

# The Leadership Forum



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## Harvard Business Review Corner “In the Company of Givers and Takers” by Adam Grant *Harvard Business Review*, April 2013

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Successful businesses recognize a key concept: their organization’s prosperity depends on the work culture and the work culture hinges on the collegiality of their employees. In medicine, we sometimes avoid thinking of our workplace as a business. However, leaders in medicine might be interested in some lessons from the business world on how to empower their physicians and cultivate a culture of “giving” such that they are able to produce sustainable environments of profitability, productivity, and patient satisfaction.

In the *Harvard Business Review* article, “In the Company of Givers and Takers,” Adam Grant outlines key concepts that a leader can implement to develop an efficient and effective organization.

We’ve all seen successful people who are takers, those who try to get as much as possible from others and contribute as little as possible in return. They guard their own time, claim credit for others’ work, self-promote, and sometimes backstab. On the other end of the spectrum are the givers, individuals who contribute to others without seeking anything in return. They enjoy helping others and frequently do so,

without strings attached. Then there is the rest of the employees, the majority of individuals who fall somewhere in the middle, called matchers. They maintain a balance of give and take, a quid pro quo system; matchers can be influenced to be more giving or more taking depending on the work culture.

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Nathan Podsakoff of the University of Arizona examined 38 organizational behavior studies that included multiple industries and 3,500 business units and found a robust link between employee giving and desirable business outcomes. Specifically, high rates of giving were predictive of higher profitability, productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction. Unfortunately, employees often receive mixed messages that undermine a giving culture. Systems that force rankings or have competitive bonus pools or pit employees against each other can undermine collegiality. Reward systems that focus on in-

dividual performance metrics can lead to a “not my job” mentality.

When Frank Flynn of Stanford looked at engineers, being a giver tended to propel some individuals to the very top while sinking other individuals to the bottom. Takers and matchers tended to be in the middle with regard to work productivity and quality.

So, how can leaders promote an atmosphere conducive to giving and the desirable positive outcomes? Grant uses Podsakoff’s and Flynn’s studies to illustrate concepts that leaders can implement to encourage the givers in an organization to succeed and therefore influence the work culture toward higher productivity and efficiency. The tricky part is helping givers succeed without allowing takers to take advantage of them.

Leaders need to be observant of who is a giver and who is a taker. Leaders can target takers (or matchers emulating takers) in the organization by providing incentives for collaboration and repercussions for colleagues who do not reciprocate. There are also a few ways that leaders can help the givers protect them-

*continued on page 2*

# The Leadership Forum

## *Harvard Business Review Corner* continued from page 1

selves from their own generosity so they and the organization can excel.

Grant suggests that leaders can help givers in their organization learn techniques for appropriate self-advocacy that feel compatible with their innate generosity. Givers are more likely to be assertive if acting as an agent on behalf of others. He proposes teaching givers to set boundaries and suggests givers limit their giving by carving out time and space for uninterrupted work. Givers also need to be wary of their own empathy and appeals by others for their assistance. Teaching givers to

consider the other person's perspectives in addition to their own feelings can allow givers to make better choices and avoid burnout or decreased productivity due to overcommitment to helping their colleagues.

Physicians reflect the greater society. Among us are the takers, the givers, and a majority of matchers. Although we are trained to be givers to our patients, the training is situation specific and may not translate into how we treat our colleagues. Our reward systems may include self-promotion and hero-worship,

which can send mixed messages to physicians about how to succeed.

Leaders need to recognize the importance of a giving culture among colleagues and promote an atmosphere of generosity toward each other. Creating value for other people is the best way for everyone to win in the long run—with higher profitability, productivity, efficiency, and patient satisfaction—even though it may involve some short-run costs. Creating the right culture for success is a critical concept for physicians to understand in order to lead successfully.