

The Business Wisdom of Montgomery Brewster's Uncle

A review of

Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success by Adam Grant
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Robert D. Mather

University of Central Oklahoma

Kathryn Ayers

Webster University

In George Barr McCutcheon's 1902 novel "Brewster's Millions," Montgomery Brewster inherits a fortune from his grandfather. However, his uncle did not like the selfish practices with which the grandfather made his fortune, and offers to leave Montgomery a larger fortune if he spends all of his grandfather's money without telling anyone about the deal. This creates a situation in which Brewster must spend his money against the advice of his friends, who believe they are acting in his best interest. Ultimately, Brewster finds that when he spends his money generously, his generosity is rewarded by making even more money, thus making it extraordinarily difficult for him to spend the initial inheritance in order to access the larger one.

Adam Grant's "Give and Take" promotes a similar notion of karmic generosity in the business world. Ultimately, it promotes the Golden Rule in the workplace—Treat others as you wish to be treated. It also promotes the 100-hour rule of volunteering, which is 2 hours per week. This optimal number of hours keeps individuals at peak happiness, life satisfaction, and livelihood. Indeed, this book can be considered the infiltration of business by positive psychology (i.e., Seligman, 1998), which is a paradigm in psychology that seeks to enhance the human condition.

Give and Take offers a layman's view into the study of reciprocity styles, while allowing the reader to glean small, but valuable strategies to implement for their personal success. Business has often been concerned with studying those who are successful, and discovering what qualities they possess that have influenced their success. Is it their drive, their passion for what they do, random chance, or the number of hours they spend on the job? Adam Grant outlines a different approach to success when he suggests that success is not necessarily determined by a specific personality characteristic, but rather, it may be how we interact with others.

As the book is aptly named, Grant identifies two interaction styles on a continuum as Givers and Takers, while a third, Matchers, contains people who lie in the middle. Through more anecdotal than quantitative evidence, Grant walks the reader through which reciprocity style is most likely to succeed and why. From established cities to tribal villages, these reciprocity styles seem to cross cultural boundaries. So across the world, what reciprocity style seems to lead to the least, or ideally the most, success? Grant's research reveals that Givers seem to fall to the bottom of the success ladder, essentially because of their persistent selflessness of giving to others. They fall prey to their own great intentions because of helping others while sacrificing their own possible success. For instance, Grant points out a politician who made major strides in a local political race of three candidates, yet he expected it would be a close call on who would win the race. Instead of waiting to see who would win, the politician removed himself from the election and encouraged his constituents to vote for the rival candidate who was in last place. The politician knew if voters would rally under one candidate instead of be divided by two, the votes would overcome the front runner, and the somewhat shared ideology between the politician and the other candidate would be able to be enacted. The last-place candidate won the race because of the politician's giving tendency, yet the politician

Send correspondence concerning this article to Robert D. Mather, University of Central Oklahoma, 100 North University Drive, Box 85, Edmond, OK, 73034. E-mail: rmather@uco.edu. Or, to Kathryn Ayers, Webster University, 470 East Lockwood Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63119. kathrynayers@gmail.com.

seemed to gain nothing personally from withdrawing from the race.

If Grant indicates that Givers have the least success, what reciprocity style leads to the most success? He points out that Takers may get ahead because of their drive to behave in a situation such that they come out ahead, while Matchers act in a “tit for tat” mindset of “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.” Grant expected to see that Takers or Matchers would top the rankings, yet the research indicates that Givers were the most successful. The explanation for this interesting phenomenon was the primary narrative of Give and Take. The author provides a wide-range of anecdotes to illustrate how Givers implement certain actions and ideas in their lives, which leads to their ascent up the success ladder. Remember the politician from earlier? Abraham Lincoln later became one of the most revered and studied Presidents of the United States. There are numerous stories of him giving to others while sacrificing his own potential well being, yet it paid off.

While many in business engage in networking, collaborating with others, evaluating situations, and influencing their peers, Grant specifically breaks down the way that Givers act in these four activities that leads to their success. He outlines small steps to develop giving tendencies. For instance, Givers often engage in “five-minute favors.” Essentially, these actions occur when the Giver expends minimal effort to contact a connection that could have a major impact on the recipient of the giving, even perhaps changing their life. The five-minute favor is an easily implemented action in our lives as a small, but impactful step to becoming a Giver. Grant also analyzes the importance of how asking others for advice can bring out Giver tendencies. For instance, instead of asking for help finding a job, why not ask the person for advice on how to get into that specific field? More than likely he will be flattered that you have requested his opinion, and offer valuable thoughts while he also may be more likely to assist you in return. Continually giving to others can burn Givers out, but Grant outlines actions that Givers take to feel refreshed. He points out that research shows that volunteering for 100 hours a year, or a little less than two hours each week, is the point where most people see that their happiness increases. While these actions may seem minimal, Grant continually offers many of these great tips for implementation in the development of an inner Giver, which ultimately may lead to more success.

Indeed, Grant argues persuasively that “otherish givers” can make money by giving it away, and provides much evidence from controlled empirical studies and anecdotes of prominent individuals. Give and Take is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses in management, industrial/organizational psychology, and applied social psychology. In addition, it is an excellent text for individuals in any level of the workforce to read to understand how social interactions can build or shackle a career.

Give and Take offers insight into reciprocity styles throughout many facets of our world. While narrative evidence reigns supreme throughout, it allows the reader to return to this book again and still garner new and executable thoughts to adjust their actions to be more like a successful Giver. Grant does a commendable job of taking psychological and business research and packaging it in an easily readable explanation of how to interact with others to become more successful. Are you curious as to where you may fall on the reciprocity spectrum? Visit the book’s website at www.GiveandTake.com and take the quiz prior to reading the book to gain the best reading experience.

The major point of this book is that there are interpersonal rewards for giving. It is a very simple message that is supported by science. However, in general the perception in the business world is that giving is weak. Thus, there is a perception that Givers are surrounded by Takers. In fact, the science also supports the ability to get ahead in business in a variety of circumstances by being a Taker. But chalk up a win for the good guys, because Give and Take persuasively makes the point that businesses should value Givers to give the organization the opportunity for long term success. Montgomery Brewster’s uncle set up his give-it-away deal to prove the point that it pays to be a Giver, not a Taker. Grant has provided the research to support the premise of Brewster’s Millions and the value that humanity places in helping others.

References

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