

Givers vs. Takers: The Surprising Truth about Who Gets Ahead by Knowledge@Wharton

A colleague asks you for feedback on a report. A LinkedIn connection requests an introduction to one of your key contacts. A recent graduate would like an informational interview. New research from Wharton management professor Adam Grant reveals that how you respond to these requests may be a decisive indicator of where you will end up on the ladder of professional success. Grant recently spoke with Knowledge@Wharton about his findings, which are explored in his new book, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. In this interview, he delineates the differences between givers, takers and matchers; explores who gets ahead -- and who falls behind, and reveals how we can identify our own style and adapt it for greater success.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Knowledge@Wharton: Adam, thank you so much for joining us today. You write in your book, *Give and Take*, that people differ in their preferences for reciprocity. You divide people into givers, takers and matchers. Could you begin by explaining the difference?

Adam Grant: You could anchor this at two extremes: the takers and the givers. The takers are people who, when they walk into an interaction with another person, are trying to get as much as possible from that person and contribute as little as they can in return, thinking that's the shortest and most direct path to achieving their own goals.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have this strange breed of people that I call "givers." It's not about donating money or volunteering necessarily, but looking to help others by making an introduction, giving advice, providing mentoring or sharing knowledge, without any strings attached. These givers actually prefer to be on the contributing end of an interaction. Very few of us are purely takers or purely givers. Most of us hover somewhere in between. That brings us to the third group of people, who are matchers. A matcher is somebody who tries to maintain an even balance of give and take. If I help you, I expect you to help me in return. [They] keep score of exchanges, so that everything is fair and really just.

Knowledge@Wharton: It seems logical enough, based on what you said, that research shows that in fields like engineering and medicine, givers end up at the bottom of the heap. Because obviously if you are focused on giving more to others than taking back, then it's quite likely that you will end up at the bottom. But who ends up at the top of the heap, and why?

Grant: That was one of the most fascinating questions that I got interested in when I started doing the research for the book. You look across a wide range of industries and

even countries, and you find these three styles exist everywhere. Indeed, the givers are overrepresented at the bottom. Putting other people first, they often put themselves at risk for burning out or being exploited by takers. A lot of people look at that and say, "Well, it's hard for a taker to rise consistently to the top, because oftentimes, takers burn bridges. So, it must be the matchers who are more generous than takers, but also protect their own interests." When I looked at the data, I was really surprised to see that those answers were wrong. It's actually the givers again. Givers are overrepresented at the top as well as the bottom of most success metrics.

I found that in sales, the most productive sales people are actually those who put their customers' interests first. A lot of that comes from the trust and the good will that they have built, but also, the reputations that they create. One of the ways that I would play this out is to say that the success of givers and the fall of takers is also driven by matchers. A matcher is somebody who really believes in a just world. Of course, a taker violates that belief in a just world. Matchers cannot stand to see takers get ahead by taking advantage of other people. The data on this suggests that matchers will often go around trying to punish them, often by gossiping and spreading negative reputational information.

Just as matchers hate seeing takers get away with exploitation, they also hate to see people act really generously and not get rewarded for it. Matchers will often go out of their way to promote and help and support givers, to make sure they actually do get rewarded for their generosity. That's one of the most powerful dynamics behind the rise of givers.

Knowledge@Wharton: One of the things I found most fascinating about your book is the combination of very rigorous research with some really compelling stories of both givers and takers. Among the various stories you tell, there is one about a person called Peter Audet. Did being a giver help him or hurt him? What are some of the lessons to be learned?

Grant: I would say yes to all of the above. Peter Audet is one of my favorite people who I met when I was doing research for the book. He's a financial advisor, and he's the kind of guy who goes out of his way to help everyone he meets. For years, he would interview job candidates, and he would only be able to hire one and have to turn everybody else down. He would often give up his entire afternoon just trying to find jobs for the other people who he couldn't hire himself, really opening up his personal network to do that.

A lot of times, this orientation toward helping others got him in trouble. In one particular case, he had a colleague who I ended up calling Brad in the book, who essentially was getting out of the business, and he needed somebody to buy his clients quickly. Peter said, "Sure, I'll do it." He basically paid about \$10,000 for Brad's clients on the spot, just to help him out. Then a couple months later, Peter started losing his clients.... He discovered that all of those clients that he was losing were former clients of Brad's that he had bought. He did a little bit of homework and found out that Brad was back in the business. He was basically taking his clients back and not paying Peter a dime for them. It cost Peter a ton of money. He really got burned by a taker in that situation.

Yet, Peter will tell you, if you talk to him, that he has been enormously successful in his career. He runs a financial advisory firm that's well over seven figures, in terms of annual revenue. And he will tell you that being a giver is how he has gotten ahead.

It's how he wins business. It's why people go to him. Oftentimes givers put themselves at risk in the short run. But in the long run, they end up building the kind of social capital that's really important for success in a very connected world. You can see this play out in many, many different situations in his career. One of my favorites was when he actually drove out to visit a client in the scrap metal business, who was the tiniest of clients, worth very, very little money. Peter's colleagues actually said, "Don't bother. It's a waste of your time. The drive out there alone is not worth your hourly fee." Peter said, "You can't just ignore somebody because they're not worth your time. I really want to help in any way I can." The client turns out not to be a scrap metal worker, but the owner of a lucrative scrap metal business. He multiplies his fees by a factor of 100 once he sees what a generous guy Peter is.

That's one of the things that we learn from Peter: Givers do, in the short run, sometimes lose. Peter has gotten better at protecting himself and screening. Before he determines how much he'll help them, [he asks,] "Is this person a taker, a giver or a matcher?" But at the end of the day, he also ends up helping people who he would never expect to be able to help him back. Yet, sometimes they do.

Knowledge@Wharton: That's very interesting. Going out to see somebody who needed his help multiplied his business manifold. That's a very inspiring story. How do successful givers approach networking? How does their approach differ from, say, takers or matchers?

Grant: Takers tend to actually have incredibly broad networks. In part, because when they burn one bridge, they have to go and find new people to exploit, in order to keep the network going. Matchers tend to have much narrower networks. They will typically only exchange with people who have helped them in the past or who they expect to be able to help them in the future. They end up restricting their universe of opportunities. Givers tend to build much broader networks than matchers, but in a very different way than takers. What givers will typically do when they meet somebody new is try to figure out, "How can I add value to this person's life, and what could I possibly contribute that might benefit this person?" What that typically means is they end up creating a lot of good will in the relationships that they build that often lies dormant until they may actually need it.

Knowledge@Wharton: How do you spot a faker, or a taker in giver's clothing?

Grant: Ah, that was one of my favorite bodies of research that I looked into in writing the book. There are a couple of powerful ways to spot a taker. Let's start with the corner office. There's a phenomenal study by Chatterjee and Hambrick that looked at over 100 computer companies and actually downloaded the annual reports of each. They tried to figure out [if] you could identify the taker CEOs without ever meeting them. They got Wall Street analysts to rate how much each CEO is a taker. These analysts who knew the CEOs and interacted with them rated the extent to which they were entitled and narcissistic and self-serving.

The first factor that really correlated highly with those ratings was the gap in compensation between the CEO and the next highest-paid executive. Typically, a computer industry CEO makes about two to two and a half times as much annual compensation as the next highest-paid executive in that company. The typical taker CEO had about seven times more annual compensation than the next highest-paid executive in that company. They literally [took] more in terms of compensation.

The second cue was looking at their speech. The takers tended to use first-person singular pronouns, like "I" and "me," as opposed to "us" and "we," when talking about the company. The third, and my favorite, was the takers literally felt it's all about me: I am the most important and central figure in this company. When you looked at their photos in the company's annual reports, they actually had larger photos. They were more likely to be pictured alone.

Those signals don't just show up in the corner office, right? There's new research by Keith Campbell and his colleagues suggesting that you can even spot these cues on Facebook. One of the easiest ways that you can look for a taker is to look for a pattern that translates from Dutch as basically "kissing up, kicking down." Takers tend to be very careful at impression management and ingratiation when they're dealing with someone superior or more influential. But it's hard to keep up the façade in every interaction. It's often peers and subordinates who have a more direct window into what this person's true motives are like.

Knowledge@Wharton: What you just said reminds me of a story I read many years ago. When Mahatma Gandhi edited a magazine, he would receive all kinds of letters. One letter was from a young woman who was about to get engaged. She was going to meet her prospective fiancé for the first time. She wanted to know how she could judge this person. The advice that Mahatma Gandhi gave her, in the columns of the magazine that he edited, was, "Don't look at how he treats you. Look at how he treats his servants." I think that's very, very telling because with somebody whom he was trying to impress, obviously he would be very well-behaved. But a true sign of character is how you treat people who are vulnerable.

Grant: That's a really profound observation. There's a famous quote attributed to Samuel Johnson, that the true measure of a person is how he treats someone who can do him or her no good.

Knowledge@Wharton: Exactly. Now, you also point out that givers and takers differ quite a bit in the way they approach collaboration and sharing credit. Can you give any examples of how this works out?

Grant: This is one of the most interesting dynamics you could look at. In doing the research for the book, I use some historical examples here that I found fascinating. One was Frank Lloyd Wright, who at one point discovered, as an architect, that his draftsmen were essentially getting more commissions and more work than he was because customers and clients found them easier to work with and every bit as talented. He was offended by this and felt they should be subservient to him. He actually set a policy that they were not allowed to accept independent commissions. If while working in his studio they did any work, even if he never touched it, his name had to be signed first. That obviously cost him a lot of very, very talented drafts people. If you look at his legacy, he rarely mentored and championed far fewer great architects than most who achieved similar stature did.

Another example that really stands out from history is Jonas Salk who's remembered as a hero for discovering and commercializing a polio vaccine. But if you look at Salk's behavior really closely, one of the things you'll see is he never gave credit to any of the people in his lab who helped him discover the vaccine and actually caused the team to fracture and splinter. Salk never made a discovery that was nearly as influential again. This is one of the costs of appearing like a taker in a collaboration: slighting other people who might deserve credit. What givers tend to do in collaboration is

assume that credit is not zero sum. If I give you credit for your contributions, that doesn't necessarily take away from my contribution. That makes it a lot easier to keep people on board in a team over time. It means, typically, that if you're a leader or a manager, people will follow you if you rotate to a different organization or a different job. That's really powerful, but often harder to do.

Knowledge@Wharton: You have offered a very interesting reason for why Salk didn't give credit to his team. There was a certain bias at work. Could you explain that?

Grant: This comes out of social and cognitive psychology. The immediate thinking is, "Well, if Salk were a taker, he would be motivated to put his best foot forward. He would trumpet his accomplishments and really dismiss those of people around him." Yet, Ross and colleagues have shown consistently that these kinds of biases are less about our desires to paint ourselves in the most flattering light and actually more about information. There's a discrepancy between what we know about our own contributions and those of others.

In Salk's case, he remembered the blood, the sweat, the tears that he put in, moment by moment, when he was working toward creating that polio vaccine that saved thousands, and possibly millions, of lives. He literally couldn't remember the contributions of his colleagues because he wasn't there a lot of the time. He didn't actually experience them. This is really the discrepancy that exists. Eugene Caruso and his colleagues have done some really powerful research showing that when people are just asked to list the contributions of their team members and their own, they are literally more able to remember their own contributions. That's one of the big factors that drives credit biases in collaboration.

Knowledge@Wharton: Interesting. One of the biggest challenges for any manager, or even a teacher, is identifying the so-called "diamonds in the rough": people who have the potential to do great things as they go forward. Can you tell us a little bit about how a legendary teacher described in your book does this?

Grant: Absolutely. There's an accounting professor at the University of North Carolina and Duke by the name of CJ Skender. The man has taught over 35,000 students in his career. He's won every teaching award on the planet. He has a remarkable gift for bringing out the best in his students. He's had many, many students win gold medals, both in his state and nationally, for their accounting achievements. He's had more than three dozen students follow him to become professors of accounting. When you look at his approach, the question is, "How does he do it?" A lot of people assume that he's got a great eye for talent and that he's immediately able to spot the quantitative savants and then basically work with them.

CJ says, no, it's the exact opposite. He sees every student who walks into his classroom as a diamond in the rough, waiting to be polished. Then he tries to make his classes as interesting as possible to bring out the best in those students. Now, of course, it doesn't work with every student. But what he finds over time is by making his material interesting, he does shift some people toward becoming more motivated and more hard-working. This is true of coaches and leaders and managers everywhere. If you look at research by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues about what made somebody a world-class tennis player or a world-class musician, or even a mathematician or a scientist of great acclaim, very rarely were those world-class candidates superior early on in their careers. They looked pretty average when you started with them. But what they had in common was a coach, a teacher and a manager who believed in them and set their

aspirations very high. That often created a self-fulfilling prophecy, by inspiring them to engage in more deliberate practice and to put in the 10,000 hours that we all know are critical to achieving expertise.

Knowledge@Wharton: Another really fascinating part of your book deals with what you call powerless communication. What is that? What does that mean, and how is it useful in persuading and influencing others?

Grant: I'll give you my own personal example of this. When I was 25 and had first started teaching, I was asked to teach a leadership and motivation course for senior leaders in the U.S. Air Force. I was about half their age. I had just finished my doctorate, and I had relatively little experience. I felt like what I had to do was speak in the most confident possible tone to really establish my credibility. I came in, and I walked through all my credentials and described what my training was. Then, we went through the session. Afterward, I got the course feedback. It was pretty depressing, to say the least. One of the comments that really got burned into my brain was that there was more knowledge in the audience than on the podium. There were other people who made comments like, "Gosh, the professors get younger every year," and "How could this guy really teach us to lead? He's never been a leader."

I sat back and thought about that and realized that perhaps the confident, dominant, powerful approach was not the best path to influence. I decided to open up with a slightly different approach. [When] I walked into the next class that I had to teach, for that same audience in the Air Force, I said, "Okay. My name's Adam Grant. I know what all of you are thinking right now. What can I possibly learn from a professor who is 12 years old?" Then I just waited. After a few seconds, everybody started laughing. One of the Air Force colonels said, "No, no, no, that's way off. I'm sure you're at least 13." That became a running joke throughout the session. I guess what I learned from that experience was that sometimes humility and vulnerability in communication, what you might think of as powerless communication, is actually a stronger way to connect with your audience.

There's a lot of research on this. There's a classic study by Elliot Aronson on the pratfall effect, where quiz bowl competitors are recorded and you get to listen to them. You hear an expert, and when the expert spills coffee all over himself, you actually like him more. It humanizes him, it gives you an authentic connection with him. That's a lot of the power of powerless communication.

Knowledge@Wharton: What can givers do to avoid burnout and to avoid becoming doormats? It seems those are two pretty big risks for people who see themselves as givers.

Grant: Yes, I think that's right. In a way, being a matcher is a safer strategy. Knowing that givers end up at the bottom and the top means there are some risks associated with it. But I think that those risks actually can be mitigated with careful strategies. A lot of it comes down to setting boundaries. Many givers confuse being helpful or being generous with being available for every person and every request all the time. There are other givers who confuse being generous with empathizing and dropping everything that you're doing to help others. There are also plenty of givers out there -- this is something I found over and over in my research -- who feel like it's uncomfortable or inappropriate to advocate for their own interests. I think that we need to work with people who fall in the giving end of the spectrum to help them set clear boundaries and determine, "Okay, how am I going to help most of the people most of the

time?"

One of my favorite concepts that I came across when doing the background research for the book is what's called the five-minute favor. Instead of just helping everyone all the time, [ask], "Can I offer something of unique value to this other person that will take me five minutes or less?" It's basically about finding high benefit to others, but low cost to the self....

Knowledge@Wharton: Normally people believe that the alternative to being selfish -- a trait that takers usually have -- is being selfless. But you've come up with another term, called "otherish." Could you explain the difference?

Grant: When I first started studying give and take, I thought that basically self-interest versus selflessness were on one spectrum. You had takers over here, who were very selfish. You had givers, who were very selfless. It actually turns out, if you look at the data on this, that you can more effectively draw it two by two and say concern for your own interests and concern for other people's interests are actually independent motivations. You could score low and high on one, or on both. The takers tend to be purely selfish. There's one group of givers, who are purely selfless, who constantly put other people's interests ahead of their own.

But, there's this other group of givers that I call "otherish." They are concerned about benefitting others, but they also keep their own interests in the rearview mirror. They will look for ways to help others that are either low cost to themselves or even high benefit to themselves, i.e., "win-win," as opposed to win-lose. Here's the irony. The selfless givers might be more altruistic, in principle, because they are constantly elevating other people's interests ahead of their own. But my data, and research by lots of others, show that they're actually less generous because they run out of energy, they run out of time and they lose their resources, because they basically don't take enough care of themselves. The "otherish" givers are able to sustain their giving by looking for ways that giving can hurt them less or benefit them more.

Knowledge@Wharton: The vulnerabilities that you identified earlier of burnout and being a doormat are actually things that affect selfless givers more than others.

Grant: That's right. Selfless givers are at much greater risk of burnout and exploitation than are the "otherish" givers.

Knowledge@Wharton: One final question, Adam. What practical advice, apart from reading your book, could you offer people who want to start applying these principles to their own lives?

Grant: There's lots of advice peppered throughout the book in different chapters. But when I take a step back, I think the first question is, what is your own style? If you go to the Give and Take web site, Giveandtake.com, there's a self-assessment that you can take there. There's also a 360 assessment, both available for free, where you can get other people to rate you. That's really the first step: to hold up a mirror and figure out, "Okay, what is my default? I may act more like a taker when I'm negotiating a big contract. I may act more like a giver when I'm in a mentoring role. I'm probably a matcher when a colleague from another organization approaches me for some specialized knowledge. But, how do I treat most of the people most of the time?" This is the first step.

The second step is, there are some surprising opportunities, both for success and for meaning, in operating like a giver. I would ask, "What are the types of giving that you find most energizing or most consistent with your skills?" For some people, it's making introductions. For others, it's sharing credit. For others, it's stepping up as a mentor. Finding your own giver style is really powerful. The real meaning and purpose associated with that is that even if givers don't always do better than takers or matchers, they manage to succeed in ways that make others better and lift others up, instead of cutting them down. Looking for ways to do that is probably the most sustainable path to success in the long term, both for individuals and organizations.

Knowledge@Wharton: Adam, thank you so much for speaking with Knowledge@Wharton.

Grant: My pleasure. Thank you.