# Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success

**Adam Grant**

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*Review by Paolo Terni*

Who makes it to the top, givers or takers? Surprisingly, even in cut-throat business environments, it is givers – those who help and support others with their time, mentorship, resources or network; and do so regardless of whether they would benefit from it.

This is the key finding presented by Adam Grant, the youngest full Professor at Wharton, in his book "Give and Take". The author himself is the lead researcher in many key studies narrated in the book, and that makes his arguments very compelling. Moreover, Grant is one of the top rated Professors by Wharton's students – and it shows. The book flows beautifully, the logic is impeccable, and the evidence is strong. Plenty of stories make the narrative engaging, clear and memorable – we learn about what it means to be givers or takers from a gallery of characters ranging from stuttering lawyers to Jonas Salk and from philanthropists to NBA players.

So what exactly distinguishes givers from takers? Quoting Adam Grant: "Every time we interact with another person . . ., we have a choice to make: do we try to claim as much value as we can, or contribute value without worrying about what we receive in return?" (p. 4). If you choose the former you are a taker; if you choose the latter you are a giver. However in most work-related environments, people revert to a third strategy: matching. Matchers play tit-for-tat and try to preserve a balance between giving and taking.

It would seem obvious that givers would end at the bottom, mercilessly exploited by takers. However, both the worst

performers AND the best performers are givers. Matchers and takers tend to end up in the middle. The advantage of givers is especially pronounced over time – givers tend to fare worst at the beginning of their profession (at least in sales and medical school), but they tend to come up on top when there is enough time to establish their reputations.

The book is structured in to four parts. The first outlines the distinctions between the different styles of relating (giving, taking and matching), and why givers rise to the top; the second illustrates how givers have unique approaches to interactions in the following domains: networking, collaborating, evaluating, and influencing; the third shows how givers can protect themselves from exploitation or burnout (in other words, what successful strategies set apart the givers who end up being top performers from those who end up being worst performers); and the fourth and final part is chock-full of practical recommendations about ways to give, from links to websites that promote pro-social behaviours to the description of the "reciprocity ring" exercise, a powerful group activity that stimulates giving (in itself worth the price of the book).

Solution-Focused (SF) practitioners would find many chapters resonating with their professional orientation. For example, in chapter four the author addresses how the three interactional styles think differently about human potential. Grant first clearly and succinctly introduces the reader to the scientific literature that demonstrates the power of expectations in shaping interactions, from the seminal work of Rosenthal in San Francisco related to "intellectual blooming" in children to the more recent research by McNatt in business settings, which shows that employees bloom if seen as high potential by bosses. Then Grant shows that takers have low-expectations of others and therefore get locked in self-fulfilling vicious cycles, whereas matchers wait for signs of high potential first. By contrast, givers by default are trusting and optimistic and see everyone as a diamond in the rough. This is a familiar theme for SF practitioners, given our stance of addressing people in their resources first.

Furthermore, Adam Grant very acutely observes that we might have the whole idea of developing potential backward. Common organisational practice recommends identifying high-potential employees first and then investing in them by providing mentoring, training and support. But it is by fostering people's unique talents and interests, something that SF practitioners and givers do naturally, that leaders can bring the potential of their teams online.

Similarly, chapter five on powerless communication would ring familiar to SF practitioners. Givers do not seek the path of dominance but rather that of prestige (I would call it respect, but that is the word used). They do so by doing the following: asking questions rather than offering answers; talking tentatively rather than boldly; seeking advice rather than imposing views on others. It looks as if a giver would find herself right at home practising SF.

To put the book in context, the literature about what makes people successful usually focuses on three ingredients: motivation (working hard); ability (talent); and opportunity (luck). Grant convincingly argues for the inclusion of a fourth ingredient: how we interact with other people. While he acknowledges that givers, takers and matchers all do achieve success, what is unique about givers is that when they succeed everyone wins, because they create value that is shared and spreads across their networks.

I think one of the big merits of this book is to "normalise" being a giver in the workplace. Research shows that at work many givers act as matchers (or even takers) for fear of being exploited; and even those who do act as givers often do not admit it for fear of being seen as naïve. By highlighting the unique and powerful ways in which givers create value, and by sharing practical tools to foster a culture of giving, this book is a clarion call for all givers to "come out" and to invest their pro-social orientation for the creation of a better business culture.