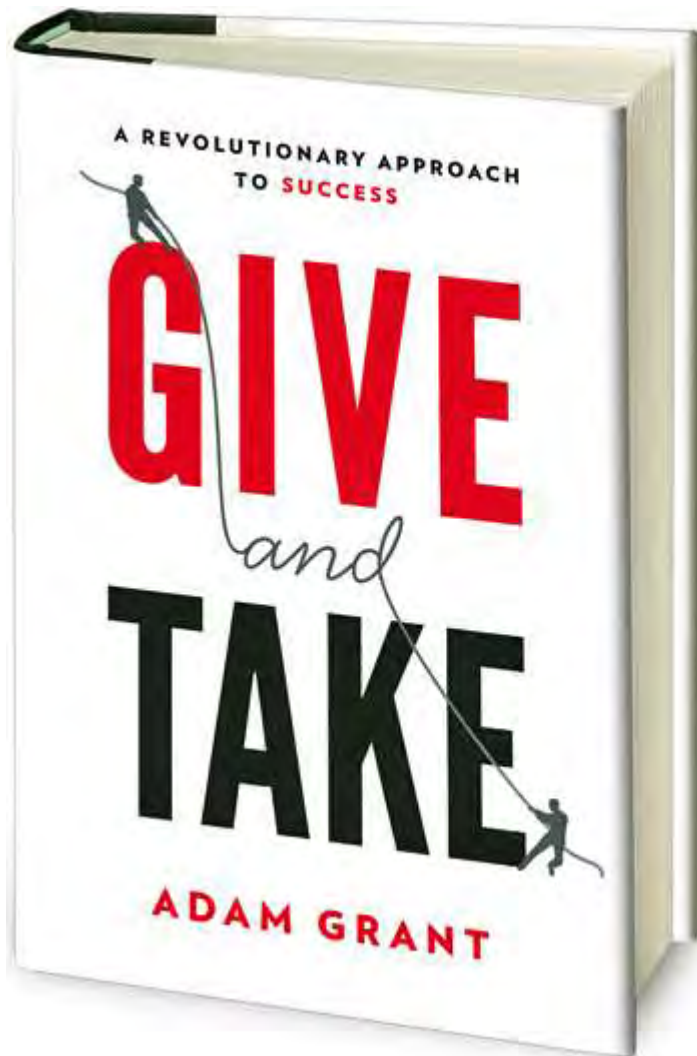


Is 'Living for the Sake of Others' Really a Good Idea?

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In a cynical and dangerous world, idealists are often seen as deluded people who don't know how the real world actually works. Many religions teach the value of selfless giving or "living for the sake of others," but is that a realistic way of life? Couldn't that lead to being used or exploited by others? Is this just a Sunday School truism for the naïve and weak? Don't nice guys finish — last?

Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, one of the world's leading business schools, has devoted the past two decades to studying people who practice high levels of giving in their lives. In his new book, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, Grant argues that a substantial body of research shows that people who generously give to others — those he calls "givers" — are happier and more successful than both those

who merely seek to "match" what others give to them and "takers" whose every action is calculated by their own self-interest.



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According to Grant, neuroscience evidence shows that giving activates the reward and meaning centers in our brains. These benefits are not limited to giving money: they also show up for giving time. One study of more than 2,800 Americans over age 24 showed that volunteering predicted increases in happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem—and decreases in depression—a year later. Other studies show that elderly adults who volunteer or give support to others actually live longer.

But do the benefits of giving work in the "dog eat dog" world of business? Grant cites examples of "givers" in the business world. One is Kevin Liles, who worked as an intern for free for Def Jam records and rose to become its president. As an intern, Liles was the first to arrive at work and last to leave. As a promotion director, Liles was responsible for one region, but went out of his way to promote other regions too. Grant says, "Everybody started to look at Kevin as a leader, because they all looked to him for direction. He gave until people couldn't live without him.

What about people who work in sales? According to Grant, top sales people are not high-powered and pushy. He cites the example of Kildare Escoto, the top-selling optician at Eye Care Associates. Escoto

says, “My job is to ask the patient questions, and see what the patient needs. My mind-set is not to sell. My job is to help. My main purpose is to educate and inform patients on what’s important. My true concern in the long run is that the patient can see.”

Grant asked hundreds of opticians to complete a survey measuring whether they were “takers,” “matchers” or “givers.” Even after controlling for intelligence, the givers outsold the matchers and takers. The average giver brought in over 30% more annual revenue than matchers and 68% more than takers. Even though givers were only 30% of the sellers, half of the top sellers were givers.

Can givers succeed in sales jobs where customers are more skeptical, like insurance? In one study, managers rated the giving behaviors of more than a 1,000 insurance salespeople. Even in insurance, the higher the salesperson’s giver score, the greater the salesperson’s revenue, policies sold, applications, sales quotas met, and commissions earned. By asking questions and getting to know their customers, givers build trust and gain knowledge about their customers’ needs.

Can giving actually make people richer? Grant believes so, citing a 2007 study by economist Arthur Brooks, who tested the relationship between income and charitable giving. As expected, higher income led to higher giving. For every dollar in extra income, charitable giving went up by 14 cents. But unexpectedly, Brooks found that for every dollar in extra charitable giving, income was \$3.75 higher a year later. Giving actually seemed to make people richer.

Just as giving benefits both the giver and receiver, groups also impose a “tax” on “takers.” In a study of Slovenian companies, employees who hid knowledge from their coworkers struggled to generate creative ideas because coworkers responded in kind, refusing to share information.

As a caveat, Grant warns that some givers can burn out. Grant says givers can become exhausted and unproductive when they don’t receive adequate feedback. He gives the example of callers at a university call center who had the job of contacting alumni and asking them to donate money. They faced a rejection rate exceeding 90%.

In their first month on the job, the “takers” were bringing in an average of more than 30 donations a week. Contrary to Grant’s expectation, the “givers” were much less productive: they struggled to maintain their motivation, making fewer calls and bringing in under 10 donations a week. Grant was mystified: why were the callers who wanted to make a difference making the least difference?

At the next training session, Grant invited new callers to read letters from students whose scholarships had been funded by the callers’ work. After reading the letters, it took the givers just a week to catch up to the takers. The takers did show some improvement, but the givers responded most powerfully, nearly tripling in weekly calls and donations.

Grant wanted to see what would happen if they actually met a scholarship recipient face-to-face. When callers interacted with one scholarship recipient in person, they were even more energized, doubling their number of calls per hour and minutes per week. The principle of giver burnout has less to do with the amount of giving and more with the amount of feedback about the impact of that giving. Givers burn out when they’re working with people in need but feel they are unable to help effectively.

In Israel, a group of radiologists evaluated nearly 100 computer tomography (CT) exams from patients. Half the radiologists completed their first CT exams without a patient’s photo. When they did their second CT exams three months later, they saw the photo. These radiologists improved their accuracy by 53%. The other half saw the patient photo in their first CT exams, and then completed their second CT exams three months later with no photo. Their accuracy deteriorated by 28%.

Attaching a single patient’s photo to a CT exam increased diagnostic accuracy by 46%. And roughly 80% of the key diagnostic findings came only when the radiologists saw the patient’s photo. By seeing the patient’s photo, they felt more empathy. By encouraging empathy, the photos motivated the radiologists to conduct their diagnoses more carefully.

Grant also believes that giving is “contagious,” explaining that when people walk into a new situation, they look to others for clues about appropriate behavior. When giving starts to occur, it becomes the norm, and people carry it forward in interactions with other people.

As an example, he cites a website created by an Ohio native, Deron Beal. He aimed to create “local Internet-based communities” of exchange similar to Craigslist, but in a radical departure, he set up an unusual ground rule: no currency or trading allowed. The network was called Freecycle, and all goods had to be given away.

The earliest Freecycle members had some unusual things to give away. One woman offered to give away a partially used bottle of hair dye, which would expire in a few hours. “It needs to be used really soon,” she wrote, “so if anyone has an urge to go darker, tonight is the night.”

But Beal believed that “one person’s trash really is another’s treasure.” Some people gave away valuable things they could have easily sold. One person donated a camera in excellent condition worth \$200; others gave away good computers, flat-screen TVs, baby car seats, pianos, vacuum cleaners, and exercise equipment. Within a year, there were more than 100,000 members in 360 cities worldwide. By 2005, Freecycle reached one million members. Today, it is made up of over 5,100 groups with 9.4 million members.

Freecycle grew in part by attracting those who already leaned strongly in the giver direction, but it accomplished a lot more. Freecycle managed to encourage matchers and takers to act like givers. “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.”

Can such a “paradigm shift” actually change the way the world, as a whole, operates? There are certainly numerous counter-examples of ruthless takers who achieved extraordinary power and wealth, if not the love and respect of their peers.

Nevertheless, books like Give and Take should give confidence to those of us striving to live a principled life that our intentions are not just noble, but a realistic strategy to achieve personal success and impact for the better the communities in which we live. Change the world? We will need a little faith for that...

Dr. Panzer co-authored The War on Intimacy: How Agenda-Driven Sex Ed Sabotages Committed Relationships and Our Nation’s Health. He received his doctorate in the field of Educational Communication and Technology from New York University.