THE POWER OF GENEROSITY

BY JAMIE MALANOWSKI

Once again the season of giving is upon us. Considering the pleasure that can be had by giving—the joyful, grateful bond shared between two people when one of them has been generous, thoughtful, even self-sacrificing—it's surprising that we need months-long marketing campaigns every year to remind us how good giving can be.

No doubt that this is because people are a self-interested lot, and while most of us are happy to please the people we love and value, it's hard to extend ourselves to our inconsistent doorman, buy a nice Secret Santa present for mysterious Marv in IT, or go the extra mile for sour Aunt Cynthia, who would be unimpressed if you gave her the Hope Diamond. We want something for our giving, if only recognition; better yet, a decent quid pro quo. No matter how rewarding pure generosity can be, somewhere below the surface—and often not very far—sits a gremlin with an accounting ledger, encouraging you to ask, "What's in it for me?"

If recent literature is any indication, the answer is a lot. And this is true not only for individual practice but more surprisingly as a business strategy as well. Giving works: The first business lesson that most of us receive, the cynically wise "nice guys finish last" that we first heard in the schoolyard and a million times since, appears to be untrue. There can be winners without losers; nice guys, as it happens, do just fine.

This thought is well-argued in the book *The Go-Giver* by Bob Burg and John David Mann. In this parable, the authors tell the story of Joe, an ambitious young man desperate to make a sale. He seeks the secrets of success from a noted consultant called The Chairman, who doesn't help him set up a deal but instead shares the Laws of Stratospheric Success. Among them are the Law of Value, which

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holds that your true worth is determined by how much more you give in value than you take in payment; the Law of Compensation, which states that your income is determined by how many people you serve and how well you serve them; and the Law of Influence, which says that your influence is determined by how abundantly you place other people's interests first.

Like all simple summaries, this one invites debunking, but that's a challenge. The observations ring true: In the leaders we have most admired, in the products and services we have most valued, in the relationships we hold most dear, we again and again see incidents and relationships where, at some point, people have acted on behalf of others not only beyond any question of reciprocity, but even outside any notion of calculating the cost. Says Mann, "Giving–putting the interests of others first, creating space for the other to succeed and flourish–is not just morally righteous, or philosophically nice. As an approach to business, it is highly successful."

"Price is a dollar figure," Burg says. "Value is the worth the end-user places on the service or the thing, and it is always in the eye of the beholder. If you can find what the other person finds valuable, you can create an experience that generates a positive feeling. Because of that feeling, that customer is going to come back and will send others your way. The people become your walking ambassadors."

Burg and Mann do not claim to have developed an original thought. The precept they advocate in *The Go-Giver* and its sequel *Go-Givers Sell More*, both best-sellers, is the Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—that in some related phrase is found in virtually every ethical tradition. All these traditions recognize that extending oneself is a relatively easy task when the person on the receiving end is someone you know and love. It's harder when the recipient is a stranger, and becomes extremely difficult when he or she might exploit our generosity without gratitude or fairness. On such occasions, giving seems like a chump's play. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In his book *Give and Take*, Adam Grant, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, adds social-science muscle to the discussion. He argues that among the qualities that lead to success is the often-overlooked key attribute of a person's "reciprocity style"—how well someone shares his or her time, resources or knowledge, or how willing that person is to give credit in team projects.

Broadly speaking, Grant says, people tend to be predominantly givers, takers or matchers. Most of us are matchers, willing to share as long as others share in turn. This is justice at its most basic, in line with the often-quoted "eye for an eye" biblical rule. Takers think of themselves first, push their interests ahead of the group and act with a sense of entitlement. Givers are willing to extend themselves without expecting credit or compensation.

One of Grant's least surprising findings is that givers can be found bunched at the bottom of the success ladder, because their trusting natures and willingness to sacrifice leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. What's amazing is that Grant also finds givers bunched at the top. Their reputations for unselfishness win them admiration and loyalty, creating the long-term relationships that enable them to reap tremendous rewards.

"One of the keys to being a successful giver is knowing how people see you," Grant says. Evidently it's one thing to share credit, but you had better make sure that people know you're sharing credit.

Grant is no Pollyanna; he doesn't expect everyone to get along. He sees takers as problems for an organization because their selfishness brings out the worst instincts in others, undermining teamwork and cohesiveness. "The damage done by one bad apple is far greater than the benefit done by one good egg," he says. "A lot of executives are afraid that if they weed out their bad apples, their organizations would lose some competitive toughness. This is not so." Matchers, Grant says, with their firm sense of quid pro quo, would step up and prevent exploitation.

Grant recommends that companies consciously develop giving as a reciprocity style for the whole organization by recognizing and rewarding givers, and by weeding out takers. He encourages companies to adopt liberal use of 360-degree interviews—with input from colleagues, subordinates, supervisors and possibly even clients—to identify givers as well as help all workers realize how they affect others.

"You can't change human nature," Grant says, "but the more an organization can change its reciprocity style to be more giving, the better the experience will be for everyone."

MALANOWSKI IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO *SUCCESS*.