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News that Inspires

Turning the Tables on Success
by Adam Grant

In today's workplace, what goes around comes around faster, sinking takers and propelling givers to the top.

In the old world of work, good guys finished last. "Takers" (those in organizations who put their own interests first) were able to climb to the top of hierarchies and achieve success on the shoulders of "givers" (those who prefer to contribute more than they receive). Throughout much of the 20th century, many organizations were made up of independent silos, where takers could exploit givers without suffering substantial consequences.

But the nature of work has shifted dramatically. Today, more than half of U.S. and European companies organize employees into teams. The rise of matrix structures has required employees to coordinate with a wider range of managers and direct reports. The advent of project-based work means that employees collaborate with an expanded network of colleagues. And high-speed communication and transportation technologies connect people across the globe who would have been strangers in the past. In these collaborative situations, takers stick out. They avoid doing unpleasant tasks and responding to requests for help. Givers, in contrast, are the teammates who volunteer for unpopular projects, share their knowledge and skills, and help out by arriving early or staying late.

After studying workplace dynamics for the past decade, I've found that these changes have set the stage for takers to flounder and givers to flourish. In a wide range of fields that span manufacturing, service, and knowledge work, recent research has shown that employees with the highest rates of promotion to supervisory and leadership roles exhibit the characteristics of givers—helping colleagues solve problems and manage heavy workloads. Takers, who put their own agenda first, are far less likely to climb the corporate ladder.

The fall of takers and the rise of givers hinges on a third group, whom I call "matchers." Matchers hover in the middle of the give-and-take spectrum, motivated by a deep-seated desire for fairness and reciprocity. They keep track of exchanges and trade favors back and forth to keep their balance sheet at zero, believing that what goes around ought to come around. Because of their fervent belief in an eye for an eye, matchers become the engine that sinks takers to the bottom and propels givers to the top.

Takers violate matchers' belief in a just world. When matchers witness takers exploiting others, they aim to even the score by imposing a tax. For example, matchers spread negative reputational information to colleagues who might otherwise be vulnerable, preventing takers from getting away with self-serving actions in the future. On the flip side, most matchers can't stand to see generous acts go unrewarded. When they see a giver putting others first, matchers go out of their way to dole out a bonus, in the form of compensation, recognition, or recommendations for promotions. Of course, these responses aren't limited to matchers. Givers, too, are motivated to punish takers and reward fellow givers. But I've found that in the workplace, the majority of people are matchers, which means that they are the ones who end up dispensing the most taker taxes and giver bonuses. In an interdependent, interconnected business environment, what goes around comes around faster than it used to.

At Google, for example, an engineer named Brian received eight bonuses in the span of a single year, including three in just one month. He volunteered his time to train new hires and help members of multiple cross-functional teams learn new technologies, and his peers and managers responded like matchers, granting him additional pay and recognition. Consistent with Brian's experience at Google, a wealth of research shows that in teams, givers earn more respect and rewards than do takers and matchers. As Stanford University sociologist Robb Willer notes, “Groups reward individual sacrifice.”

Interdependent work also means that employees will be evaluated and promoted not only on the basis of their individual results, but also in terms of their contributions to others. This reduces the incentives for takers to exploit givers, encouraging them to focus instead on advancing the group's goals. As a result, takers engage in fewer manipulative acts—which reduces the risks to givers—yet they still contribute less than givers. This allows givers to gain a reputation for being more generous and group-oriented. And a rich body of evidence has shown that these qualities are the basis for sound leadership.

In fact, when givers become leaders, their groups are better off. Research led by Rotterdam School of Management professor Daan van Knippenberg has shown that employees work harder and more effectively for leaders who put others' interests first. This, again, is a matching response: As van Knippenberg and Claremont Graduate University professor Michael Hogg found, “going the extra mile for the group, making personal sacrifices or taking personal risks on behalf of the group” motivates group members to give back to the leader and contribute to the group's interests. And a thorough analysis led by Nathan Podsakoff, a professor at the University of Arizona, of more than 3,600 business units across numerous industries showed that the more frequently employees give help and share knowledge, the higher their units' profits, productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee retention rates.

By contributing to groups, givers are also able to signal their skills. In a study led by researcher Shimul Melwani of UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School, members of five dozen teams working on strategic analysis projects rated one another on a range of characteristics and behaviors. At the end of the project, team members reported which of their colleagues had emerged as leaders. The single strongest predictor of leadership was the amount of compassion that members expressed toward others in need. Interestingly, compassionate people were not only viewed as caring; they were also judged as more knowledgeable and intelligent. By expressing concern for others, they sent a message that they had the resources and capabilities to help others.

Today, these signals are ever more visible: Givers are aided by the fact that the anonymity of professional life is vanishing. In the past, when we encountered a job applicant, a potential business partner, or a prospective service provider, we had to rely on references selected by that candidate. When takers burned bridges with one contact, they could eliminate that person from their reference list. But now, online social networks offer a much richer database of references. Odds are that through a quick search of our LinkedIn or Facebook networks, we can find a common connection with knowledge of that person's reputation. By reaching out to the mutual contact to obtain an independent reference on the candidate's past behavior, decision makers can screen out takers and favor givers. Of the billion Facebook users around the world, 92 percent are within four degrees of separation—and in most countries, the majority of people are just three degrees apart.

Such tools have made it tough for a taker to hide in the shadows. At Groupon, for example, Howard Lee was heading the South China office, and received a slew of applications for sales jobs. He searched his LinkedIn network for common connections, and located quite a number of them. When he discovered that certain candidates had a history of self-serving behavior, he quickly moved on, focusing his time and energy on candidates with track records as givers.

Taken together, these trends are changing the characteristics that we value in people. Two of the defining qualities of great leaders are the ability to make others better and the willingness to put the group's interests first. Because givers today add increasing value in leadership roles and interdependent work, hiring processes can be modified to assess which candidates are inclined to contribute more than they receive. For development, promotion, and retention, leaders and managers should focus less on individual skills and talents, and more on the extent to which employees use their skills and talents to lift others up—rather than cutting them down. The employees with the greatest potential to excel and rise will be those whose success reverberates to benefit those around them.

Along with investing in people who are already disposed toward operating like givers, it will be of paramount importance to create practices that nudge employees in the giver direction. In many organizations, owing to their tendencies to claim credit and promote themselves, successful takers are more visible than successful givers. To make sure that employees are aware that it's possible to be a giver and achieve success, it may be necessary to locate and recognize respected role models who embody an orientation toward others. That way, when what goes around comes around faster than it used to, it will be for the benefit of employees and their organizations.