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Giving Your Way to Success
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“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Those are words you have likely heard before even if you are not accustomed to reading the Bible from which they come. Perhaps you did not hear these words precisely in this form, but likely you heard something akin to them from a parent or teacher when you were being taught to share a toy or let others go first in line. But it seems to me that somewhere along the way we have become rather suspicious of these words. Aren’t there a lot of times when it is just really nice to receive something? If we are always givers, how is that we will have enough for ourselves? If we are always giving, won’t people take advantage of us? These are the questions that even if we don’t speak them come in our minds and undermine any strong belief in the idea that it is more blessed than to receive. We might be willing to say it is more blessed to give than to receive when we have an abundance or an overflow and won’t really miss what we are giving away, but beyond that the value of giving is questionable. Or is it?

Social scientists have discovered that people differ dramatically in their preference for giving. In fact, they have pretty much divided up the world into three kinds of people: givers, takers, and matchers. Those who are takers are all about getting the most value for themselves. They see life as a zero-sum game, a win-lose proposition, and they are going to win. If something has a clear benefit to them, they will do it even if it has a detrimental effect on others. Matchers are a bit more altruistic; they aren’t trying to come out better than others in each transaction. They just figure that if they do a favor that one is expected in return, and others get that sense. Givers, as you might guess, are altogether different. They are others-focused and pay attention to what others need from them. They mentor those new to the field. They give out information when they see it can help someone. They provide introductions when it might lead some to success.

So I wonder what kind of person you would describe yourself. Or perhaps more importantly, what kind of person would others describe you to be? I’ll be honest with you. I think I am a matcher.

But before we get too introspective, let's talk about success. And by success, I mean flat out raw success as we often measure it in Western culture. Success as measured by moving higher up the ladder, success as having more influence over others, success as having a greater income, success as in producing greater results. When it comes to success using these measures, is it possible to know which group—givers, takers, or matchers—is most likely to be found among the most successful? Social scientists tell us yes, as they have conducted study after study to see the relationship between our willingness to give and our success. And this is what they have found: the most successful people are givers across industries. And they are not givers because they are successful; they are successful because they are givers.

For example, Steve Jones, a very successful CEO of one of Australia's largest banks, wanted to know what made the bank's financial advisers successful. His team studied the expected factors of financial expertise and effort. But their study indicated that the factor that had the greatest influence on success "was whether a financial adviser had the client's best interests at heart, above the company's and even his own."¹

In another study, engineers were identified as givers, matchers, or takers by asking their colleagues to rate whether they gave more, the same, or less than they received. The study then correlated their giving identity with productivity. "Of all engineers, the most productive were those who gave often—and gave more than they received. These were the true givers, and they had the highest productivity and the highest status: they were revered by their peers."²

Similarly a study of opticians showed that the average giver brought in over 30 percent more annual revenue than matchers and 68 percent more than takers.³ Even in insurance, the higher the salesperson's giver score, the greater that person's revenue, policies sold, applications, sales quotas met, and commissions earned.⁴

Now, all this might surprise you. And it might surprise you because when you have chosen to give to others, perhaps by mentoring someone or helping with a project or a contact, there is often times no immediate or noticeable impact to your own success. You help someone, they go on their way, and that is that. But perhaps there is

more benefit to helping that you have recognized. Perhaps being a giver, as one entrepreneur has said, “is not good for a 100-yard dash, but it’s valuable in a marathon.”⁵

Consider for example a study of medical students. Medical students were identified as givers or not at the beginning of their program. In their first year of medical school givers earned significantly lower grades, likely because they spent a good deal of their time helping other students prepare. But that was the only year of medical school in which the givers underperformed. By their second year, the givers had made up the gap and by the sixth year, the givers earned substantially higher grades than their peers. So strong was the correlation between giving and better grades that it is greater than the correlation between smoking and lung cancer.⁶ In other words, if a doctor is willing to tell a patient he shouldn’t smoke because of its health effects, she should be willing to tell herself that she ought to be a giver if she is going to be a success in her practice.

You might wonder how this works. How is that givers in the end are more successful? Basically, there are two ways. First of all because people sense that they are not in the game just for themselves, they find themselves willing to work with givers and provide more information. This kind of work relationship often benefits the giver in the end. Secondly, givers are by far the most likely to receive benefits from those they have never met. In other words, when giving acts are done, it is not too long before someone who knows someone that was a beneficiary of a giver comes calling for advice and eventually business.

Now, all of this might seem a little too good to be true. Can it be that just by becoming a giver you greatly increase your chances for success? Well, this is where an important caveat that comes into play. It is true that there are inordinate number of givers who make it to the top of any profession, but there is also an inordinate number of givers who find themselves at the bottom of the success pile so to speak. The takers and the matchers tend to find themselves in the middle while the givers are at the top and the bottom. Of course this complicates matters, but fortunately there is a difference between the givers and the top and at the bottom that is discernable.

First, givers at the top do not just give to anyone. They discern quickly whether the people they are working with are takers. If they are, they steer clear from them or they require reciprocity upfront if they do help. If givers don't act in this way, they become the doormats of takers, and see productivity drop significantly.

Second, in discerning who to give to, the givers at the top recognize that whether someone is agreeable or gruff has little to do with whether they are a giver or a taker. There are many agreeable takers who schmooze others so that they can take from them. The givers at the top are able to look past a person's demeanor and recognize the motives and values of others.⁷

Third, although givers at the top make themselves available to others they are also certain to guard time for focused self-production. Rather than having an open door policy all day long and every day, they operate in blocks. They block out time to be self-productive and they block out times to be helpful to others.

Fourth, givers at the top have learned to act like they are advocating for others when in negotiations. Givers, because of their desire to help others, can leave too much on the table when negotiating. That is why some givers do not produce well. But givers who recognize that not to be timid in negotiations is a giving thing to those who are counting on them are able to do quite well in negotiations and create win-win scenarios that fosters even further business.⁸

Yes, givers can be those who find themselves at the bottom of the heap, but if they become nuanced givers in regards to these points, they can move from pushovers to top of the class.

I started today by reciting Jesus' words: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." I am quite sure that all of us have sensed the truth of these words to some degree by the good feeling that comes from helping someone else. But it seems to me there is more to these words than just a good feeling. Giving is at the very foundation of success.

¹ Adam Grant, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*
(Penguin, 2013), 18.

² Ibid, 59.

³ Ibid, 139.

⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷ Ibid, 192.

⁸ Ibid, 201-215.

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