According to conventional wisdom, highly successful people always have at least three things in common – talent, hard-work and good fortune. But in today’s hyper-connected world, there’s a crucial fourth ingredient. More so than ever before, our success at work and in our personal lives, depends heavily on our interactions with other people. Every time we interact with another person we have a simple but profound choice to make: should we try to extract as much personal value as we can from that interaction? Or should we focus on adding value for the other guy, without worrying too much about what we receive in return?

Dr. Adam Grant, award-winning advertising director, and now the youngest-ever tenured professor at the Wharton School of Business, is absolutely fascinated by the dynamics of workplace give-and-take. So much so that he has dedicated more than ten years of his professional life to studying the forces of give-and-take at organizations ranging from Google to the U.S. Air Force. His new book illustrates how giving can have a dramatic effect on your career, regardless of the type of organization, or your place in it.

Givers, Takers and Matchers

In the vast majority of professional interactions, people tend to operate on a rather fundamental level as either Givers, Takers or Matchers. While it’s not unusual to find people who shift from one reciprocity style to another as they travel across different societal domains (i.e. they may be a Giver at home and a Taker at work), there tends to be a high degree of consistency within the domains themselves. In other words, if Sally is a Taker in certain types of professional situations, then it’s a good bet that Sally’s a Taker at work.

You know a Taker when you see one. They have a pretty distinctive signature: they like to get more than they give. They tilt reciprocity in their own favor, putting their own interests ahead of others’ needs.

Takers believe that the world is a competitive, “dog-eat-dog” place. They feel that in order to succeed, they need to be better than others. To prove their competence, they’re never shy about self-promoting, and they always make sure they get credit for their efforts. It’s important to remember, though, that most takers aren’t necessarily cruel or cut-throat. They’re just highly self-interested, and self-protecting. The common attitude amongst Takers is: “If I don’t look out for myself first, then no one will.”

Givers, of course, are pretty much the opposite. Where Takers are predominantly
self-interested, Givers are far more focused on acting in the best interests of others. In workplace settings, this usually manifests itself as helping one’s colleagues, providing mentoring to more junior staff and sharing credit.

Few of us act purely like Givers or Takers. Most of us tend to adopt a third, middle-ground style instead. We become what Grant calls Matchers, consciously striving to preserve an equal balance of giving and getting. If you’re a matcher, your relationships are usually governed by even exchanges of favors.

At this point you may be thinking, “Well, this ‘workplace reciprocity’ theory of Dr. Grant’s is all very interesting, but my goal is to get things done at work, and hopefully get ahead as quickly as I can while I’m doing it; so what does giving vs. taking have to do with my own career success?” The honest answer is: your willingness to give has everything to do with your present and future career success.

If you had to guess who’s the most likely to end up at the bottom of the success ladder, what would you say—Takers, Givers, or Matchers?

The answer is Givers. Professionally, while all three reciprocity styles have their own benefits and drawbacks, Grant’s research clearly demonstrates that Givers sink to the bottom of the success ladder more often than the other two reciprocity styles. Across a wide range of well-paying occupations, Givers are at a disadvantage: they may make others better off, but sacrifice their own success in the process.

The same pattern is also evident in academic settings. In a recent study of more than six hundred medical students in Belgium, the students with the lowest grades tended to be Givers. When surveyed, these are the students who had unusually high scores on Giver-type statements like “I love to help others” and “I anticipate the needs of others.” The Givers often went out of their way to help their peers study for exams, sharing what they already knew with their fellow students at the expense of broadening their own knowledge. This sacrifice also gave their peers a leg up at test time.

So if Givers are most likely to land at the bottom of the academic and career success ladder, that begs the question of who’s at the top? Here’s a surprise – It’s the Givers again.

Interestingly enough, many of the above-mentioned Belgian medical students with the lowest grades had unusually high giver scores. But so did the students with the highest grades, by quite a margin.

According to Grant, across hundreds of different occupations, if you examine the link between reciprocity styles and success, the Givers come out on top in virtually every case. Let’s find out why.

The Power of Giving

The fact that Givers are, on average, more successful than both Takers and Matchers might come as a surprise. Sure, we’re all raised to believe in the importance of giving and sharing; but as much as we understand the importance of giving in our personal lives, many of us are just as likely to compartmentalize giving, reserving a different set of values for the workplace.

“Most likely, the fear of being judged as weak or naïve prevents many people from
operating like givers at work,” writes Grant. Indeed, many people who hold strong Giver values in their personal lives will consciously choose Matching as their primary reciprocity style at work, precisely for this reason.

But the fact remains, Givers are more likely to rise to the top. So if you’re one of those people who consciously avoids being perceived as a Giver in the workplace, in an effort to look strong and powerful relative to your colleagues, you may actually be hindering your chances of becoming exactly that. Of course, there are some drawbacks to being a Giver, and in the second half of the summary we’ll touch on how these costs can be managed.

But first, let’s examine Givers’ unique approaches to human interactions across four key domains – Networking, Collaborating, Evaluating, and Influencing – which drive their career success. Across these four domains, we’ll show what Givers do differently, and what you can learn from them.

Networking
Givers understand that when you get a bad reputation, it tends to stick – especially in the social media era.

Before the technological revolution, most of us had relatively manageable numbers of work-related contacts inside and outside of our firm. And our contacts tended to live in tightly connected circles. Within these closed networks, people could easily get away with being Takers in certain contexts without having a damaged reputation spill over into other settings.

In the “good old days,” as an employee moved from one organization to another, her work-related contacts didn’t always travel with her. And so the new people who entered an employee’s network with the new job didn’t usually gain a great deal of information about her reputation. This allowed Takers to start with a clean slate wherever they went, and if their reputation as being a Taker started to hinder their career within a particular company, all they had to do was move and start fresh.

“In the era of social media,” writes Grant, “it’s so much harder for Takers to get away with being Fakers – i.e. fooling people into thinking they’re Givers. On the Internet, we can easily track down reputational information about our contacts by accessing public databases and discovering shared connections.”

Givers also understand that it’s far easier to go back to former professional acquaintances years after the fact to ask for assistance if they remember you as having been a generous individual.

As to how this works, for the past few years, a trio of American business professors has been asking mid-career executives who enroll in their leadership courses to do something that they dread: reactivate their dormant social network ties. When one executive learned of the assignment, he groaned. “Dormant contacts are dormant for a reason, right?” he said. “Why would I want to re-contact them?”

But Givers see this differently. In one study, two hundred executives were asked to reactivate social media ties that had been dormant for a minimum of three years. Each executive reached out to two former colleagues and sought advice on an ongoing work project. After receiving the advice, they rated its value: to what extent did it help them solve problems and gain useful referrals? They also rated the advice that they received from two current contacts on the same project. Surprisingly, the executives rated the advice from the
dormant ties as contributing more value than the advice from the current ties.

Why?

The dormant ties provided more novel information than the current contacts. While they were out of touch, the dormant contacts had been exposed to new ideas and fresh perspectives. The current contacts (e.g. people within the same company or supply chain as the executive) were more likely to share the same viewpoint that the executives already possessed.

Givers have a much easier time of reactivating and leveraging long dormant social media relationships. As Grant explains, “reconnecting a dormant relationship is not like starting a relationship from scratch. When people reconnect, they still have feelings of trust.” But if those feelings of trust were never cultivated in the first instance, the likelihood of re-establishing them is poor.

“Dormant ties are the neglected value in our social networks, and Givers have a distinctive edge over Takers and Matchers in unlocking this value,” writes Grant. Reconnecting is a totally different experience for Givers, especially in a wired world. “Givers have a track record of generously sharing their knowledge, and helping us out without worrying about what's in it for them,” writes one seasoned networker. “So we’re glad to help when they get back in touch with us.”

Collaborating

Most Americans see independence as a symbol of strength. This is particularly true of Takers, who tend to see themselves as superior to and separate from others. If they depend too much on others, Takers believe they’ll be vulnerable.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Givers reject the notion that interdependence is weak. Givers are more likely to see interdependence as a source of strength; a way to harness the skills of multiple people for a greater good.

Grant’s research clearly shows that the Givers got this one right. Why? Well, from a taker’s perspective, asking for advice means acknowledging that you don’t have all the answers. Takers worry that asking for advice might make them look weak, dependent, or incompetent. But the opposite is actually true. Research clearly shows that people who regularly seek advice and help from knowledgeable colleagues are actually rated more favorably by supervisors, as well as neutral observers, than those who never seek advice and help. In other words, by letting themselves appear a bit vulnerable from time-to-time, Givers end up looking much stronger in the end.

Evaluating

Givers do a better job than Takers and Matchers when it comes to evaluating talent. And evaluating the value of his or her subordinates’ actual workplace contributions, as well as making assumptions about future ones, is arguably the most important responsibility any manager will have.

To help us understand why Givers are better at evaluating the contributions made by others, Grant invites us to think about the give-and-take involved in married life. “Think about your marriage, or your most recent romantic relationship,” writes Grant. “Of the total effort that goes into the relationship, from making dinner and planning dates to taking out the garbage and resolving conflicts, what percentage of the work do you handle?” he asks.
Let’s say you claim responsibility for 55 percent of the total effort in the relationship. If you’re perfectly calibrated, your partner will claim responsibility for 45 percent, and your estimates will add up to 100 percent. In actuality, when two psychologists named Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly ran this experiment with a group of married couples in Canada, Ross and Sicoly found that three out of every four couples add up to more than 100 percent. In other words, most partners overestimate their own contributions. This is known as the responsibility bias: exaggerating our own contributions relative to others’ inputs.

Responsibility bias is a function of many different factors. But arguably the key one is information discrepancy. We have more access to information about our own contributions than the contributions of others. Obviously, we see all of our own efforts because we were there to witness them in each and every case. But we typically only witness a sample of our partners’ efforts. And so, quite understandably, when we think about who deserves the lion’s share of the credit for keeping the household running smoothly, we have more knowledge of our own contributions.

While Takers tend to fixate only on what they themselves brought to the table, Givers know that the key to making honest and objective assessments of the contributions made by others — be it in a marriage or at the office — is to focus first on what the other person has contributed. This can be as simple as making a list of what the other guy contributed before you estimate your own contribution. This is a great way to remain humble while also acknowledging the legitimate contributions of others. If you do this well, you’ll quickly become a magnet for good talent.

Influencing

In To Sell Is Human, Daniel Pink argues that our success depends heavily on our ability to influence others. To convince others to buy our products, use our services, accept our ideas, and invest in us, we need to communicate in ways that persuade and motivate. But according to Grant, the best method for influence — the one most favored by Givers — may not be the one that first comes to mind.

“Research suggests that there are two fundamental paths to influence: dominance and prestige,” writes Grant. “When we establish dominance, we gain influence because others see us as strong, powerful, and authoritative. When we earn prestige, we become influential because others respect and admire us.” Of the two paths, the research clearly shows that prestige is more effective in more settings.

Interestingly, the two fundamental paths to influence are closely tied to our reciprocity styles. Takers are usually attracted to the idea of gaining dominance. To establish dominance, Takers specialize in certain forms of communication: they speak forcefully, raise their voices to assert their authority, express certainty to project confidence, promote their accomplishments, and sell with conviction and pride. Non-verbal cues are also an important part of a Taker’s communications arsenal. Takers display strength by spreading their arms in dominant poses, raising their eyebrows in challenge, commanding as much physical space as possible, and even conveying anger and issuing threats when necessary.

As a result, takers tend to be much more effective than givers in gaining dominance. But dominance doesn’t always equate to influence. “When our audiences are highly skeptical of what we’re trying to push on them,” writes Grant, “the more we try to dominate them, the more they tend to resist.”
Givers understand this well, and so they consciously adopt a different approach. Instead of telling, they ask. By asking questions and actually listening to the answers, you show that you genuinely care about the other person’s interests. This builds your prestige as an influencer; others will come to respect and admire the concern that you show, and you will ultimately be rewarded for it.

In one study highlighted in Grant's book, a group of pharmaceutical salespeople were assigned to a new product with no existing client base. Each quarter, even though the salespeople were paid commission, the givers pulled further ahead of the others. Moreover, giving was the only characteristic to predict performance: it didn’t matter whether the salespeople were conscientious or carefree, extroverted or introverted, emotionally stable or anxious, open-minded or traditional. The only defining quality of a top pharmaceutical salesperson was being a Giver, as opposed to a Taker.

To illustrate how all of this works, Grant invites you to imagine that your plane has just crashed-landed in the desert. You’re with your coworker, Jamie. You have to prioritize twelve items, including a flashlight and a map, in order of importance for survival. You share your rankings with Jamie, who disagrees. You’re not a fan of the flashlight. But Jamie thinks it’s critical, and decides to deliver a forceful message: “The flashlight needs to be rated higher. It is the only reliable night signaling device; also, the reflector and lens could be used to start a fire. Put it higher!”

Jamie sounds like a taker – and probably is, since takers are inclined to give orders like this. “Are you willing to listen to Jamie?” asks Grant of his readers?

If you’re like most people, the answer is no. You naturally don’t want to be told what to do, so you resist Jamie’s influence. In trying to establish dominance over you, Jamie has lost prestige. But what if Jamie makes the same suggestion, talking more tentatively, and adding some questions and hedges?

“Do you think the flashlight should maybe be rated higher?” Jamie could say. “It may be a pretty reliable night signaling device. Also, maybe the reflector and lens could be used to start a fire, which could possibly be another way to signal for help?”

Most people would be much more receptive to the second version of Jamie’s speech. Her pattern of speech in the second instance signals that Jamie is a Giver. By talking more tentatively, Jamie shows a willingness to defer to you, or at the very least actually listen to you. Simply by adding subtle markers of tentative talk such as hedges (e.g. by saying the word “maybe”), and ending with a question as opposed to a statement, you’ll stand to earn greater respect from most audiences, and more influence.

**The Art of “Motivation Maintenance”**

Up to this point, we’ve been focusing on how Givers climb to the top of the success ladder through the unique ways that they build Networks, Collaborate, Evaluate and Influence others in order to achieve their true potential. But as you learned earlier, Givers are also more likely to end up at the bottom of the success ladder. This means that achieving and maintaining success involves more than just capitalizing on the strengths of Giving. It also requires avoiding the pitfalls of being too giving. And one of the biggest, most common pitfalls is burnout.

“If people give away too much credit over too long of a period of time, it’s all too easy for
them to become pushovers and doormats,” writes Grant. “The consequence: givers end up exhausted and unproductive.” Grant suggests a few simple, practical ways we can maintain our Giving motivation.

According to the research, it turns out that there’s a way to avoid burnout by actually planning – and clustering – your Giving-related activities. Grant calls this powerful technique “chunking.”

Here’s how it works: Imagine that you’re going to perform five random acts of kindness this week. You’ll be doing unrelated things like helping a friend with a project, writing a thank-you note to a former teacher, donating blood, and visiting an elderly relative. You can choose one of two different ways to organize your giving: chunking or sprinkling. If you’re a chunker, you’ll pack all five acts of giving into a single day each week – say on Saturday. But if you’re a sprinkler, you’ll distribute your giving evenly across five different days of the week, so that you give a little bit each day.

In a real-life experiment, people performed five random acts of kindness every week for six weeks. They were randomly divided into two groups: half chunked their giving into a single day each week, and the other half sprinkled it across all five days each week. At the end of the six weeks, despite performing the same number of acts, only one group felt significantly happier. And one group was more tired.

The chunkers were the happier group, and the sprinklers ended up feeling more tired at the end.

Instead of giving in a haphazard way, consider doing it in deliberately planned segments. By breaking up our workplace giving, we give ourselves a chance to recharge our batteries, and also do it in a way that maximizes the convenience factor in our schedules. Selfless givers are more inclined to sprinkle their giving throughout their days, helping whenever others need them. This is very noble behavior. But it can quickly become distracting and exhausting, robbing Givers of the attention and energy they need to complete their own work.

The Hundred Hour Rule

There are limits to the amount of time you should spend giving. Grant’s research shows that one hundred hours seems to be a magic number in this regard. In a study of more than two thousand Australians, those who volunteered one hundred hours per year were happier and more satisfied with their lives than those who volunteered fewer than one hundred hours annually. But there were no benefits of volunteering more than one hundred hours. Similar studies in America have yielded the same result. This is the “100-hour rule of volunteering.” It’s the range where Giving is maximally energizing and minimally draining.

When you do the math, a hundred hours a year breaks down to just two hours a week. Research shows that two hours of Giving on the job per week appears to be the sweet spot where people make a meaningful difference without sacrificing other priorities. And it’s a proven way to avoid Giver burnout.

Conclusion

Most of us are naturally warm and giving with our friends and family. But when it comes to workplace interactions, our generous qualities don’t always shine through.

But most of us actually spend the majority of our waking hours at work. This means that
how we interact with others at work is a fundamental part of who we are. If we reserve our natural Giver values strictly for our personal lives, Grant believes we might be missing out in our professional lives.

Becoming a Giver at work isn’t something that happens overnight. If your natural inclination is to be more of a Taker, or even a Matcher, it’ll take some effort to adopt a new reciprocity style. And it may feel a bit unnatural in the early going. But by shifting ever so slightly in the Giver direction, you might find your life is marked by greater success, richer meaning, and more lasting impact.

So why not give Giving a try?