that advertising and editorial are separate departments; I could ensure the accuracy of his ads, but I had no influence over the content of the books themselves. Steven didn't care; he demanded an advertising discount to make up for the editorial error and threatened not to renew his ad if I didn't comply. Feeling bad for him, I granted him a 10 percent discount. This violated a Let's Go policy that appeared in my contract, prohibiting all discounts that didn't appear in our media kit, and it was a preview of more mistakes to come.

After contacting several dozen clients, I had given three more discounts and signed very few contracts, which became mortifying when I learned that Let's Go had a 95 percent client renewal rate. Along with bringing in no revenue, when a client demanded a refund on the previous year's ad, I caved, becoming the first employee to give away money that was already on the books. In empathizing with clients and trying to meet their needs in any way possible, I was helping them at my own expense—not to mention my company's. I was a disaster, and I was ready to quit.

It wasn't the first time I had been a giver to a fault. When I was fourteen, I decided to become a springboard diver. I was determined to master the art of hurling myself into the air, doing somersaults and twists, and entering the water gracefully without a splash. Never mind that I could hardly jump, flip, or twist, I was terrified to try new dives, and my teammates called out my lack of flexibility by nicknaming me Frankenstein. One day, my coach brought a metronome to practice in the hopes of improving my timing. After several hours of effort, he declared me incapable of rhythm.

For the next four years, I trained six hours a day. Eventually, I became a two-time state finalist, a two-time junior Olympic national qualifier, and an All-American diver. I would go on to compete at the NCAA varsity level at Harvard. But along the way, I sacrificed my own success. Several months before the biggest meet of my life, I volunteered to coach two of my competitors. I taught them new dives, critiqued their form, and revealed the secret of the rip entry, showing them how to disappear into the water at the end of a dive.

They returned the favor by beating me at the state championships, by just a handful of points.

At Let's Go, I was once again benefiting others at a personal cost. Although I was helping my clients save money, I was a pushover, losing revenues for the company and sacrificing my own commission. But the following week, I happened to meet a new assistant manager at Let's Go whose position was created as a result of the advertising revenue that my predecessor generated. The job made it possible for her to pay for school. It was the inspiration that I needed: I realized that my colleagues were depending on me. As a student, I didn't have a wife and children yet, but I could see myself as an agent on behalf of college students in search of jobs that would defray the cost of tuition and provide meaningful work experiences. I might be a doormat when lobbying solely for my own interests, but when I was representing the interests of students, I was willing to fight to protect them.

Before a heated negotiation with a merciless French hotelier who demanded a discount, I thought about how the revenue could support job creation, which gave me the resolve to dig in my heels. I added a relational account: if I gave him a discount, it would only be fair to offer the same to our other clients, and I had a responsibility to be consistent. He ended up paying the full price.

After four months, I had set company records by bringing in more than \$600,000 in revenue, nearly doubling my predecessor's tally, and landing more than \$230,000 from cold calls to new prospects. I sold the largest advertising package in company history, and our president announced at a banquet that I was "one of the finest advertising associates ever to come through" the company. At age nineteen, I was promoted to director of advertising sales, which put me in charge of a budget above \$1 million and tasked me with hiring, training, and motivating my own staff.

Right after I was promoted, the Internet bubble collapsed. More than a dozen clients went out of business before our advertising season even started, and six of our ten biggest clients informed me that their advertising budgets had been slashed, so they wouldn't be able to renew. When all was said and done, Let's Go lost twenty-two loyal clients and 43 percent of the total budget from the previous year. The worst blow came when our largest client called. It was Michael, the vice president of the student travel agency that had purchased the record-setting package the previous year. "I'm very sorry to tell you this, because we love your product and value this relationship." Michael took a deep breath. "But due to budget constraints and a declining travel market, I'm not sure if we can afford to advertise this year at all. To even consider it, we'll need a major discount."

Knowing that many jobs depended on revenue from Michael's company, I became an advocate and pushed back. Because his rivals were pulling their ads, I told Michael, it was an opportunity to gain a leg up on the competition—and what better time to invest than during a recession? He said he would check with his boss and get back to me. The following week, he called with bad news: he had authorization to advertise in our books only if he could have the same package as the prior year, and only with a 70 percent discount. This would slash his expenditure of just under \$120,000 to below \$40,000.

While I was trying to figure out how much of a discount we could afford, I went to coach a diving practice. Sitting on the pool deck, it dawned on me that there was a major difference between diving and Let's Go. Individual sports involved zero-sum contests where helping competitors win meant that I would be more likely to lose. In business, though, win-win was possible; my clients' interests didn't have to be at odds with my own. When I began to contemplate Michael's interests, I realized that he might value products to give away for free in his store. I learned from colleagues that our publishing contract gave Let's Go the rights to sell or license any content that didn't exceed twenty pages, so I offered him sponsorship of a new product: twenty-page Let's Go travel booklets that he could hand

out to customers. Customers would appreciate the free travel tips and might stay longer in the store or be more likely to return. Since the funds would come from his distribution budget rather than his advertising budget, he was able to consider the possibility. When I gave further thought to Michael's interests, I realized that the booklets would be more valuable to him if he could sponsor them exclusively, rather than featuring other companies' ads. We agreed on a mutually beneficial deal for exclusive sponsorship, and he ended up spending more than \$140,000, topping my own previous record for the largest ad package in company history.

Whereas advocacy and relational accounts enabled me to become more assertive in win-lose negotiations, it was perspective taking that helped me expand the pie and succeed in win-win negotiations. Ultimately, despite the dot-com bust, this approach led more than half of our renewal clients to increase their ad packages. Our team brought in more than \$550,000 in profits, making it possible to increase the size of our staff and introduce new marketing initiatives. After months of hounding delinquent clients to send their payments, I became the only manager in recent history to bring in 100 percent of accounts receivable, leaving no bad debt. I was elected to the company's board of directors and earned the manager of the year award for leadership, commitment, and business acumen. The lessons I learned at Let's Go stuck with me, and I decided to spend the rest of my career teaching other givers what I had discovered about overcoming the doormat effect.

For a number of years, researchers have known that successful negotiators tend to operate in an otherish fashion. In a comprehensive analysis of [twenty-eight different studies](#) led by Dutch psychologist Carsten De Dreu, the best negotiators weren't takers or selfless givers. The takers focused on claiming value: they saw negotiations as zero-sum, win-lose contests and didn't trust their opponents, so they bargained aggressively, overlooking opportunities to create value through developing an understanding of their counterparts' interests. The selfless givers made too many concessions, benefiting their counterparts at a personal cost. The most effective negotiators were otherish: they reported high concern for their own interests *and* high concern for their counterparts' interests. By looking for opportunities to benefit others and themselves, otherish givers are able to think in more complex ways and identify win-win solutions that both takers and selfless givers miss. Instead of just giving away value like selfless givers, otherish givers create value first. By the time they give slices of pie away, the entire pie is big enough that there's plenty left to claim for themselves: they can give more *and* take more.

This notion of expanding the pie captures a turning point in Lillian Bauer's career. Although she had learned to push back with clients and place boundaries on the time she spent mentoring and helping takers, she wasn't willing to let go of helping givers and matchers. When junior associates who didn't seem like takers needed help, she still gave in a selfless manner, sacrificing inordinate amounts of her time regardless of her own schedule and demands.

Jason Geller adopted a more otherish approach: he found a way to expand the amount of giving that he could accomplish without increasing the demands on his time. Geller engaged others in sharing the workload, creating opportunities for them to become givers, while keeping himself from becoming overloaded. As a senior manager, when junior analysts asked him for help, Geller would suggest a lunch, and invite a couple newer managers to come along. This opened the door for the managers to have access to him, and for them to provide mentoring to the junior analysts. "It's a great way for them to build the support of folks more junior to them," he says. Instead of doing all of the giving himself, he was able to connect junior analysts with multiple mentors, who provided a broader base

of knowledge and advice.

After being told she was too generous, Bauer adopted an approach that resembled Geller's. She started doing group mentoring sessions instead of only one-on-ones:

I asked myself, "Am I really the only person who can help in this particular instance?" I tried not to think about myself as the only resource I was optimizing, and started connecting people to help each other. Now, I'm quite explicit with my mentees. I tell them, "People did this for me, and you need to do this for other people. There is an expectation that when you receive that kind of generosity from people, you need to pay it forward."

By deciding not to carry the burden alone, Bauer expanded the pie, enabling her giving to have a broader impact while protecting her own time. "If you have a natural mix of givers, takers, and matchers in your company," Bauer says, "you can do a lot to magnify the giver tendency, suppress the more aggressive taker tendencies, and shift the matchers toward giving. There's an energy and a satisfaction that you get out of it. In its own way, it's addictive."

Instead of assuming that they're doomed to become doormats, successful givers recognize that their everyday choices shape the results they achieve in competitive, confrontational situations. The dangers lie less in giving itself, and more in the rigidity of sticking with a single reciprocity style across all interactions and relationships. As the psychologist Brian Little puts it, even if a style like giving is our first nature, our ability to prosper depends on developing enough comfort with a matching approach that it [becomes second nature](#). Although many successful givers start from the default of trusting others' intentions, they're also careful to scan their environments to screen for potential takers, always ready to shift from feeling a taker's emotions to analyzing a taker's thoughts, and flex from giving unconditionally to a more measured approach of generous tit for tat. And when they feel inclined to back down, successful givers are prepared to draw reserves of assertiveness from their commitments to the people who matter to them.

For Lillian Bauer, these shifts in strategy catalyzed a chump change. As Bauer learned to leverage her natural strengths in advocating for others and reading other people's motives, she adapted her behavior to invest in those on whom she could have the greatest influence and encouraged them to give as well. The cumulative effect was that she transformed from a doormat into a successful giver. Even though her generosity initially slowed her rise to partner, she ended up getting there ahead of schedule. Lillian Bauer was one of the first members of her consulting class to make partner.

## The Scrooge Shift

*Why a Soccer Team, a Fingerprint, and a Name Can Tilt Us in the Other Direction*

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*How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, although he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.*

*—Adam Smith, father of economics*

In 1993, a man named Craig Newmark left IBM after seventeen years to take a computer security position at Charles Schwab in San Francisco. As a single guy new to the Bay Area, he was looking for ways to spice up his social life. In early 1995, he started e-mailing friends to share information about local arts and technology events. Word of mouth spread, and people began to expand the postings beyond events to feature job openings, apartments, and miscellaneous items for sale. By June, the e-mail list had grown to 240 people. It was too large for direct e-mail, so Craig moved it to a listserv. In 1996, a website was born, and it was called [Craigslist](#). By the end of 2011, there were Craigslist sites in more than seven hundred locations around the world. In the United States alone, roughly fifty million people visit Craigslist each month, making Craigslist one of the ten most popular websites in the country—and one of the forty most visited in the world.

Craigslist flourished by appealing to our basic matcher instincts. It facilitates transactions in which buyers and sellers can agree on a fair price, exchanging goods and services for what they're worth. Fundamentally, Craigslist is about trading value in direct exchanges between people, creating a matcher's preferred even balance of give and take. "We're not altruistic," Newmark writes. "From one perspective, we're like a flea market."

Could a system like this function based entirely on giving, instead of matching?

In 2003, an Ohio native by the name of Deron Beal decided to find out. Just like Craig Newmark, Beal was in a new city where he lacked information, so he started an e-mail list of friends. Following the lead from Craigslist, Beal was aiming to create Internet-based local communities of exchange for

anyone to access, connecting people who wanted goods with people who were ready to part with them. But in a radical departure from the typical Craigslist exchange, Beal set an unusual ground rule: no currency or trading allowed. The network was called [Freecycle](#), and all goods had to be given away for free.

The idea for Freecycle was sparked when Beal developed and ran a recycling program for businesses at a nonprofit organization called Rise in Tucson, Arizona. Local businesses began to give Beal used items that were still in good condition but weren't recyclable, like computers and desks. In the hopes of giving the items away to people who needed them, Beal spent hours on the phone offering them to charities, but made little progress. At the same time, he had a bed that he wanted to give away, but thrift shops wouldn't accept it. He realized that he might be able to solve both of these problems with an online community that matched givers and receivers more efficiently.

Beal sent an initial e-mail announcing Freecycle to about forty friends, inviting them to join and spread the word. When some of the earliest Freecycle members started posting items to give away, Beal was caught off guard. One woman offered to give away a partially used bottle of hair dye, which would expire in a matter of hours. "It needs to be used really soon," she wrote, "so if anyone has an urge to go darker, tonight is the night." A Texas man posted a more desirable item—fishing tackle—but had a string attached. He would only give it away to someone from whom fishing tackle had been stolen. "As a kid thirty-four years ago, I stole a tackle box. There's no way I can find the person and make it right, so I'm trying to do the next best thing." With some people finding matcher loopholes in the system, and others trying to give away junk, Freecycle seemed like a lost cause.

But Beal believed that "one person's trash really is another's treasure." And some people gave away actual treasure on Freecycle that they could have easily sold on Craigslist. One person donated a camera in excellent condition worth at least \$200; others gave away good computers, flat-screen TVs, baby car seats, pianos, vacuum cleaners, and exercise equipment. When Freecycle started in May 2003, there were thirty members. Within a year, Freecycle had grown at an astonishing rate: there were more than 100,000 members in 360 cities worldwide. By March 2005, Freecycle had increased tenfold in membership, reaching a million members.

Recently, social scientists Robb Willer, Frank Flynn, and Sonya Zak decided to study [what drives people to participate in exchange systems](#). They were striving to get to the bottom of a vigorous debate among social scientists, many of whom believed that the types of direct exchanges that take place on Craigslist were the optimal way of exchanging resources. By allowing people to trade value back and forth, a system like Craigslist capitalizes on the fact that most people are matchers. But some experts anticipated the rapid growth of systems like Freecycle, where members give to one person and receive from another, never trading value back and forth with the same person. These researchers were convinced that although such a generalized reciprocity system relies on people to be givers and can be exploited by takers, it could be just as productive in facilitating the exchange of goods and services as direct matching.

The intuitive explanation is that the two types of systems attract different types of people. Perhaps matchers were drawn to Craigslist, whereas givers flocked to Freecycle.\* As Deron Beal told me, "If there were only takers, there would be no Freecycle." But Willer's team found that this wasn't the whole story.

Although Freecycle grew in part by attracting people who already leaned strongly in the giver direction, it accomplished something much more impressive. Somehow, Freecycle managed to



encourage matchers and takers to act like givers. To figure out how Freecycle works, Willer's team studied random samples of members at both Craigslist and Freecycle. They collected surveys from more than a thousand members of the two exchange organizations from dozens of communities around the United States, measuring reciprocity styles by asking members to answer a series of questions about whether they generally preferred to maximize their own gains or contribute to others. The givers had donated an average of twenty-one items on Freecycle. The takers could have given nothing, but they had given away an average of more than nine items each on Freecycle.

Interestingly, in fact, people often join Freecycle to take, not give. "People usually hear about Freecycle as a way to get free stuff. Your average person will join thinking, 'I can get something for nothing,'" Beal says. "But a paradigm shift kicks in. We had a big wave of new parents who needed help in hard times. They received strollers, car seats, cribs, and high chairs. Later, instead of selling them on Craigslist, they started giving them away."

What drives people to join a group with the intention of taking, but then end up giving?

The answer to this question opens up another way that givers avoid the bottom of the success ladder. When dealing with individuals, it's sensible for givers to protect themselves by engaging in sincerity screening and acting primarily like matchers in exchanges with takers. But in group settings, there's a different way for givers to make sure that they're not being exploited: get everyone in the group to act more like givers. The strategy was foreshadowed by Jason Geller and Lillian Bauer, who directly asked their mentees to pay it forward in mentoring groups of more junior colleagues. Earlier, Adam Rifkin, the Silicon Valley giver who was named *Fortune's* best networker, did the same thing in his entire network. He invited the people who benefited from his giving to help other people in his web of relationships, and a giving norm evolved. As I noted in the opening chapter, people rarely have a single reciprocity style that they apply uniformly to every domain of their lives. If a group develops a norm of giving, members will uphold the norm and give, even if they're more inclined to be takers or matchers elsewhere. This reduces the risks of giving: when everyone contributes, the pie is larger, and givers are no longer stuck contributing far more than they get.

What is it about groups that can tilt members in the giver direction? At the end of this chapter, I'll introduce you to a powerful activity that some of the world's leading companies and business schools have started using to motivate giving among takers and matchers, as well as givers. But first, by unpacking Freecycle's success in motivating matchers and takers to give, we can gain a deeper understanding of what individuals and organizations can do to foster greater levels of giving. The starting point is to ask why people give in the first place.

## *The Altruism Debate*

For nearly forty years, two of the world's most distinguished psychologists have locked horns over whether the decision to give can be purely altruistic, or whether it's always ultimately selfish. Rather than debate philosophy, each has come to battle wielding a deadlier weapon: the psychological experiment.

The [defendant of pure altruism](#) is C. Daniel Batson, who believes that we engage in truly selfless giving when we feel empathy for another person in need. The greater the need, and the stronger our attachment to the person experiencing it, the more we empathize. When we empathize with a person, we focus our energy and attention on helping him or her—not because it will make us feel good but because we genuinely care. Batson believes that although some people feel empathy more intensely and frequently than others, virtually all humans have the capacity for empathy—even the most disagreeable of takers. As Adam Smith put it centuries ago: “the emotion which we feel for the misery of others . . . is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.”

The [devil's advocate](#) is Robert Cialdini, who argues that there's no such thing as pure altruism. He believes that human beings are frequently generous, giving, and caring. But he doesn't think these behaviors are entirely altruistic in origin. He believes that when others hurt, we hurt—and this motivates us to help. Cialdini's first challenge to Batson's claims was that when empathy leads us to help, it's not because our ultimate goal is to benefit the other person. He proposed that when others are in need, we feel distressed, sad, or guilty. To reduce our own negative feelings, we help. Cialdini accumulated an impressive body of studies suggesting that when people feel distressed, guilty, or sad toward another person in need, they help.

Batson's rebuttal: it's true that people sometimes help to reduce negative feelings, but this isn't the only reason. And negative feelings don't always lead to helping. When we feel distressed, sad, or guilty, our ultimate goal is to reduce these negative feelings. In some cases, helping is the strategy that we choose. But in many cases, we can reduce our negative feelings in other ways, such as distracting ourselves or escaping the situation altogether. Batson figured out a clever way to tease apart whether empathy drives us to help because we want to reduce another person's distress or our own distress. If the goal is to reduce our own distress, we should choose whatever course of action makes us feel better. If the goal is to reduce another person's distress, we should help even when it's costly and other courses of action would make us feel good.

In one experiment, Batson and colleagues gave people a choice: watch a woman receive electric shocks or leave the experiment to avoid the distress. Not surprisingly, 75 percent left. But when they felt empathy for the woman, only 14 percent left; the other 86 percent stayed and offered to take the shocks in her place. And of the people who stayed to help, the ones who empathized the most strongly were willing to endure four times as many shocks as those who felt less empathy. Batson and colleagues demonstrated this pattern in more than half a dozen experiments. Even when people can reduce their negative feelings by escaping the situation, if they're feeling empathy, they stay and help anyway, at a personal cost of time and pain. On the basis of this evidence, Batson concluded that reducing bad feelings is not the only reason people help, and a comprehensive analysis of eighty-five



different studies backed him up.

But Cialdini, one of the greatest social thinkers of our time, wasn't done yet. He acknowledged that empathy can drive helping. Feelings of concern and compassion certainly motivate us to act for the benefit of others at a personal cost. But he wasn't convinced that this reflects pure altruism. He argued that when we empathize with a victim in need, we become so emotionally attached that we experience a sense of oneness with the victim. We merge the victim into our sense of self. We see more of ourselves in the victim. And this is why we help: we're really helping ourselves. Quoting Adam Smith again, "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something."

Cialdini and colleagues conducted numerous experiments supporting this idea. Empathy leads to a sense of oneness, or self-other overlap, and this leads to greater helping. Batson's team came back with another rebuttal: that *is* altruism. If we empathize with other people to the point of merging our own identities with theirs, we care about them as much as we care about ourselves. Because we no longer place our interests above theirs, helping them is purely altruistic.

Stalemate.

Both camps agree that empathy leads to helping. Both camps agree that a sense of oneness is a key reason why. But they fundamentally differ about whether oneness is selfish or altruistic. I believe there's a middle ground here, and it's one that Deron Beal discovered early on. When he started Freecycle, he wanted to keep used goods out of landfills by giving them away to people who wanted them. But he also had some personal interests at stake. In his recycling program, he had a warehouse full of stuff he couldn't use or recycle, and his boss wanted the warehouse emptied. In addition, Beal was hoping to get rid of an old mattress that he owned. None of his friends needed it, and it was too big to throw away. To dump it, he would need to borrow a truck and drive the mattress to a landfill, where he would be charged for disposal. Beal realized it would be easier and cheaper if he could just give it away to someone on Freecycle.

This is why many takers and matchers started giving on Freecycle. It's an efficient way to get rid of things they don't want and probably can't sell on Craigslist. But soon, Beal knows from personal experience, people who initially give things away for selfish reasons begin to care about the people they're helping. When the recipient arranged to pick up his mattress, Beal was thrilled. "I thought I was getting away with giving a mattress away, that I was the one benefiting," he says. "But when the person showed up at my door and thanked me, I felt good. It was only partially a selfish act: I was helping someone else in a way that made me happy. I felt so darn good about it that I started giving away other items."

After a decade of research, I've come to the conclusion that Beal's experience is the norm rather than the exception. Oneness is otherish. Most of the time that we give, it's based on a cocktail of mixed motives to benefit others and ourselves. Takers and matchers may be most likely to give when they feel they can advance others' interests and their own at the same time. As the primatologist Frans de Waal writes in *The Age of Empathy*, "The selfish/unselfish divide may be a [red herring](#). Why try to extract the self from the other, or the other from the self, if the merging of the two is the secret behind our cooperative nature?"

Consider Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia written for free by upwards of three million volunteers, with more than a hundred thousand of them contributing regularly. When asked why they

write for Wikipedia, hardly any volunteers reported being involved for self-serving reasons, such as to make new contacts, build their reputations, reduce loneliness, or feel valued and needed. But the relatively altruistic value of helping others wasn't the sole factor they emphasized either. Wikipedia contributors aren't necessarily givers across the different domains of their lives, but they're volunteering their time to exhaustively summarize and cross-reference Wikipedia entries. Why? In a survey, two reasons dominated all others: they thought it was fun and they believed information should be free. For many volunteers, [writing Wikipedia entries](#) is otherish: it provides personal enjoyment and benefits others.

Beal believes the otherish structure of Freecycle is one of the major reasons that it grew so fast. Giving away items that we don't need, and benefiting others in the process, is the gift economy equivalent of Adam Rifkin's five-minute favors: low cost to oneself coupled with potentially high benefit to others. It's noteworthy that Freecycle's formal mission statement highlights two sets of benefits: members can contribute to others and gain for themselves. The mission is to "build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources & eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community."

Beyond this otherish structure, there's a central feature of a Freecycle community that motivates people to start giving. A clue to the mechanism lies in the story of a French consultant who struggled for years to earn the trust of a potential client—until he recognized the power of a sense of community.

## *From Enemies to Allies*

During the 2008 global financial crisis, one of the many companies to suffer was a French firm that I'll call Nouveau. Nouveau was headquartered in a small city in the middle of France that boasted a beloved soccer team. The founders had chosen the city as their headquarters in an effort to restore the city's glory, but the population was shrinking and profits were falling, and there was pressure to relocate to a larger city. Nouveau's executives decided to save headquarters with a dramatic reorganization. Seeking outside assistance, the CFO issued a request for proposals to consulting firms. Nouveau was open to working with whichever firm presented the best proposal, with one exception: one particular consulting firm could not be trusted. This firm had been working with Nouveau's chief competitor for years. Nouveau's top brass worried that inside information could be leaked accidentally—or even stolen by a taker.

The suspect consulting firm's [lead partner](#), who I'll call Phillippe, was aware of the distrust from the Nouveau executives. Phillippe's firm had submitted proposals to Nouveau in the past, and they were always rejected. The consultants had repeatedly explained the firm's strict confidentiality policies, but the Nouveau executives didn't buy it. Eventually, the consultants concluded that it was a waste of time to continue making proposals. But Phillippe was genuinely interested in contributing to Nouveau's success, so he led his team in preparing and submitting a proposal for the reorganization. Then they sat down to brainstorm: how can we prove to Nouveau that we're trustworthy?

Phillippe's firm was the last to pitch to Nouveau. At the pitch meeting, Phillippe arrived at Nouveau's headquarters with five consultants in tow. They were escorted into a large room where ten Nouveau executives sat across from them. Phillippe's team presented the proposal, and the Nouveau executives were unmoved. "We like your proposal," one executive said, "but we can't trust you. Why should we enter into a relationship with you? How can we be sure that you will put our interests first?" Phillippe reminded them of his firm's confidentiality policies and code of honor, reinforcing that its reputation hinged on upholding the highest standards for clients, but his promise fell on deaf ears.

Phillippe had run out of logical arguments, so he resorted to the only other ammunition that he had. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out the blue scarf of the city's famed soccer club. Donning the scarf as a symbol of hometown pride, he made a plea: "We've been trying to convince you for many years that our confidentiality policies can be trusted. Since we're not managing to say that with words, we'd like to show our commitment in a different way." The five members of Phillippe's team followed suit, putting the soccer scarves around their necks.

The Nouveau executives were surprised. They asked which partner would take the lead on the project. Phillippe stepped up: "I am going to take the lead, and we will begin our work over the August break. I can commit to this because your headquarters is next to my home."

A few hours later, Phillippe's firm landed the project.

The Nouveau executives had not known that Phillippe was from their city. "This was a reorganization task," Phillippe explains, "and having someone care about this city, and the people living in it, was a plus for the employees and the company. It was a bit of [common ground](#)."

Common ground is a major influence on giving behaviors. In one experiment, psychologists in the United Kingdom recruited fans of the Manchester United soccer team for a study. When walking from

one building to another, the soccer fans saw a runner slip on a grass bank, where he fell holding his ankle and screaming in pain. Would they help him?

It depended on the T-shirt that he was wearing. When he wore a plain T-shirt, only 33 percent helped. When he wore a Manchester United T-shirt, 92 percent helped. Yale psychologist Jack Dovidio calls this “activating a [common identity](#).” When people share an identity with another person, giving to that person takes on an otherish quality. If we help people who belong to our group, we’re also helping ourselves, as we’re making the group better off.\*

A common identity was a key active ingredient behind the rapid growth of Freecycle, and the unusually high levels of giving. When Berkeley professor Robb Willer’s team compared Craigslist and Freecycle members, they were interested in the degree to which each group experienced identification and cohesion. The more members identified, the more they saw Craigslist or Freecycle as an important part of their self-images, as reflecting their core values. The more cohesion members reported, the more they felt part of a meaningful Craigslist or Freecycle community. Would members experience greater identification and cohesion with Craigslist or Freecycle?

The answer depends on how much a member has received from the site. For members who received or bought few items, there were no differences in identification and cohesion between Craigslist and Freecycle. People were equally attached and connected to both sites. But for members who received or bought many items, there were stark differences: members reported substantially greater identification and cohesion with Freecycle than Craigslist. This was true even after accounting for members’ tendencies toward giving: regardless of whether they were givers or not, members who participated frequently felt more attached to Freecycle than to Craigslist. Why would people feel more identified and connected with a community where they give freely rather than matching evenly?

Willer’s team argues that for two central reasons receiving is a fundamentally different experience in generalized giving and direct matching systems. The first distinction lies in the terms of the exchange. In direct matching, the exchange is an economic transaction. When members buy an item on Craigslist, they know that sellers are typically trying to maximize their own gains with little concern for buyers’ interests. In contrast, in generalized giving, givers aren’t getting anything tangible back from the recipients. When members receive an item on Freecycle, they’re accepting a gift from a giver with no strings attached. According to Willer’s team, this “suggests that the giver is motivated to act in the interest of the recipient rather than in his or her own self-interest,” which “communicates a regard for the recipient beyond the instrumental value attached to the item itself.” In comparison with an economic transaction, a gift is value-laden.

The second distinction has to do with who’s responsible for the benefits you receive. When you buy on Craigslist, if you receive an item at a good price, you can chalk it up to your savvy as a negotiator or the kindness (or naïveté) of an individual seller. You’re exchanging back and forth with another individual; you’re not getting anything from the Craigslist community. “As a result, participants in direct exchange will be less inclined to identify with the group because they will be less likely to derive the emotional experience of group membership,” Willer’s team writes. In generalized giving, on the other hand, the community is the source of the gifts you receive. An effective system of generalized giving typically involves cycles of exchange with the following structure: person A gives to person B, who gives to person C. When Freecycle members receive multiple items from different people, they attribute the benefits to the whole group, not to individual

members.

Together, these two forces facilitate the development of a bond with Freecycle. Instead of buying an item from another person, people feel that they're receiving gifts from a community. The gratitude and goodwill generated means that they begin to identify with the community, seeing themselves as Freecycle members. Once this identification happens, people are willing to give freely to anyone who shares the Freecycle identity. This extends their willingness to give across the whole Freecycle community, spurring members to offer items that they no longer need in response to requests when they can help. By giving away things they don't want, takers can feel like they're not losing anything of value, yet maintain the norm of giving so they can still get free stuff when they want it. For matchers, because there's no way to pay it back, paying it forward is the next best thing—especially since they're helping people just like themselves. This is what happened with the parents who gave away baby supplies: they restored their sense of a reciprocal, even exchange by donating items they no longer needed to fellow parents in similar situations.

People are motivated to give to others when they identify as part of a common community. But not all individuals and groups are equally likely to attract this type of identification. There's something else about the Freecycle community that fosters identification—and it's a factor well understood by Adam Rifkin.

United States for the one hundred most common first names that shared their first three letters with these cities. Then, they matched up names in terms of how popular they were in different age groups. It turns out that people named Jack are *four times* more likely than people named Phillip to live in Jacksonville, even though the names are equally common. (The Phils have apparently retreated to Philadelphia, where they outnumber the Jacks.) And it's not that they're named after these places; people are more likely to *move* to places that resemble their own names (Georgia is twice as likely to move to Georgia as chance would predict).

It works for careers too: in 1990, Dennis was the fortieth most common male first name in the United States. Jerry was the thirty-ninth, and Walter was forty-first.

There were 270 dentists in the United States named Jerry.

There were 257 dentists in the United States named Walter.

How many dentists were named Dennis?

Statistically, there should have been somewhere between 257 and 270.

In reality, there were 482.

If your name was Dennis, you were almost twice as likely to become a dentist as if you had the equally common name of Jerry or Walter. Other studies show that people with the last name Lawyer are more likely to become lawyers than doctors, at rates 44 percent higher than chance; the opposite is true for people named Doctor, at 38 percent greater than chance rates. The attraction also holds for products and people that we associate with ourselves. Pelham and colleagues have found that people prefer chocolates, crackers, and teas that include the letters of their own names—and that they're more [attracted to potential dates](#) who have similar initials, even though they insist that this similarity doesn't influence their attraction. And evidence shows that similarity can influence whom we decide to help. Researchers Jeff Galak, Deborah Small, and Andrew Stephen studied more than 289,000 loans to more than 23,000 borrowers on [Kiva](#), a microfinance website where people can give loans as small as \$25 to help people in the developing world escape poverty and start businesses. People were more likely to give microloans to borrowers who shared their first initials or their occupations.\*

It appears that similarity to the self adds a bit of grease to the attraction process: people are just a bit more enthusiastic, friendly, and open-minded when they meet someone who reminds them of themselves. This is what happened to the two Adam Rifkins when they first met. They initially clicked based on a superficial similarity, which opened the door for them to connect based on real similarities—and start helping each other.

But the bond between the two Adam Rifkins goes beyond the fact that they have the same name. To illustrate, imagine that you show up for a study along with a college student. A researcher takes your [fingerprints](#), under the guise of studying whether they reveal anything about your personality. You both fill out a personality questionnaire. As you're getting ready to leave, the student pulls out a paper from her backpack. "For an English class that I'm taking, I need to find someone I don't know to critique my essay. I wonder if you could read this eight-page essay for me and give me one page of written feedback on whether my arguments are persuasive and why? I need the written feedback by this time tomorrow." Would you help her?

You were just in the control group in a study led by the psychologist Jerry Burger, where 48 percent of participants helped. But other participants were led to believe that they had something in common with the student making the request. After they filled out the questionnaire, the researcher



examined a fingerprint evaluation sheet and remarked, “This is interesting. You both have Type E fingerprints.”

Now, would you be more likely to help?

It depends on how the similarity was framed. Half of the time, the researcher mentioned that Type E fingerprints are common: about 80 percent of the population has them. The other half of the time, the researcher mentioned that Type E fingerprints are very rare: only about 2 percent of the population has them.

When the similarity was common, 55 percent of participants helped—hardly more than the control group. But when the similarity was rare, 82 percent of participants helped. It was not just any commonality that drove people to act like givers. It was an uncommon commonality. In Pelham’s studies, name-similarity effects on where we live, what careers we choose, and whom we marry are stronger for people with rare names than common names. We gravitate toward people, places, and products with which we share an uncommon commonality. This is the bond that the two Adam Rifkins felt when they first connected. Adam Rifkin is a rare name, and the uncommon commonality may have greased the attraction process. Indeed, Pelham’s research shows that the more unique your name is, the more likely you are to identify with places that resemble your name.

To explain why uncommon commonalities are so transformative, the psychologist Marilynn Brewer developed an influential theory. On the one hand, we want to fit in: we strive for connection, cohesiveness, community, belonging, inclusion, and affiliation with others. On the other hand, we want to stand out: we search for uniqueness, differentiation, and individuality. As we navigate the social world, these two motives are often in conflict. The more strongly we affiliate with a group, the greater our risk of losing our sense of uniqueness. The more we work to distinguish ourselves from others, the greater our risk of losing our sense of belongingness.

How do we resolve this conflict? The solution is to be the same and different at the same time. Brewer calls it the principle of [\*optimal distinctiveness\*](#): we look for ways to fit in and stand out. A popular way to achieve optimal distinctiveness is to join a unique group. Being part of a group with shared interests, identities, goals, values, skills, characteristics, or experiences gives us a sense of connection and belonging. At the same time, being part of a group that is clearly distinct from other groups gives us a sense of uniqueness. Studies show that people identify more strongly with individuals and groups that share unique similarities. The more rare a group, value, interest, skill, or experience is, the more likely it is to facilitate a bond. And research indicates that people are happier in groups that provide optimal distinctiveness, giving a sense of both inclusion and uniqueness. These are the groups in which we take the most pride, and feel the most cohesive and valued.

Freecycle initially provided a sense of optimal distinctiveness through its emphasis on protecting the environment. The central goal was different from most recycling movements: instead of reprocessing old materials into new ones, members found recipients who wanted goods that couldn’t be reprocessed, keeping them out of landfills. This common purpose created a shared identity within the Freecycle community, fostering a sense of connection across diverse ideologies. The original group of Freecycle volunteers in Tucson included a liberal Democrat who was passionate about environmental sustainability, a conservative Republican who didn’t believe in waste, and a Libertarian who wanted to empower people to do things themselves, rather than relying on governmental support. Over time, as membership expanded and diversified, each Freecycle community provided an outlet for people to customize giving to their own interests. In New York, for

example, a local group made a habit of shutting down a city block for Freecycle gifting events.

By fostering a common identity and opportunities for unique self-expression, Freecycle was able to mobilize a giving system based on generalized reciprocity: you give to help others in the community, and you know that someone in the community will give to you. But Willer's team finds that there's a catch: such a system depends on a "critical mass of exchange benefits," which "creates positive sentiments toward the group, sentiments that help fuel further contributions." In other words, people only identify with a generalized giving group after they receive enough benefits to feel like the group is helping them. With Freecycle, this outcome was by no means guaranteed; after all, if the givers on the site had been overwhelmed by takers looking for a free ride, the whole thing might never have gotten off the ground. How did Freecycle accumulate that initial critical mass of giving and discourage free riding?

## ***Why Superman Backfires and People Conserve Electricity***

When Freecycle first launched, one of the early members was a ninety-eight-year-old man. He collected parts to fix up bicycles and gave them to local children. He was an “incredible role model,” Deron Beal recalls. Tucson citizens were able to identify with the man as a fellow resident. When they saw him give, he was a member of their unique community, so they felt more compelled to follow his example. New York University psychologist Jonathan Haidt refers to this as [elevation](#), the warm feeling of being moved by others’ acts of giving, which can “seem to push a mental ‘reset button,’ wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with . . . a sense of moral inspiration.” When elevated, Haidt and psychologist Sara Algoe write, “we feel as though we have become (for a moment) less selfish, and we want to act accordingly.”

But it was more than just common identity that made this elderly man such an elevating role model. Consider an experiment by psychologists Leif Nelson and Michael Norton, who randomly assigned people to list either ten features of a superhero or [ten features of Superman](#). When invited to sign up as community service volunteers, the group that listed superhero features was nearly twice as likely to volunteer as the Superman group. Three months later, Nelson and Norton invited both groups to a meeting to kick off their volunteering. The people who had written about a superhero were four times more likely to show up than the people who had written about Superman. Thinking about a superhero three months earlier supported giving. In comparison, thinking about Superman discouraged giving. Why?

When people think about the general attributes of superheroes, they generate a list of desirable characteristics that they can relate to themselves. In the study, for example, people wrote about how superheroes are helpful and responsible, and they wanted to express these giver values, so they volunteered. But when people think specifically about Superman, what comes to mind is a set of impossible standards, like those popularized in the TV series *The Adventures of Superman*: “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” No one can be that strong or heroic, so why bother trying?

On Freecycle, givers modeled a standard that seemed attainable. When members saw a ninety-eight-year-old man building bikes for kids, they knew they could do something too. When members saw people giving away items like clothes and old electronics, they felt it would be easy for them to do the same. The small acts of giving that started on Freecycle made it easy and acceptable for other people to give small amounts. Indeed, Cialdini finds that people donate more money to charity when the phrase “[even a penny will help](#)” is added to a request. Interestingly, this phrase increases the number of people who give without necessarily decreasing the amount that they give. Legitimizing small contributions draws in takers, making it difficult and embarrassing for them to say no, without dramatically reducing the amount donated by givers.

Although most people joined Freecycle to get free stuff, this doesn’t mean that taking was their primary reciprocity style. When people join a group, they look for cues about appropriate behavior. When new Freecycle members saw similar others modeling low-cost acts of giving, it became natural for them to follow suit. By making giving visible, Freecycle made it easy for people to see the norm.

It’s a powerful lesson, even more so when we realize how much the visibility of giving can affect reciprocity styles. In many domains of life, people end up taking because they don’t have access to

information about what others are doing. Just a few months after Freecycle got off the ground, Cialdini worked with a team of psychologists to survey more than eight hundred Californians about their [energy consumption](#). They asked the Californians how important the following factors were in shaping their decisions to save energy:

- It saves money
- It protects the environment
- It benefits society
- A lot of other people are doing it

The Californians consistently reported that the most important factor was protecting the environment. Benefiting society was second, saving money was third, and following the lead of other people was last. Cialdini's team wanted to see whether people were right about their own motivations, so they designed an experiment. They visited nearly four hundred homes in San Marcos, California, and randomly assigned them to receive one of four different types of door hangers:

*Save money by conserving energy:* According to researchers at Cal State San Marcos, you could save up to \$54 per month by using fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool in the summer.

*Protect the environment by conserving energy:* According to researchers at Cal State San Marcos, you can prevent the release of up to 262 lbs. of greenhouse gases per month by using fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool this summer.

*Do your part to conserve energy for future generations:* According to researchers at Cal State San Marcos, you can reduce your monthly demand for electricity by 29% using fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool this summer.

*Join your neighbors in conserving energy:* In a recent survey of households in your community, researchers at Cal State San Marcos found that 77% of San Marcos residents often use fans instead of air conditioning to keep cool in the summer.

Cialdini's team conducted door-to-door interviews at each household, without knowing which door hangers they had. When asked how motivating the door hangers were, the residents whose hangers emphasized joining their neighbors reported the lowest motivation. They reported 18 percent lower desires to conserve energy than residents with the protect-the-environment hangers, 13 percent lower than residents with the future-generations hangers, and 6 percent lower than residents with the save-money hangers.

But when Cialdini's team looked at the residents' energy bills to see what people actually did, they found something surprising: the residents were wrong about what motivated them. During the following two months, the residents whose door hangers emphasized joining their neighbors actually conserved the *most* energy. On average, the "join your neighbors" hanger led to between 5 and 9 percent fewer daily kilowatt-hours of energy used than the other three hangers—which were all equally ineffective. Knowing that other people were conserving energy was the best way to get residents to follow suit.

But perhaps it was the people who were already conserving electricity in each neighborhood who

responded most visibly, picking up the slack for the electricity takers. To find out whether sharing information about their neighbors' conservation efforts could motivate conservation among people who were consuming high levels of electricity, Cialdini's team ran another experiment with nearly three hundred households in California. This time, they gave residents door hangers that provided feedback on how their electricity consumption compared with similar households in their neighborhood over the past week or two. These door hangers provided feedback on whether residents were consuming less (giving) or more (taking) than their neighbors.

Over the next few weeks, the electricity takers significantly reduced their energy consumption, by an average of 1.22 kilowatt-hours per day. Seeing that they were taking more than the average in their neighborhood motivated them to match the average, decreasing their energy consumption.\* But this only works when people are compared with their neighbors. As Cialdini's team explains:

The key factor was which other people—other Californians, other people in their city, or other residents in their specific community. Consistent with the idea that people are most influenced by similar others, the power of social norms grew stronger the closer and more similar the group was to the residents: The decision to conserve was most powerfully influenced by those people who were most similar to the decision makers—the residents of their own community.

Inspired by this evidence, the company Opower sent home energy report letters to 600,000 households, randomly assigning about half of them to see their energy use in comparison with that of their neighbors. Once again, it was the takers—those consuming the most—who conserved the most after seeing how much they were taking. Overall, just showing people how they were doing relative to the local norm caused a dramatic improvement in energy conservation. The amount of energy saved by this feedback was equivalent to the amount of energy that would be saved if the price of electricity increased by up to 28 percent.

People often take because they don't realize that they're deviating from the norm. In these situations, showing them the norm is often enough to motivate them to give—especially if they have matcher instincts. Part of the beauty of Freecycle is that members have constant access to the norm. Every time a member offers to give something away, it's transparent: others can see how frequent giving is, and they want to follow suit. Because Freecycle is organized in local communities, members are seeing giving by their neighbors, which provides feedback on how their own giving stacks up relative to the local norm. Whether people tend to be givers, takers, or matchers, they don't want to violate the standards set by their neighbors, so they match.

Today, according to Yahoo!, only two environmental terms in the world are searched more often than *Freecycle*: *global warming* and *recycling*. By the summer of 2012, Freecycle had more than nine million members in over 110 countries, expanding at a rate of eight thousand members every week. Many people still join with a taker mentality, hoping to get as much free stuff as possible. But receiving benefits from a group of local citizens who serve as role models for small acts of giving continues to create a common identity in Freecycle communities, nudging many members in the giver direction. Together, the nine million Freecycle members give away more than thirty thousand items a day weighing nearly a thousand tons. If you piled together the goods given away in the past year, they'd be fourteen times taller than Mount Everest. As Charles Darwin once wrote, a tribe with many

people acting like givers, who “were always [ready to aid one another](#), and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.”

When I learned about the success of Freecycle, I began to wonder if these principles could play out in everyday life, in an organization without an environmental focus. What would it take to create and sustain a giving system in a company or a school?



## *The Reciprocity Ring*

When I joined the faculty at Wharton, the world's oldest collegiate business school, I decided to try a giving experiment in my classroom. I announced that we would be running an exercise called the Reciprocity Ring, which was developed by University of Michigan sociologist Wayne Baker and his wife Cheryl at Humax. Each student would make a request to the class, and the rest of the class would try to use their knowledge, resources, and connections to help fulfill the request. The request could be anything meaningful in their professional or personal lives, ranging from job leads to travel tips.

In a matter of minutes, I was facing a line of students—some cynical, others anxious. One student pronounced that the exercise wouldn't work, because there aren't any givers at Wharton: givers study medicine or social work, not business. Another admitted that he would love advice from more experienced peers on strengthening his candidacy for consulting jobs, but he knew they wouldn't help him, since they were competing with him for these positions.

Soon, these students watched in disbelief as their peers began to use their networks to help one another. A junior named Alex announced that he loved amusement parks, and he came to Wharton in the hopes of one day running Six Flags. He wasn't sure how to get started—could anyone help him break into the industry? A classmate, Andrew, raised his hand and said he had a weak tie to the former CEO of Six Flags. Andrew went out on a limb to connect them, and a few weeks later, Alex received invaluable career advice from the ex-CEO. A senior named Michelle confided that she had a friend whose growth was stunted due to health problems, and couldn't find clothes that fit. A fellow senior, Jessica, had an uncle in the fashion business, and she contacted him for help. Three months later, custom garments arrived at the doorstep of Michelle's friend.

Wayne Baker has led Reciprocity Rings at many companies, from GM to Bristol-Myers Squibb. Oftentimes, he brings leaders and managers together from competing companies in the same industry and invites them to make requests and help one another. In one session, a pharmaceutical executive was about to pay an outside vendor \$50,000 to synthesize a strain of the PCS alkaloid. The executive asked if anyone could help find a cheaper alternative. One of the group members happened to have slack capacity in his lab, and was able to do it for free.

The Reciprocity Ring can be an extremely powerful experience. Bud Ahearn, a group president at CH2M HILL, noted that leaders in his company “are strong endorsers, not only because of the hundreds of thousands of annual dollar value, but because of the remarkable potential to advance the quality of our ‘whole’ lives.” Baker has asked executives to estimate the dollar value and time saved in participating for two and a half hours. Thirty people in an engineering and architectural consulting firm estimated savings exceeding \$250,000 and fifty days. Fifteen people in a global pharmaceutical firm estimated savings of more than \$90,000 and sixty-seven days.

Personally, after running the Reciprocity Ring with leaders, managers, and employees from companies such as IBM, Citigroup, Estée Lauder, UPS, Novartis, and Boeing, I've been amazed by the requests that have been fulfilled—from landing a coveted job at Google to finding a mentor to receiving autographed memorabilia from a child's favorite professional football player. But before this happens, just as my Wharton students did, many participants question whether others will actually give them the help that they need. Each time, I respond by asking whether they might be [underestimating the givers](#) in their midst.

In a study by researchers Frank Flynn and Vanessa Bohns, people learned that they would be approaching strangers in New York City and asking them to fill out a survey. The participants estimated that only one out of every four people would say yes. In reality, when the participants went out and asked, one out of every two said yes. In another study in New York City, when participants approached strangers and asked them to borrow a cell phone, they expected 30 percent to say yes, but 48 percent did. When people approached strangers, said they were lost and asked to be walked to a nearby gym, they expected 14 percent to do it, but 43 percent did. And when people needed to raise thousands of dollars for charity, they expected that they would need to solicit donations from an average of 210 people to meet their fund-raising goals, anticipating an average donation under \$50. They actually hit their goals after approaching half as many people—on average, it only required 122 people, whose donations were over \$60 each.

Why do we underestimate the number of people who are willing to give? According to Flynn and Bohns, when we try to predict others' reactions, we focus on the costs of saying yes, overlooking the costs of saying no. It's uncomfortable, guilt-provoking, and embarrassing to turn down a small request for help. And psychological research points to another factor—equally powerful, and deeply rooted in American culture—that causes people to believe there aren't many givers around them.

Workplaces and schools are often designed to be zero-sum environments, with forced rankings and required grading curves that pit group members against one another in win-lose contests. In these settings, it's [only natural to assume](#) that peers will lean in the taker direction, so people hold back on giving. This reduces the actual amount of giving that occurs, leading people to underestimate the number of people who are interested in giving. Over time, because giving appears to be uncommon, people with giver values begin to feel that they're in the minority.

As a result, even when they do engage in giving behaviors, people worry that they'll isolate themselves socially if they violate the norm, so they disguise their giving behind purely self-interested motives. As early as 1835, after visiting the United States from France, the social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that Americans “enjoy [explaining almost every act of their lives on the principle of self-interest](#).” He saw Americans “help one another” and “freely give part of their time and wealth for the good of the state,” but was struck by the fact that “Americans are hardly prepared to admit” that these acts were driven by a genuine desire to help others. “I think that in this way they often do themselves less than justice,” he wrote. A century and a half later, the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow interviewed a wide range of Americans who chose helping professions, from cardiologists to rescue workers. When he asked them to explain why they did good deeds, they referenced self-interested reasons, such as “I liked the people I was working with” or “It gets me out of the house.” They didn't want to admit that they were genuinely helpful, kind, generous, caring, or compassionate. “We have [social norms against sounding too charitable](#),” Wuthnow writes, such that “we call people who go around acting too charitable ‘bleeding hearts,’ ‘do-gooders.’”

In my experience, this is what happens in many businesses and universities: plenty of people hold giver values, but suppress or disguise them under the mistaken assumption that their peers don't share these values. As the psychologists David Krech and Richard Crutchfield explained many years ago, this creates a situation where “[no one believes](#), but everyone thinks that everyone believes.” Consider a 2011 survey of [Harvard freshmen](#): they consistently reported that compassion was one of their top values, but near the bottom of Harvard's values. If many people personally believe in giving, but assume that others don't, the whole norm in a group or a company can shift away from giving. “[Ideas](#)

[can have profound effects](#) even when they are false—when they are nothing more than ideology,” writes the psychologist Barry Schwartz. “These effects can arise because sometimes when people act on the basis of ideology, they inadvertently arrange the very conditions that bring reality into correspondence with the ideology.” When people assume that others aren’t givers, they act and speak in ways that discourage others from giving, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As a structured form of giving, the Reciprocity Ring is designed to disrupt this self-fulfilling prophecy. The first step is to make sure that people ask for help. Research shows that at work, the vast majority of giving that occurs between people is in response to direct requests for help. In one study, managers described times when they gave and received help. Of all the giving exchanges that occurred, roughly 90 percent were initiated by the recipient asking for help. Yet when we have a need, we’re often reluctant to ask for help. Much of the time, we’re embarrassed: we don’t want to look incompetent or needy, and we don’t want to burden others. As one Wharton dean explains, “The students call it Game Face: they feel pressured to look successful all the time. There can’t be any chinks in their armor, and opening up would make them vulnerable.”

In the Reciprocity Ring, because everyone is making a request, there’s little reason to be embarrassed. By making requests explicit and specific, participants provide potential givers with clear direction about how to contribute effectively. As in Freecycle, the Reciprocity Ring often starts with givers stepping up as role models for contributions. But in every Reciprocity Ring, there are likely to be many matchers and some people who prefer to operate as takers. For a generalized giving system to achieve sustainable effectiveness, as in Freecycle, these matchers and takers need to contribute. Otherwise, the givers will end up helping everyone while receiving little in return, placing themselves at risk for getting burned or burning out. Do matchers and takers step up?

Because people often present meaningful requests in Reciprocity Rings, many matchers are drawn in by empathy. When I heard a powerful CEO’s voice tremble as he sought advice and connections to fight a rare form of cancer, the empathy in the room was palpable. “I was surprised by how much I wanted to help,” one financial services executive confides. “My job requires me to be very task-focused and financially oriented. I didn’t expect to care that much, especially about a stranger I’d never met. But I really felt for his need, and wanted to do whatever I could to contribute and fulfill his request.”

Even when they don’t empathize, matchers still end up making plenty of contributions. It’s very difficult to act like a pure matcher in the [Reciprocity Ring](#), since it’s unlikely that the people you help will be the same people who can help fulfill your request. So the easiest way to be a matcher is to try to contribute the same amount that other people do. The Reciprocity Ring creates a miniature version of Panda Adam Rifkin’s network: participants are encouraged to do five-minute favors for anyone else in the group. To make sure that every request is granted, participants need to make multiple contributions, even to people who haven’t helped them directly. By giving more than they take, participants amplify the odds that everyone in the group will have their requests fulfilled, much like Panda Adam setting a pay-it-forward norm in his network.

But what about the takers? Many audiences are concerned that takers will capitalize on the opportunity to get help without contributing in return. To examine this risk, Wayne Baker and I surveyed more than a hundred people about their giver and taker values. Then they participated in the Reciprocity Ring, and we counted the number of contributions they made. As expected, the givers made significantly more contributions than the takers. The givers averaged four contributions each.

Surprisingly, though, the takers were still quite generous, averaging three contributions each. Despite valuing power and achievement far more than helping others, the takers gave three times more than they got. The Reciprocity Ring created a context that encouraged takers to act like givers, and the key lies in making giving public. Takers know that in a public setting, they'll gain [reputational benefits](#) for being generous in sharing their knowledge, resources, and connections. If they don't contribute, they look stingy and selfish, and they won't get much help with their own requests. "Being altruistic is often seen as 'good,' and being greedy or selfish is not," writes Duke behavioral economist Dan Ariely with two colleagues, so giving is "a way to signal to others that one is good."

Research shows that givers usually contribute regardless of whether it's public or private, but takers are more likely to contribute when it's public. In one study, when others could see their results, takers contributed a large number of ideas during [brainstorming](#). But when their results were hidden, takers added less value. Other studies reveal that takers [go green to be seen](#): they prefer luxurious products over green products when their decisions are private, but shift to green products when their decisions are public, hoping to earn status for protecting the environment. I saw a similar trend among Wharton students: each week in class, I opened the floor for a few students to present requests and invited the whole class to contribute. One November morning, five students made requests, and I was stunned to see a student who had described himself as a taker offer to help four of them. Once his reputation among his peers depended on giving, he contributed. By making contributions visible, the Reciprocity Ring sets up an opportunity for people of any reciprocity style to be otherish: they can do good and look good at the same time.

# *Identity Shifts and Reciprocity Reversals*

This raises a fundamental question: does a generalized giving system like Freecycle or the Reciprocity Ring motivate takers to become better fakers, or can it actually turn takers into givers? In some ways, I'd say the motives don't matter: it's the behavior itself that counts. If takers are acting in ways that benefit others, even if the motives are primarily selfish rather than selfless or otherish, they're making contributions that sustain generalized giving as a form of exchange.

That said, if we ignore motives altogether, we overlook the risk that takers will decrease their giving as soon as they're out of the spotlight. In one study conducted by Chinese researchers, more than three hundred [bank tellers](#) were considered for a promotion. The managers rated how frequently each bank teller had engaged in giving behaviors like helping others with heavy workloads and volunteering for tasks that weren't required as part of their jobs. Based on giving behavior, the managers promoted seventy of the bank tellers.

Over the next three months, the managers came to regret promoting more than half of the tellers. Of the seventy tellers who were promoted, thirty-three were genuine givers: they sustained their giving after the promotion. The other thirty-seven tellers declined rapidly in their giving. They were fakers: in the three months before the promotion, they knew they were being watched, so they went out of their way to help others. But after they got promoted, they reduced their giving by an average of 23 percent each.

What would it take to nudge people in the giving direction? When Harvard dean Thomas Dingman saw that Harvard students valued compassion but thought others didn't, he decided to do something about it. For the first time in the university's four centuries, Harvard freshmen were invited to sign a pledge to serve society. The pledge concluded: "As we begin at Harvard, we commit to upholding the values of the College and to making the entryway and Yard a place where all can thrive and where the exercise of kindness holds a place on a par with intellectual attainment."

Believing in the power of a public commitment, Dingman decided to go one step beyond inviting students to sign the pledge. To encourage students to follow through, their signatures would be framed in the hallways of campus dorms. A storm of objections quickly emerged, most notably from Harry Lewis, a computer science professor and the former dean of Harvard College. "An appeal for kindness is entirely appropriate," Lewis responded. "I agree that the exercise of personal kindness in this community is too often wanting," he wrote on his blog, but "for Harvard to 'invite' people to pledge to kindness is unwise, and [sets a terrible precedent](#)."

Is Lewis right?

In a series of experiments led by NYU psychologist Peter Gollwitzer, people who went public with their intentions to engage in an identity-relevant behavior were significantly *less likely* to engage in the behavior than people who kept their intentions private. [When people made their identity plans known to others](#), they were able to claim the identity without actually following through on the behavior. By signing the kindness pledge, Harvard students would be able to establish an image as givers without needing to act like givers.

Dingman quickly dropped the idea of posting signatures publicly. But even then, evidence suggests that privately signing a kindness pledge [might backfire](#). In one experiment, Northwestern University psychologists randomly assigned people to write about themselves using either giver terms



like *caring*, *generous*, and *kind* or neutral terms like *book*, *keys*, and *house*. After the participants filled out another questionnaire, a researcher asked them if they wanted to donate money to a charity of their choosing. Those who wrote about themselves as givers donated an average of two and a half times *less* money than those who wrote about themselves with neutral words. “I’m a giving person,” they told themselves, “so I don’t have to donate this time.” The kindness pledge might have a similar effect on Harvard students. When they sign the pledge, they establish credentials as givers, which may grant them a psychological license to give less—or take more.

When we’re trying to influence someone, we often adopt an approach that mirrors the Harvard pledge: we start by changing their attitudes, hoping that their behaviors are likely to march in the same direction. If we get people to sign a statement that they’ll act like givers, they’ll come to believe that giving is important, and then they’ll give. But according to a rich body of psychological detective work, this reasoning is backward. Influence is far more powerful in the opposite direction: change people’s behaviors first, and their attitudes often follow. To turn takers into givers, it’s often necessary to convince them to start giving. Over time, if the conditions are right, they’ll come to see themselves as givers.

This didn’t happen to the bank tellers in China: even after three months of helping colleagues, once they got promoted, they stopped giving. Over the past thirty-five years, research launched by Batson and his colleagues shows that when people give, if they can [attribute it to an external reason](#) like a promotion, they don’t start to think of themselves as givers. But when people repeatedly make the personal choice to give to others, they start to internalize giving as part of their identities. For some people, this happens through an active process of cognitive dissonance: once I’ve made the voluntary decision to give, I can’t change the behavior, so the easiest way to stay consistent and avoid hypocrisy is to decide that I’m a giver. For other people, the internalization process is one of learning from observing their own behaviors. [To paraphrase the writer](#) E. M. Forster, “How do I know who I am until I see what I do?”

In support of this idea, studies of volunteering show that even when people join a volunteer organization to advance their own careers, the longer they serve and the more time they give, the more they begin to view the volunteering role as an [important aspect of their identities](#). Once that happens, they start to experience a common identity with the people they’re helping, and they become givers in that role. Research documents a similar process inside companies: as people make voluntary decisions to help colleagues and customers beyond the scope of their jobs, they come to see themselves as organizational citizens.\*

Part of the wisdom behind Freecycle and the Reciprocity Ring is that both of these generalized giving systems encourage giving while maintaining a sense of free choice. Although there’s a strong norm of giving, it’s entirely up to each participant to decide what to give and whom to help. When my Wharton class went through the Reciprocity Ring, as different students chose their own ways to give and peers to help, a distinctive common identity began to develop. “This is a unique group of people at Wharton that cares about each other,” one student said. Although the students were competing for the same jobs in management consulting and investment banking, they started helping one another prepare for interviews, sharing tips and offering advice. After the class ended, a group of students took the initiative to start an alumni listserv so that they could continue helping one another. According to one student, “because of the emphasis on the benefit of giving and helping in our shared community, I’d be far more comfortable and likely to ask for (and probably receive) help from a



random member of the alumni group than my other groups.”

At the end of the semester, the cynical student who had questioned whether there were any givers at Wharton quietly approached me. “Somehow,” he said, “everyone in the class became intrinsically motivated to give, and it transcends the class itself.”

## Out of the Shadows

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*Some people, when they do someone a favor, are always looking for a chance to call it in. And some aren't, but they're still aware of it—still regard it as a debt. But others don't even do that. They're like a vine that produces grapes without looking for anything in return . . . after helping others . . . They just go on to something else . . . We should be like that.*

—Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor

A number of years ago, an imposing figure made his mark on the sports world. Well over six feet tall and two hundred pounds, [Derek Sorenson](#) was a tough, aggressive competitor who struck fear into the hearts of his opponents. He led his NCAA team to a national championship and went on to play in the pros. After his career was cut short by an injury, he was courted by the finest professional teams in his sport to become a contract negotiator. He would be wheeling and dealing with players and agents in the hopes of building a world-class team.

To sharpen his bargaining skills, Derek enrolled in a negotiation course at a leading business school. During each class session, he had the chance to practice negotiating in a variety of roles, ranging from a pharmaceutical executive trying to buy a manufacturing plant to a condo developer in a heated dispute with a carpenter. In one of his earliest negotiations, Derek bought a property as a real estate investment, and in top taker form, he persuaded the listing agent to sell at a price that went directly against her client's interests.

On an icy winter evening, Derek played the role of one of four fishermen who ran competing businesses. They were overfishing to the point that the resource would become extinct, and they sat down to discuss how they should handle the dilemma. One negotiator suggested that they should split the maximum total fishing in four equal parts. Another proposed a different way of matching based on equity rather than equality: since some of them were running larger operations than others, they should each reduce their fishing by 50 percent. They all agreed that this was a fair solution, and the meeting was adjourned. Now, it was up to each negotiator to make an individual decision about whether to honor the agreement and how much to fish.

Two of the negotiators stuck to their commitments, reducing their fishing by 50 percent. The third operated like a giver: she reduced her fishing by 65 percent. The group was all set to keep the resource intact, but Derek chose not to reduce his fishing at all. He took as much as he could, actually increasing his fishing total and decimating the other three entrepreneurs. Before the group met, Derek had the lowest profits of the four. After he took far more than his share of the harvest, his profits were 70 percent higher than the giver's and 31 percent higher than those of the other two. When confronted by his colleagues, Derek responded, "I wanted to win the negotiations and destroy my competitors."

Just a few months later, Derek began a meteoric rise in his career. He was hired by a professional sports team and established a reputation as a dominant negotiator, playing a key role in assembling a team that went on to win a world championship. Derek was promoted in an unusually short period of time and recognized as one of the one hundred most powerful people in his sport—while still in his thirties.

When Derek first started working for his team as a professional negotiator, his job was to manage the budget, identify top prospects, and negotiate contracts with agents to sign new players and keep existing players. Since resources were tight, bargaining like a taker would work to his advantage. Derek began to search for underrated talent, and stumbled upon a gem of a player in the minor leagues. He sat down with the player's agent to negotiate a contract. True to form, Derek made a lowball offer. The agent was frustrated: several comparable players were earning higher salaries. The agent accused Derek of pushing him around and demanded more money, but Derek ignored the demands and didn't budge. Eventually, the agent gave in and agreed to Derek's terms. It was a win for Derek, saving his team thousands of dollars.

But when Derek went home that night, he had an uneasy feeling. "I could just feel through the conversation that he was pretty upset. He brought up a couple points on comparable players, and in the heat of things, I probably wasn't listening too much. He was going away with a bad taste in his mouth." Derek decided he didn't want to end the exchange with the agent on a sour note. So he tore up the contract and met the agent's original request, giving him thousands of extra dollars for the player.

Was this a wise decision? Derek was costing his team money, and potentially creating a precedent for doing so in other negotiations. Besides, the deal was settled. The agent had agreed to the lowball offer and Derek had achieved his goal. Going back on it hardly seemed like a smart move.

Actually, it was much smarter than it first appeared. When Vanderbilt researchers Bruce Barry and Ray Friedman studied negotiations, they had a hunch that sharper negotiators would get better results, as they could gather and analyze more information, keep track of multiple issues, and generate hidden solutions. In one study, Barry and Friedman obtained data on the intelligence of nearly a hundred MBA students. They measured intelligence using each student's score on the GMAT, a rigorous test that is widely used in business school admissions to measure quantitative, verbal, and analytical abilities. The participants negotiated in pairs, playing either the developer of a new mall or the representative of a potential store to anchor the mall. After they finished negotiating, they submitted their final agreements, and two experts assessed the value of the deal to each party.

As expected, the joint gains were highest when both parties were very intelligent. Barry and Friedman broke down each party's gains, expecting to find that the [smarter negotiators](#) got better deals for themselves. But they didn't. The brightest negotiators got better deals *for their counterparts*.

"The smarter negotiator appears to be able to understand his or her opponents' true interests and

thus to provide them with better deals at little cost to him- or herself,” Barry and Friedman write. The more intelligent you are, the more you help your counterpart succeed. This is exactly what Derek did when he gave the agent more money for the minor league player. He was giving in an otherish way that was low cost to him but high benefit to the agent and the player. A few thousand dollars was small potatoes to his team, but very significant to the player.

What drove Derek to shift in the giver direction? Shortly before the negotiation with the agent, Derek had gained a window into something that mattered deeply to him: his reputation. At the end of the negotiation course, every participant submitted votes for negotiation awards. Derek received zero votes for Most Cooperative, zero for Most Creative, and zero for Most Ethical. In fact, there was only one award for which he received any votes. For this particular award, Derek received the vast majority of the votes. He was the landslide winner for Most Ruthless.

But Derek achieved something more memorable that week. He became the only student in business school history to be voted the Most Ruthless negotiator *in a class that he never took*. At the same time that he was enrolled in his course, another negotiation class was under way. None of these students in the other class ever sat across the bargaining table from Derek. Some of them had never met him. Yet his reputation spread so quickly that they voted for him as Most Ruthless anyway.

Derek was negotiating the way any reasonable person would in a taker’s world. As a professional athlete, he had learned that if he didn’t claim as much value as possible, he was at risk for becoming a doormat. “It was the team against the player. The team was always trying to take money out of my pocket, so I viewed a negotiation to be a combative process, which produced a winner and a loser,” Derek says. “I had to try to take more and more.” After being anointed the Most Ruthless negotiator by his peers—and a group of strangers—Derek began to reflect on his reciprocity style at the bargaining table. “While I gained a short-term benefit by taking, in the long run I paid. My relationship with a colleague was ruined, and it caused the demise of my reputation,” he said. In the negotiation with the agent, when he ripped up the contract and gave the agent more money, “It built goodwill. The agent was extremely appreciative,” Derek reflects. “When the player came up for free agency, the agent gave me a call. Looking back on it now, I’m really glad I did it. It’s definitely improved our relationship, and helped out our organization. Maybe Most Ruthless is maturing.”

Actually, I believe maturing is the wrong way to describe Derek’s transformation. Maturation implies a process of growth and development, but in a sense, Derek was actually taking a step backward to express core values that he had embraced for years away from the bargaining table. Long before he ever negotiated like a taker, his peers perceived him as a generous, helpful person who would make time for anyone who asked. He spent countless hours providing advice to colleagues who were interested in sports management careers and mentoring young athletes who aspired to follow in his footsteps. Growing up, he was elected captain of virtually every team on which he played, from elementary school through high school, all the way through college. He even became captain as a rookie on his first professional team—players twice his age respected his commitment to putting the team’s interests ahead of his own.

At the bargaining table, Derek’s transition wasn’t about learning a new set of values. It was about developing the confidence and courage to express an old set of values in a new domain. I believe this is true for most people who operate like matchers professionally, and my hope is that others like Derek won’t wait for a Most Ruthless award to start finding ways to act in the interest of others at work. For Derek these days, a signature form of giving is helping opposing teams gather information

about players. Even though they're competing in a zero-sum sport, he shares knowledge to help rival teams make good decisions about players who have been on his team in the past. "On the field, I want to beat up opposing teams. But off the field, I'm always trying to help them out."

Today, Derek attributes his success in building a championship-winning professional sports team to his shift from taking toward giving. Yet he still worries about what will happen if people outside his inner circle find out about his shift in the giver direction. In fact, Derek Sorenson is a pseudonym: before sharing his story, he asked me to disguise his identity. "I don't want it to get out there that I've given more money than I needed to a player," he says.

These fears persist among many successful givers, but they're not insurmountable. Consider [Sherryann Plesse](#), the financial services executive from the opening chapter who hid the fact that kindness and compassion emerged as her top strengths. When I originally asked her to tell her story, like Derek, she only agreed under the condition that she would remain anonymous. Six months later, she changed her mind. "I've started an underground campaign of givers coming out of the closet," she said. "Being a giver has contributed to my personal and professional success. It's liberating to talk about it. I'm not afraid anymore."

What changed her mind? When Sherryann first recognized her giver attributes, she was focused on the risks: people expected her to be tough and results-oriented, and might see giving as a sign of weakness. But when she started taking a close look around her company, she was struck by the realization that all of her professional role models were givers. Suddenly, her frame of reference shifted: instead of just seeing givers at the bottom, she recognized a surprising number of givers at the top. This isn't what we usually notice when we glance up at the horizon at successful people. By and large, because of their tendencies toward powerful speech and claiming credit, successful takers tend to dominate the spotlight. But if you start paying attention to reciprocity styles in your own workplace, I have a hunch that you'll discover plenty of givers achieving the success to which you aspire.

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Personally, the successful people whom I admire most are givers, and I feel that it's my responsibility to try and pass along what I've learned from them. When I arrived at Wharton, my charge was to teach some of the world's finest analytic minds to become better leaders, managers, and negotiators. I decided to introduce them to reciprocity styles, posing the question that animated the introduction to this book: who do you think ends up at the bottom of the success ladder?

The verdict was nearly unanimous: givers. When I asked who rises to the top, the students were evenly split between matchers and takers. So I chose to teach them something that struck them as heretical. "You might be underestimating the success of givers," I told them. It's true that some people who consistently help others without expecting anything in return are the ones who fall to the bottom. But this same orientation toward giving, with a few adjustments, can also enable people to rise to the top. "Focus attention and energy on making a difference in the lives of others, and success might follow as a by-product." I knew I was fighting an uphill battle, so I decided to prove them wrong.

This book is that proof.

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Although many of us hold strong giver values, we're often reluctant to express them at work. But the growth of teamwork, service jobs, and social media has opened up new opportunities for givers to develop relationships and reputations that accelerate and amplify their success. We've covered evidence that givers can rise to the top across a stunningly diverse range of occupations, from engineering to medicine to sales. And remember when [Peter Audet](#), the Australian financial adviser, seemed to be wasting hours of his time by driving out to help a poor scrap metal worker manage his money? The client turned out to be the wealthy owner of a scrap metal business, resulting in major gains for Peter's firm—but the story doesn't end there.

Peter learned that the scrap metal owner was too busy running the business to take a vacation, and he wanted to help. A few months later, another client expressed that she wasn't happy in her job as a manager at an auto body shop. Peter recommended her to the scrap metal owner, who had a need for her skills, and it turned out that she lived five minutes away from the scrap metal yard. She started work three weeks later, and the client took his wife on their first vacation in years. "Both of these clients are happy and grateful that I think about their whole lives, not just their investments," Peter says. "The more I help out, the more successful I become. But I measure success in what it has done for the people around me. That is the real accolade."

In the mind of a giver, the definition of success itself takes on a distinctive meaning. Whereas takers view success as attaining results that are superior to others' and matchers see success in terms of balancing individual accomplishments with fairness to others, givers are inclined to follow Peter's lead, characterizing success as individual achievements that have a positive impact on others. Taking this definition of success seriously might require dramatic changes in the way that organizations hire, evaluate, reward, and promote people. It would mean paying attention not only to the productivity of individual people but also to the ripple effects of this productivity on others. If we broadened our image of success to include contributions to others along with individual accomplishments, people might be motivated to tilt their professional reciprocity styles toward giving. If success required benefiting others, it's possible that takers and matchers would be more inclined to find otherish ways to advance personal and collective interests simultaneously.

The connection between individual and collective success underlies every story of successful givers in this book. As an entrepreneur, Adam Rifkin built his network of influential people by trying to help everyone he met, launching successful companies and enabling thousands of colleagues to find jobs, develop skills, and start productive businesses along the way. As a venture capitalist, David Hornik invested in lucrative companies and fortified his reputation by helping aspiring entrepreneurs create better pitches and gain funding for their start-ups. As a comedy writer, George Meyer earned Emmys and established a reputation as the funniest writer in Hollywood while elevating the effectiveness of and opening doors for the people who collaborated with him on *Army Man* and *The Simpsons*.

In the classroom, C. J. Skender earned dozens of teaching awards while inspiring a new generation of students, seeing their potential and motivating them to achieve this potential, and Conrey Callahan sustained her energy and was nominated for a national teaching award after she started a nonprofit to help underprivileged children prepare for college. In health care, Kildare Escoto and Nancy Phelps rose to the top of their company's sales revenue charts by striving to help patients. In consulting, Jason Geller and Lillian Bauer made partner early by virtue of the contributions that they made through mentoring and developing others, which in turn enriched the knowledge of junior



colleagues. In politics, Abraham Lincoln became president—and built a legacy as one of the greatest leaders in world history—by helping his rivals earn coveted political positions.

This is what I find most magnetic about successful givers: they get to the top without cutting others down, finding ways of expanding the pie that benefit themselves and the people around them. Whereas success is zero-sum in a group of takers, in groups of givers, it may be true that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Armed with this knowledge, I've seen some people become more strategic matchers, helping others in the hopes of developing the relationships and reputations necessary to advance their own success. Can people succeed through instrumental giving, where the primary intent is getting? At the beginning of the book, I suggested that in the long term, the answer might be no.

There's a fine line between giving and clever matching, and this line blurs depending on whether we define reciprocity styles by the actions themselves, the motives behind them, or some combination of the two. It's a deep philosophical question, and it's easy to identify with a range of views on how strategic matchers should be evaluated. On the one hand, even if the motives are mixed, helping behaviors often add value to others, increasing the total amount of giving in a social system. On the other hand, as we saw with Ken Lay, our behaviors leak traces of our motives. If recipients and witnesses of our giving begin to question whether the motives are self-serving, they're less likely to respond with gratitude or elevation. When strategic matchers engage in disingenuous efforts to help others primarily for personal gain, they may be hoisted by their own petard: fellow matchers may withhold help, spread negative reputational information, or find other ways to impose a taker tax.

To avoid these consequences, would-be matchers may be best served by giving in ways that they find enjoyable, to recipients whose well-being matters to them. That way, even if they don't reap direct or karmic rewards, matchers will be operating in a giver's mind-set, leading their motives to appear—and become—more pure. Ultimately, by repeatedly making the choice to act in the interest of others, strategic matchers may find themselves developing giver identities, resulting in a gradual drift in style toward the giving end of the reciprocity spectrum.

We spend the majority of our waking hours at work. This means that what we do at work becomes a fundamental part of who we are. If we reserve giver values for our personal lives, what will be missing in our professional lives? By shifting ever so slightly in the giver direction, we might find our waking hours marked by greater success, richer meaning, and more lasting impact.

## ACTIONS FOR IMPACT

If you're interested in applying the principles in this book to your work or your life, I've compiled a set of practical actions that you can take. Many of these actions are based on the strategies and habits of successful givers, and in each case, I've provided resources and tools for evaluating, organizing, or expanding giving. Some of the steps focus on incorporating more giving into your daily behaviors; others emphasize ways that you can fine-tune your giving, locate fellow givers, or engage others in giving.

1. *Test Your Giver Quotient.* We often live in a feedback vacuum, deprived of knowledge about how our actions affect others. So that you can track your impact and assess your self-awareness, I've designed a series of free online tools. Visit [www.giveandtake.com](http://www.giveandtake.com) to take a free survey that tests your giver quotient. Along with filling out your own survey, you can invite people in your network to rate your reciprocity style, and you'll receive data on how often you're seen as a giver, taker, and matcher.

2. *Run a Reciprocity Ring.* What could be achieved in your organization—and what giving norms would develop—if groups of people got together weekly for twenty minutes to make requests and help one another fulfill them? For more information on how to start a Reciprocity Ring in your organization, visit Cheryl and Wayne Baker's company, Humax ([www.humaxnetworks.com](http://www.humaxnetworks.com)), which offers a suite of social networking tools for individuals and organizations. They've created materials to run a Reciprocity Ring in person and a Rippplleffect tool for running it online. People typically come together in groups of fifteen to thirty. Each person presents a request to the group members, who make contributions: they use their knowledge, resources, and connections to help fulfill the request. Another start-up, Favo.rs (<http://favo.rs>), has created an online marketplace where people can make and fulfill requests for help.

3. *Help Other People Craft Their Jobs—or Craft Yours to Incorporate More Giving.* People often end up working on tasks that aren't perfectly aligned with their interests and skills. A powerful way to give is to help others work on tasks that are more interesting, meaningful, or developmental. In 2011, a vice president named Jay at a large multinational retailer sent e-mails to each of his employees announcing a [top-secret mission](#), with details to be shared on a need-to-know basis in one-on-one meetings. When employees arrived individually for the meetings, Jay unveiled the confidential project. He asked them what they would enjoy doing that might also be of interest to other people. He inquired about their hobbies and personal interests, and what they would love to spend more time doing at the company. He then sent them out into the company to pursue their mission with three rules: it has to (1) appeal to at least one other person, (2) be low or no cost, and (3) be initiated by you.

Throughout the year, Jay checked in to see how the secret missions were going. About two thirds

of his employees had made some effort toward making their visions a reality, and roughly half of those employees succeeded in launching them. One of Jay's favorite missions resulted in a book club where employees read books and discussed topics that were of personal interest and relevance to their jobs. "People had permission to do all of that stuff before I ever asked that question," Jay reflects. "But somehow, asking that question in my role gives people permission to pursue their interests in a way they didn't have before. It's planting seeds, with some percentage of them turning into real initiatives." These seeds have bloomed for many of his employees, and for Jay as well: in 2012, he was selected to become the vice president of HR for a major division of his company, where he's responsible for more than 45,000 employees.

In the secret missions, Jay encouraged his employees to engage in [job crafting](#), a concept introduced by Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton, management professors at Yale and the University of Michigan, respectively. Job crafting involves innovating around a job description, creatively adding and customizing tasks and responsibilities to match personal interests and values. A natural concern is that people might craft their jobs in ways that fail to contribute to their organizations. To address this question, Amy, Justin Berg, and I partnered with Jennifer Kurkoski and Brian Welle, who run a people and innovation lab at Google. In a study across the United States and Europe, we randomly assigned Google employees working in sales, finance, operations, accounting, marketing, and human resources to a job-crafting workshop. The employees created a map of how they'd like to modify their tasks, crafting a more ideal but still realistic vision of their jobs that aligned with their interests and values.

Six weeks later, their managers and coworkers rated them as significantly happier *and* more effective. Many Google employees found ways to spend more time on tasks that they found interesting or meaningful; some delegated unpleasant tasks; and others were able to customize their jobs to incorporate new knowledge and skills that they wanted to develop. All told, Google employees found their work more enjoyable and were motivated to perform better, and in some cases, these gains lasted for six months. Job crafting worked across reciprocity styles: givers, takers, and matchers all became more effective. The givers saw job crafting as an opportunity to expand their impact, so they generated ways to add more value to other people and the company, such as mentoring junior colleagues, creating better products for clients, and improving training for new hires. The matchers were grateful for the opportunity to pursue more meaningful and interesting work, and reciprocated by working harder. Even the takers recognized that to advance their own careers, they needed to craft their jobs in ways that would benefit the company as well as themselves.

To help people craft their jobs, Justin, Amy, and Jane have developed a tool called the Job Crafting Exercise. It's what we used to conduct the Google workshops, and it involves creating a "before sketch" of how you currently allocate your time and energy, and then developing a visual "after diagram" of how you'd like to modify your job. The booklets can be ordered online ([www.jobcrafting.org](http://www.jobcrafting.org)) and completed in teams or individually to help friends and colleagues make meaningful modifications to their jobs.

4. *Start a [Love Machine](#).* In many organizations, givers go unrecognized. To combat this problem, organizations are introducing peer recognition programs to reward people for giving in ways that leaders and managers rarely see. A [Mercer study](#) found that in 2001, about 25 percent of large companies had peer recognition programs, and by 2006, this number had grown to 35 percent—including celebrated companies like Google, Southwest Airlines, and Zappos.

A fascinating approach called the Love Machine was developed at Linden Lab, the company behind the virtual world Second Life. In a high-technology company, many employees aim to protect their time for themselves and guard information closely, instead of sharing their time and knowledge with colleagues. The Love Machine was designed to overcome this tendency by enabling employees to send a Love message when they appreciated help from a colleague. The Love messages were visible to others, rewarding and recognizing giving by linking it to status and reputations. One insider viewed it as a way to get “tech geeks to compete to see who could be the most helpful.” Love helped to “boost awareness of people who did tasks that were sometimes overlooked. Our support staff, for instance, often received the most Love,” says Chris Colosi, a former Linden manager. “Once you introduce a certain percentage of takers into your system, you need to think about what effect an incentive will have, but I enjoyed the idea of Love for tasks that were outside of someone’s job description or requirements.”

To try out the Love Machine in your organization, look up a new electronic tool called SendLove. It’s available from LoveMachine ([www.lovemachineinc.com](http://www.lovemachineinc.com)), a new start-up that asks you to start by choosing a recognition period. Team members can send each other short messages recognizing giving, and the messages are all publicly visible.

5. *Embrace the Five-Minute Favor.* If you visit a 106 Miles Meetup ([www.meetup.com/106miles](http://www.meetup.com/106miles)), you might see Panda Adam Rifkin in top form. He’s a master of the five-minute favor, and you can follow Panda’s lead by asking people what they need and looking for ways to help at a minimal personal cost. Rifkin’s two favorite offers are to give honest feedback and make an introduction. For example, here’s a simple exercise to get started as a connector. Start by going through your Rolodex, LinkedIn, or Facebook network. Identify pairs of people who share an uncommon commonality. Then, pick one pair a week and introduce them by e-mail. Rifkin also recommends reconnecting with dormant ties—not to get something, but to give. Once a month, reach out to one person with whom you haven’t spoken in years. Find out what they’re working on and ask if there are ways that you can be helpful. On a related note, you can learn more about David Hornik’s approach to giving by visiting Venture Blog ([www.ventureblog.com/](http://www.ventureblog.com/)).

6. *Practice Powerless Communication, but Become an Advocate.* Developing greater comfort and skill with powerless communication requires a change in habits—from talking to listening, self-promoting to advice-seeking, and advocating to inquiring. Jim Quigley, a senior partner at Deloitte who previously served as CEO, decided to work on his powerless communication. He set a goal in meetings to talk no more than 20 percent of the time. “[One of my objectives is listening](#). Many times, you can have bigger impact if you know what to ask, rather than knowing what to say. I don’t learn anything when I’m speaking. I learn a lot when I’m listening,” Quigley told me. As he shifted from answers toward questions, Quigley found himself gaining a deeper understanding of other people’s needs. “It doesn’t come naturally to everyone, but it’s a habit, and you can form that habit.” For more on the power of powerless communication, visit the blogs by Susan Cain ([www.thepowerofintroverts.com](http://www.thepowerofintroverts.com)) and Jennifer Kahnweiler ([www.theintrovertedleaderblog.com](http://www.theintrovertedleaderblog.com)).

At the same time, it’s important to make sure that powerless communication doesn’t come at the expense of assertiveness when advocating for others’ interests and our own. [GetRaised](#) is a free resource that offers advice on negotiating salary increases. According to cofounder Matt Wallaert, the average pay increase is \$6,726, provided that you’re underpaid. About half of male users succeed in getting a raise—compared with three quarters of female users (<https://getraised.com>).

7. *Join a Community of Givers.* To find other givers, join a Freecycle community to give away goods and see what other people need ([www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)). Another inspiring community of givers is [ServiceSpace](http://www.servicespace.org) ([www.servicespace.org](http://www.servicespace.org)), the home of a series of Giftivism initiatives started by Nipun Mehta. Headquartered in Berkeley, California, ServiceSpace has over 400,000 members and sends over fifty million e-mails a year. Yet they still operate by three rules: “no staff, no fundraising, and no strings attached.” Through ServiceSpace, Nipun has created a platform for people to increase their giver quotients, divided into three categories: gift economy projects, inspirational content, and volunteer and nonprofit support. One of the gift economy projects is Karma Kitchen, where the menu has no prices. When the bill arrives, it reads \$0.00 and contains just two sentences: “Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. To keep the chain of gifts alive, we invite you to pay it forward for those who dine after you.” Another gift economy project is HelpOthers.org, which collects stories of people playing giver tag: do something anonymously for someone else, and leave a smile card inviting them to pay it forward.

Nipun describes how one woman at a *Fortune* 500 company went to get a drink from the vending machine, and put extra change in with a note: “Your drink has been paid for by someone you don’t know. Spread the love.” Then, she brought in doughnuts and left another smile card behind. “A guy noticed this trend, and he decides to send an e-mail to the whole building,” Nipun says, laughing. “The guy writes, ‘I’ve been trying to track them down for a long time, and I think it’s between floors two and three.’ Now everybody’s on alert for kindness, and a bunch of people start doing it.” On the ServiceSpace website, you can order smile cards, help support nonprofit causes, subscribe to the weekly newsletter, or read a thought-provoking list of ways to give, such as paying the toll for the person behind you or thanking people for helping you by writing a complimentary note to their boss. “The more you give, the more you want to do it—as do others around you. It’s like going to the gym,” Nipun says. “If you’ve been working out your kindness muscles, you get stronger at it.”

Another impressive initiative is HopeMob, billed as the place “where generous strangers unite to bring immediate hope to people with pressing needs all over the world” (<http://hopemob.org>). For ideas about how to organize your own group of people to perform random acts of kindness, see the initiatives under way at Extreme Kindness in Canada (<http://extremekindness.com>) and The Kindness Offensive in the UK (<http://thekindnessoffensive.com>). The Kindness Offensive is a group of people who strive to be [aggressively helpful](#), organizing some of the grandest random acts of kindness in human history. They’ve provided a toy for every child in a hospital in London, given away half a million pancakes, distributed tons of giveaways at festivals around Britain, provided free medical supplies and housing support to families in need and hosted tea parties for elderly people, obtained an electric guitar for a ten-year-old boy, and landed free front-row seats and behind-the-scenes training at the Moscow Circus for a father hoping to surprise his daughter. It may be no coincidence that the founder’s name is David Goodfellow.

You might also be intrigued by BNI ([www.bni.com](http://www.bni.com)), Ivan Misner’s business networking organization with the motto of “Givers gain,” as well as the Go-Giver Community ([www.thegogiver.com/community](http://www.thegogiver.com/community))—a group of people who read *The Go-Giver* fable by Bob Burg and John David Mann, and decided that giving would be a powerful way to live their professional lives.

8. *Launch a Personal Generosity Experiment.* If you’d rather give on your own, try the GOOD thirty-day challenge ([www.good.is/post/the-good-30-day-challenge-become-a-good-citizen](http://www.good.is/post/the-good-30-day-challenge-become-a-good-citizen)). Each

day for a month, GOOD suggests a different way to give. For more examples of random acts of kindness, check out Sasha Dichter's thirty-day generosity experiment (<http://sashadichter.wordpress.com>) and Ryan Garcia's year of daily random acts of kindness ([www.366randomacts.org](http://www.366randomacts.org)). Dichter, the chief innovation officer at the Acumen Fund, embarked on a monthlong generosity experiment in which he said yes to every request for help that he received. Garcia, a sales executive at ZocDoc, is performing one random act of kindness every day for an entire year and keeping a blog about his experience, from stepping up as a mentor to thanking a customer service representative. As we saw in chapter 6, this generosity experiment is likely to be most psychologically rewarding if you spend somewhere between two and eleven hours a week on it, and if you distribute it into larger chunks—multiple acts once a week, instead of one act every day.

9. *Help Fund a Project.* Many people are seeking financial support for their projects. On Kickstarter ([www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com)), known as the world's largest funding platform for creative projects, you can find people looking for help in designing and launching movies, books, video games, music, plays, paintings, and other products and services. On Kiva ([www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org)), you can identify opportunities to make microloans of \$25 or more to entrepreneurs in the developing world. Both sites give you the chance to see and follow the progress of the people you help.

10. *Seek Help More Often.* If you want other people to be givers, one of the easiest steps is to ask. When you ask for help, you're not always imposing a burden. Some people are givers, and by asking for help, you're creating an opportunity for them to express their values and feel valued. By asking for a five-minute favor, you impose a relatively small burden—and if you ask a matcher, you can count on having an opportunity to reciprocate. Wayne and Cheryl Baker note that people can “[Start the spark](#) of reciprocity by making requests as well as helping others. Help generously and without thought of return; but also ask often for what you need.”



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\* Alan Fiske, an anthropologist at UCLA, finds that [people engage in a mix of giving, taking, and matching](#) in every human culture—from North to South America, Europe to Africa, and Australia to Asia. While living with a West African tribal group in Burkina Faso called the Mossi, Fiske found people switching between giving, taking, and matching. When it comes to land, the Mossi are givers. If you want to move into their village, they will automatically grant you land without expecting anything in return. But in the marketplace, the Mossi are more inclined toward taking, haggling aggressively for the best prices. And when it comes to cultivating food, the Mossi are likely to be matchers: everyone is expected to make an equal contribution, and meals are divided into even shares.

\* Interestingly, in ultimatum games, it's rare for the divider to propose anything that's so lopsided. More than three quarters of dividers propose a perfectly even split, acting like matchers.

\* In the computer industry study, when taker CEOs were at the helm, firms had more fluctuating, extreme performance, as measured by total shareholder returns and return on assets. They had bigger wins, but bigger losses. The takers were supremely confident in their bets, so they swung for the fences. They made bold, grandiose moves, which included more and larger acquisitions, as well as major upheavals to company strategy. Sometimes these moves paid off, but in the long run, the takers often put their companies in jeopardy.

\* This is a nod to a “Weird Al” Yankovic song about nerds, which includes the line, “I’m fluent in JavaScript as well as Klingon.” For the record, Rifkin worries about the amount of time that he has wasted in his life typing two spaces after a period, instead of one.

[\\*](#) Technically, since LinkedIn employees have a host of advantages in connecting with people on LinkedIn, insiders were excluded from the *Fortune* analysis. Unofficially, it is noteworthy that Rifkin topped every LinkedIn employee except two: founder Reid Hoffman and board member and investor David Sze.



\* Of course, when takers and matchers give to receive, they do so with different aims. Takers are usually looking to get as much as possible, whereas matchers are motivated to maintain equal exchanges.

\* Although my focus is on George Meyer, it's important to acknowledge that the comedy on *The Simpsons* has always been a collective achievement. In particular, Meyer is quick to praise Jon Swartzwelder, who has written five dozen episodes, more than double any other writer in show history. Other contributors with many writing credits include Joel Cohen, John Frink, Dan Greaney, Al Jean, Tim Long, Ian Maxtone-Graham, Carolyn Omine, Don Payne, Matt Selman, and Jon Vitti. Of course, Meyer notes, this list doesn't include the creators and many other writers, producers, and animators who have shaped the show's success. Meyer started sharing credit early on. "In *Army Man*, I felt if people were going to write, they should get credit for it, especially since they were doing it for free." He used a unique Army symbol to acknowledge each writer's contribution. "It was a bad decision," Meyer says, laughing, "because I had to cut all of them out with an X-Acto knife, and rubber-cement them to this board I was using. It was hard to find them in the pattern on my bedspread."

[\\*](#) Many insiders believe that the credit-taking incident, coupled with the attention Salk gave to the media, was a major reason why the National Academy of Sciences never admitted Salk. But debate continues about why he wasn't awarded a Nobel Prize. Some scientists have argued that although the polio vaccine made an invaluable applied contribution to public health, it wasn't an original contribution to fundamental scientific knowledge.

\* Is there a dark side to psychological safety? Many managers believe that by tolerating mistakes, they're sending a message that it's okay to make mistakes. Such mistakes might not be disastrous on a television sitcom, but consider a setting where lives are on the line: hospital units. Edmondson asked members of eight hospital units to rate how much psychological safety they felt in the unit, and how many medication errors they made. Sure enough, the higher the psychological safety, the greater the number of errors reported. In units where health care professionals felt their mistakes would be forgiven, they seemed more likely to deliver the wrong medication to patients, putting them at risk for ineffective treatment or allergic reactions. It makes intuitive sense that tolerance for errors would cause people to become complacent and make more errors, but Edmondson wasn't convinced. She reasoned that psychological safety was increasing comfort with reporting errors, not causing errors. Sure enough, the higher a unit's psychological safety, the more errors reported. But when Edmondson examined more objective, independent data on medication errors, the psychologically safe units didn't actually make more errors. In fact, the higher the psychological safety in a unit, the *fewer* errors they made. Why? In the units that lacked psychological safety, health care professionals hid their errors, fearing retribution. As a result, they weren't able to learn from their mistakes. In the units with high psychological safety, on the other hand, reporting errors made it possible to prevent them moving forward.

\* Of course, my wife observed, our friends will love the candlesticks—they just didn't know that such an exquisite gift existed. If they did, the candlesticks surely would have been on their registry. And she was right.

\* Growing up as the oldest child in his family, Meyer had plenty of opportunities to practice perspective taking. Studies show that having [younger siblings](#) develops our giver instincts by providing experience with teaching, child care, feeding, and cleaning. Experts have long recognized that as older siblings, particularly if we're the firstborn, we're charged with taking care of our younger siblings, which requires acute attention to their unique needs and wants—and how they differ from our own. But Frank Lloyd Wright and Jonas Salk were firstborns: Wright had two younger sisters and Salk had two younger brothers. There's something else in Meyer's family background that may have nudged him in the giver direction. In a series of studies led by the Dutch psychologist Paul van Lange, givers had more siblings than the takers and matchers. The givers averaged two siblings; the takers and matchers averaged one and a half siblings. More siblings meant more sharing, which seemed to predispose people toward giving. It may not be a coincidence that George Meyer is the oldest of eight siblings. Interestingly, van Lange's data showed a sister effect, not just a sibling effect. The givers didn't have more brothers than the takers and matchers, but they were 50 percent more likely to have sisters. It is noteworthy that of Meyer's seven younger siblings, five are sisters.



\* Skender compulsively makes lists of everything, from his favorite songs to the ten best days of his life, and arranges the dollar bills in his wallet according to the order of their serial numbers. He owns more than eight hundred pairs of suspenders, each of which has a unique name and number. He alphabetizes his socks and his underwear and lays out his clothes weeks in advance. For more than two decades, he has worn a bow tie every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday—even when mowing his lawn. He is religious about being the first to arrive in his parking garage at work, usually before five A.M., yet he is known for staying past midnight at review sessions to help students prepare for exams. He translates his advice about reciprocity into the language of accounting: “I’d rather have a large accounts receivable than a large accounts payable.” To put his teaching load in perspective, a typical college professor teaches between three and eight classes a year. Over a career, that amounts to somewhere between one hundred and three hundred classes. Skender has nearly doubled this, and he recently told his dean that he intends to teach thirty-five more years. In calendar year 2012 alone, more than two thousand students took Skender’s courses. To accommodate the demand, the university once moved his class to a special oversized room away from the main campus. Even when he teaches early in the morning, his classroom is packed, and many more students wish they could enroll. For one eight A.M. class, he had 190 students on the waiting list.

\* To be fair, Bowie's career was hampered by injuries. In college, he missed two full seasons due to shin injuries. Before the draft, to make sure Bowie was completely healthy, Inman subjected him to a seven-hour physical examination. Bowie had a solid first season, but after that, injuries caused him to miss 81 percent of the games in the next four seasons, including nearly two entire seasons. And Inman and his scouts weren't the only ones to bet on Bowie over Jordan. In June 1984, after the draft, a *Chicago Tribune* headline read "Apologetic Bulls 'Stuck' with Jordan." The general manager of the Bulls, Rod Thorn, seemed disappointed. "We wish he were 7 feet, but he isn't," Thorn lamented. "There just wasn't a center available. What can you do? Jordan isn't going to turn this franchise around . . . He's a very good offensive player, but not an overpowering offensive player." Even Jordan seemed to endorse the Bowie selection: "Bowie fits in better than I would," he said during his rookie year, as Portland had "an overabundance of big guards and small forwards." Perhaps the best defense of Inman's choice was offered by Ray Patterson, who ran the Houston Rockets in 1984, having selected Hakeem Olajuwon first in that draft before Bowie and Jordan: "Anybody who says they'd have taken Jordan over Bowie is whistling in the dark. Jordan just wasn't that good."

\* Interestingly, Jordan's basketball coach at the University of North Carolina, the legendary [Dean Smith](#), had more of a giver style. Against his own interests, and strong resistance from his assistants, Smith advised Jordan to enter the NBA draft early, before his senior year. Smith had a rule: "We do what's best for the player out of season and what's best for the team in season." As NBA salaries skyrocketed, Smith encouraged every player who had a good shot at being picked in the top five or ten to leave college early and secure his financial future, as long as he promised to come back and finish his education later. In his thirty-six years as head coach, Smith sent nine athletes to the draft early, and seven made good on their promises. Although Smith was encouraging his best players to leave the team, putting his players' interests first seemed to help him recruit top talent and build trust and loyalty. Smith retired with 879 wins, then more than any coach in NCAA history; his teams made eleven Final Fours and won two national championships. As Chris Granger, executive vice president at the NBA, explains, "[Talented people are attracted to those who care about them](#). When you help someone get promoted out of your team, it's a short-term loss, but it's a clear long-term gain. It's easier to attract people, because word gets around that your philosophy is to help people."

\* It's worth noting that the pratfall effect depends on the audience's self-esteem. Powerless communication humanizes the communicator, so it should be most appealing to audiences who see themselves as human: those with average self-esteem. Indeed, Aronson and colleagues found that when competent people make blunders, audiences with average self-esteem respond more favorably than audiences with high and low self-esteem.

\* The same pattern showed up in another study, where more than six hundred [salespeople responsible for women's products](#) completed a questionnaire that revealed whether they were givers: did they try to offer the product that was best suited to customers' needs? When researchers tracked their sales revenue, the givers initially had no advantage. As they came to understand their customers, the givers pulled further and further ahead. By the third and fourth quarters, the givers were bringing in significantly more revenue. The givers gathered more information about customers' needs and were more flexible in how they responded to customers.

\* Part of the reason that [intention questions](#) work is that they elicit commitment: once people say yes, they feel compelled to follow through. But interestingly, research suggests that intention questions can work even when people initially say no. The questions trigger reflection, and if the behavior is attractive, some people change their mind and decide to do it.



\* [Disclaimer](#): Certain types of disclaimers are riskier than other forms of powerless communication. For example, it's common for people to start a sentence with "I don't mean to sound selfish, but . . ." Psychologists have shown that this type of disclaimer backfires: it heightens the expectation that the speaker is going to say something selfish, which leads the listener to search for—and find—information that confirms the speaker's selfishness.

\* Interestingly, when leaders and managers delivered the same message, it didn't work. The scholarship students were able to speak from firsthand experience about the importance of the callers' work, and what it meant to them personally. Although we often look to leaders and managers to inspire employees, when it comes to combating giver burnout, there may be an advantage of [outsourcing inspiration](#) to the clients, customers, students, and other end users who can attest to the impact of givers' products and services.

\* Research shows that on the job, people who engage in selfless giving end up feeling [overloaded and stressed](#), as well as experiencing conflict between work and family. This is even true in marriages: in one study of married couples, people who failed to maintain an [equilibrium](#) between their own needs and their partner's needs became more depressed over the next six months. By prioritizing others' interests and ignoring their own, selfless givers exhaust themselves.

\* The salutary effects of being otherish may even be [visible in our writing](#). The psychologist James Pennebaker has been able to trace gains in health to the words that people use in their journal entries. “The writings of those whose health improved showed a high rate of the use of I-words on one occasion and then high rates of the use of other pronouns on the next occasion, and then switching back and forth in subsequent writings,” Pennebaker explains in *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, such that “healthy people say something about their own thoughts and feelings in one instance and then explore what is happening with other people before writing about themselves again.” The people whose journal entries are purely selfish or selfless, on the other hand, are much less likely to show health improvements.

[\\*](#) The optimal number of hours per year may drop below one hundred as we age. In one study of American adults over sixty-five, those who volunteered between one and forty hours in 1986 were more likely to be alive in 1994 than those who volunteered zero or more than forty hours. This was true even after controlling for health conditions, physical activity, religion, income, and a host of other factors that might influence survival.

\* Interestingly, the [emotional boost from giving doesn't always kick in right away](#). When psychologist Sabine Sonnentag and I surveyed European firefighters and rescue workers, we found that on days when they had a substantial positive impact on others, they were energized at home after work, but not during work. Seeing their impact helped them experience greater meaning and mastery, but it was only after reflecting on the impact of their actions that they experienced the full charge from giving.



\* There's a catch: [as people get richer](#), they give more money in total, but they give smaller fractions of their annual income. In one study, psychologists demonstrated that merely thinking about socioeconomic status is enough to change the amount of charitable giving that we think is appropriate. When people thought about themselves as somewhere in the middle of the wealth ladder, they felt obligated to give 4.65 percent of their annual income to charity. But when they imagined themselves at the top of the ladder, they only reported an obligation to give 2.9 percent of their annual income to charity. Similar trends can be found in the real world: in the United States, households making less than \$25,000 a year donate 4.2 percent of their income to charity. Households making more than \$100,000 a year donate just 2.7 percent of their income to charity.

\* New research shows that these tendencies are heavily influenced by biological forces. In one study, psychologists used MRI to [scan the brains](#) of people who reported being agreeable versus disagreeable on a survey. The agreeable people had greater volume in the regions of the brain that process the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of others, such as the posterior cingulate cortex. According to behavioral geneticists, at least a third of agreeableness, and possibly more than half, is heritable—attributable to genes. Whether people have an agreeable or disagreeable personality seems to be at least partially hardwired.

[\\*](#) Psychologists originally made the same mistake, including characteristics such as being altruistic within the broad trait of agreeableness. More recent research has shown that (a) compassion and politeness are two separate aspects of agreeableness, (b) the compassion dimension is more related to honesty and humility than to agreeableness, and (c) agreeableness can be distinguished from giver values. Throughout the book, I've taken care to focus primarily on studies that were explicitly designed to investigate giving, taking, or matching. At a few points, though, I have used studies of agreeableness to capture givers in places where survey items directly reference giving, like "I love to help others."

[\\*](#) In this chapter, at the request of interviewees, I've disguised the identities of several key characters. Lillian Bauer is a pseudonym, as are Brad and Rich in Peter Audet's story, and Sameer Jain, a man you'll meet later.

\* This raises a broader question: [are women more likely to be givers than men](#)? Northwestern University psychologist Alice Eagly and her colleagues have systematically analyzed hundreds of studies on giving behaviors such as helping, sharing, comforting, guiding, rescuing, and defending others. It turns out that when we study their behaviors, men and women are equally likely to be givers. They just give in different ways. On the one hand, in close relationships, women tend to be more giving than men. On average, women are more likely than men to donate organs to family members, assist coworkers, and mentor subordinates, and female physicians tend to give greater emotional support to patients than male physicians. On the other hand, when it comes to strangers, men are more likely to act like givers. On average, men are more likely than women to help in emergencies and risk their lives to save strangers.

\* Although there's consistent evidence that a lack of assertiveness is one reason for the giver pay disadvantage, there's a [second factor at play](#). Givers often choose lower-paying careers: they're willing to make less of a living in order to make more of a difference. One recent study replicated the basic finding that givers earn lower incomes even after accounting for the occupations in which they work, but this reduced the disadvantage—suggesting that part of the difference is due to givers' accepting lower-paying jobs. To illustrate, Cornell economist Robert Frank found that employees in the most socially responsible occupations earned annual salaries of approximately 30 percent less than those in the middle and 44 percent less than those at the bottom of the social responsibility spectrum. Private-sector employees earned annual salaries averaging 21 percent higher than government employees, who in turn were 32 percent above nonprofit employees. Guess who's more likely to end up in government and nonprofit jobs? The givers. In one amusing study, Frank asked economics students to consider doing the exact same job in two different organizations: one with strong giver values and one . . . less so. The students reported that they would accept 50 percent lower salaries to work as an advertising copywriter for the American Cancer Society than for Camel cigarettes, 17 percent lower salaries to work as an accountant at an art museum than at a petrochemical company or as a recruiter at the Peace Corps than Exxon Mobil, and 33 percent lower salaries as a lawyer for the Sierra Club than for the National Rifle Association. Interestingly, men were less willing to sacrifice their salaries than women. Of course, whether the participants would show these preferences in their actual behavior is another matter—but I'm willing to bet that selfless givers are more likely to do so than otherish givers.

\* Only later did I learn that my manager hired me because my predecessor had quit three weeks into the job, and she was desperate to find a replacement. The position had been open for twenty-two days, and I was the sole candidate.

[\\*](#) Many Craigslist pages do have a section for giving away free items, but its popularity is dwarfed by that of the buying and selling pages.



\* When he wore the T-shirt of a rival soccer team, Liverpool FC, 30 percent helped, which raises the question of whether it's possible to get people to help a rival. Before the staged emergency, the fans had written about why Manchester United was their favorite team, how long they had supported the team, how often they watched the team play, and how they felt when the team won and lost. The fans were thinking about themselves as Manchester United fans, so the vast majority of them didn't want to help their enemy. But the psychologists had a trick up their sleeves. In another version of the study, instead of writing about why they loved Manchester United, the fans wrote about why they were soccer fans, what it meant to them, and what they had in common with other fans. When the runner twisted his ankle, the fans were still much more likely to help if he was wearing a Manchester United T-shirt (80 percent) than a plain T-shirt (22 percent). But when he was wearing the T-shirt of their rival, Liverpool FC, 70 percent helped. When we look at a rival as a fellow soccer fan, rather than as an enemy, we can identify with him. Oftentimes, we fail to identify with people because we're thinking about ourselves—or them—in terms that are too specific and narrow. If we look more broadly at commonalities between us, it becomes much easier to see giving as otherish.

\* There are plenty of [alternative explanations](#) for many of these findings. Wharton professor Uri Simonsohn has scrutinized the data, and although he believes that name similarity *can* influence our decisions, he argues persuasively that many of the existing studies have been biased by other factors. For example, he finds that people named Dennis are overrepresented among lawyers, not only dentists. But this doesn't explain why randomized, controlled experiments show that people help others with similar names, buy products that match their initials, and are attracted to dates who share their initials—and it doesn't account for some recent studies on how names can sabotage success. Psychologists have found that on average, people whose names start with *A* and *B* get better grades and are accepted to higher-ranked law schools than people whose names start with *C* and *D*—and that professional baseball players whose names start with *K*, the symbol for strikeouts, strike out 9 percent more often than their peers. The speculation here is that people are more comfortable with negative outcomes that subtly remind them of themselves. Other evidence lends tentative support to this idea: athletes, doctors, and lawyers whose first names start with *D* die sooner than those with other initials. Professional baseball players with positive initials (A.C.E., J.O.Y., W.O.W.) live an average of thirteen years longer than players with negative initials (B.U.M., P.I.G., D.U.D.). And in California between 1969 and 1995, compared with neutral initials, women with positive initials lived an average of 3.4 years longer, men with positive initials lived an average of 4.5 years longer, and men with negative initials died an average of 2.8 years earlier. Consistent with the idea that initials affect how we take care of ourselves, people with positive initials have lower accident and suicide rates, which are higher for people with negative initials.

\* Ironically, the message backfired for the people who were conserving energy in a giver fashion. Once they saw they were below the norm for electricity consumption, they felt licensed to take more, and actually increased their consumption by an average of 0.89 kilowatt-hours per day. The psychologists were able to prevent this unintended consequence by drawing a 😊 next to the information that households were consuming less than average. Apparently, this small signal of social approval was enough to motivate people to continue acting like givers.

\* Interestingly, even though people of any reciprocity style can internalize a giving identity, there's still a difference between givers and takers. In one study at a [Fortune 500 retail company](#) with colleagues Jane Dutton and Brent Rosso, I found that when people gave to help coworkers, they were more likely to see themselves as helpful, generous, and caring people. This is the pattern that emerges for true givers: repeated acts of voluntary helping contribute to the development of a giver identity in general. For takers, though, the giver identity that develops may not translate to other roles or organizations. They might become a giver on Freecycle, but when they join another organization, they shift back to taking until they internalize that organization's identity. As we saw earlier, the more the organization provides a sense of optimal distinctiveness, the faster that identification tends to occur.

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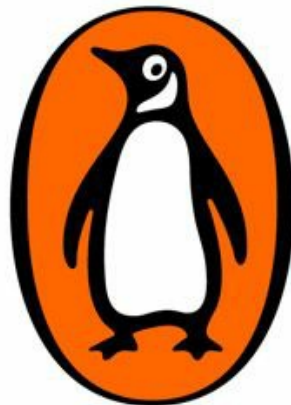
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