

GIVERS AND TAKERS AT THE WORKPLACE

Fabiola Popa

Lecturer, PhD, Politehnica University of Bucharest

*Abstract:*The article looks into the concepts of givers and takers as put forth by organizational psychologist Adam Grant, with a view to discussing how each of these categories of employees impacts on the working environment and on the overall organizational goals, as well as on each other. It will address the dangers of giving too much and of healthy boundaries within a team. It will also touch upon the pair narcissist-empath, as described by specialized literature in psychology, and relate it to the pair giver-taker, in an attempt to understand why and how the two parties in these pairs complement each other.

Keywords: givers, takers, matchers, professional communication, boundaries, the dark triad, empathy

I. Introduction

Having good teamwork skills has been repeatedly hailed as a prerequisite for an effective and productive atmosphere at the workplace. As teachers of professional communication, what lies at the core of our teaching philosophy is the attempt to provide students with better oral and written communication models, as well as with some soft skills meant to facilitate the flow of messages, to foster collaboration and willingness to successfully see tasks and projects through to the end. Ultimately, good employees are supposed to be emotionally and culturally intelligent, able to put complex ideas across in a concise, clear and persuasive manner, but also to be receptive and active listeners; to be open minded, adaptable, politically correct, ethical and reliable team workers. All in all, good employees are supposed to be both excellent technical experts and adept at navigating the differences in background, opinions, age etc. they encounter at the workplace in order to build a harmonious atmosphere, conducive to optimum results.

Unfortunately, as they continue to work, change jobs and even career goals, good-willed and helpful employees may run into ruthless co-workers, leaders or business partners, whose games and tricks may eventually discourage, exhaust, sicken, or even cause mental havoc to those they are inflicted on. This article discusses precisely what happens when givers meet takers, as described by organizational psychologist Adam Grant, and how their relationship impacts the working environment and organizational goals. I will also have a quick look into the darker psychological personality types likely to manipulate and damage unsuspecting, ethical co-workers, in order to reach their own extrinsic purposes related to financial gains and their intrinsic need to feed on other people's distress.

II. Givers and Takers at the Workplace

According to Adam Grant, when it comes to the stance one chooses to take with respect to one's relationship with the others and with the idea of work as such, there are two main categories

of people, namely the *givers* and the *takers*. Givers will be always willing to impart knowledge and ideas, to share resources and allot time to help others thrive, without expecting reciprocity. Theirs is an intrinsic view on the benefits of giving, a look at the bigger picture, a way to contribute to the greater good of the company and of their co-workers. In their turn, takers are very apt to see and seize the opportunities for themselves, to recognize those who could serve as means for their own ends, as well as to make sure they, in their turn, don't waste anything for the benefit of others. If not blinded by compulsive generosity, one should be able to detect them quickly, as they come with a full range of red flags: "Acting entitled to people's help. Claiming credit for success while blaming others for failure. Kissing up and kicking down. Being nice to your face and then stabbing you in the back — or being nice only when seeking a favor. Overpromising and underdelivering [...] you give an inch, they try to take a mile [...] they treat help as an open invitation to get more of the same" (Grant and Rebele, 2017). In between, there are also fakers, those takers disguised as good Samaritans, and matchers, those who would help and give only if helped and given in return.

As Grant mentions, research has shown that "higher rates of giving were predictive of higher unit profitability, productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction, along with lower costs and turnover rates. When employees act like givers, they facilitate efficient problem solving and coordination and build cohesive, supportive cultures that appeal to customers, suppliers, and top talent alike" (Grant, 2013). However, if one looks deeper into the issue, subsequent research has shown that the employees "who generated the least revenue reported a particularly strong concern for helping others" (Grant, 2013), while there was still a category of givers who managed to be both generous and high-achievers. The two main questions were, then: what was the latter's secret that made them have the best of both worlds, and how can employers capitalize on their givers' propensity to share, but make sure these altruistic employees do not experience generosity burnout?

The secret is in fact a shift in perspective that needs to accommodate both the givers' natural tendency to serve others and the need to protect themselves from those who, in their turn, will be naturally inclined to benefit from the givers' selflessness: "Being an effective giver isn't about dropping everything every time for every person. It's about making sure that the benefits of helping others outweigh the costs to you." (Grant and Rebele, 2017). Being a selfless giver may be appealing in theory but detrimental in practice. Instead, the optimum choice on the generosity spectrum would be the self-protective givers, who "are generous, but they know their limits. Instead of saying yes to every help request, they look for high-impact, low-cost ways of giving so that they can sustain their generosity — and enjoy it along the way" (Grant and Rebele, 2017).

Therefore, it is necessary "for employees to gain a more nuanced understanding of what generosity is and is not. Givers are better positioned to succeed when they distinguish generosity from three other attributes — timidity, availability, and empathy — that tend to travel with it" (Grant, 2013).

Their lack of assertiveness and reluctance to be self-serving often puts givers at the mercy of takers. Reframing self-advocacy in ways that could include benefits for others, so as to reconcile both the givers' need to act in the name of the others and the need to tend to their own interest, is the first solution proposed by Grant.

In addition, being more careful about the issue of *who*, *when*, and *how* they help will make givers less subject to time and energy wasters, therefore, setting healthy boundaries is the second solution. Recognizing takers from the early stage of the relationship and acting like matchers towards them is probably the most effective way of preventing later emotional havoc. In terms of time, learning to prioritize help requests, setting dedicated days on which to accept to help people rather than being at their beck and call all the time, refer help requests to other people instead of dealing with all of them themselves are some of the ways in which givers can avoid being overwhelmed. Identifying what one is best at in terms of giving and acting on that particular skill rather than everything at the same time is another trick that may do the work. Thus, "experts share knowledge. Coaches teach skills. Mentors give advice and guidance. Connectors make

introductions. Extra-milers show up early, stay late, and volunteer for extra work. Helpers provide hands-on task support and emotional support” (Grant and Rebele, 2017). Choosing one or two favourite ways of helping and sticking to them will accommodate both the need to help and the one to cater for oneself.

Finally, in order for givers not to become victims of their own empathic nature, they need to turn from “empathizers” (focused on others’ feelings) into “perspective takers” (focused on others’ thinking and interests). Givers can use their ability to put themselves into the shoes of the other party in a more objective way, which avoids the trap of letting themselves carried away and wallow in emotional turmoil.

If implemented, these three solutions, states Adams, lead to three major benefits for companies: retaining the givers at the workplace and saving them from generosity burnout, encouraging other employees to be givers rather than takers or mere matchers, and finally “creating a culture of and a reputation for generosity” (Grant, 2013) which is likely to attract other people of the kind, thus perpetuating the existence of an environment which is free of psychological games and manipulation.

But who are the takers? And who are the givers? What follows is a quick look into descriptions provided by specialized literature in psychology with respect to the dark triad of personalities, who exhibit features that are more likely to be found in takers, in contrast with more empathic natures, who are more likely to be givers. The triad is relevant to the discussion inasmuch as all three types of personalities have a twisted relationship with those around them, mainly characterized by their desire to exploit the others to their own benefit, which is in fact the very definition of the taker. Thus, “despite their diverse origins, the personalities composing this Dark Triad share a number of features. To varying degrees, all three entail a socially malevolent character with behavior tendencies toward self-promotion, emotional coldness, duplicity, and aggressiveness.” (Paulhus, 2002)

III. The Dark Triad and Empaths at the Workplace

In psychology, dark side personalities stand somewhere between normal types of personalities and clinical-level pathologies (Spain et al., 2013). The dark triad of socially aversive traits includes narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism.

Narcissists display a grandiose sense of self-worth, are permanently preoccupied with their image, they hunger for unconditioned admiration and seem to be unable to have long-lasting, profound relationships with others (Spurk et al., 2015). They are also self-serving, jealous, and tend to lie in order to protect their image (Gökdağ, 2016). They like to make others feel inferior and insecure, while they overstate their own achievements (Adams and Dean, 2009). Their desire to be liked prompts them to be charming and easy-going at first sight, and it seems that they do it by means of “fancier clothing, a more charming facial expression, more self-assured body movements, and more verbal humor, all of which lead to popularity” (Back et al, 2010). They also lack an essential component of empathy, namely susceptibility to emotional contagion, which probably accounts for their inability to engage in authentic relationships with others (Czarna et al, 2015).

In their turn, psychopaths are characterized by impulsivity and thrill seeking, and they have lower levels of empathy, anxiety and fear than normal individuals (Spain et al, 2013). They do not feel guilt or remorse when they harm other people, and they are emotionally cold (O’Boyle, 2012). They are perceived as anti-social, irresponsible, and willing to manipulate others to meet their own ends (Rauthmann, 2013).

Machiavellians have three main characteristics: the compulsion to exploit others, a cynical view of human nature, and a propensity to bend rules to the detriment of moral principles (O’Boyle, 2012). They are cold and emotionally detached and they “strive for agentic goals - money, power, and status” (Rauthmann, 2013). Out of all three dark personalities, they are probably those who are

more willing to consciously and strategically take advantage of the others, and they take pleasure in doing it.

The frequent victims of the dark personality types are the empaths, who are known to be highly sensitive, to absorb other people's emotions, and, among other things, to give too much too often, three characteristics which drain them of energy and transform them in emotional dumping grounds (Orloff, 2016). The relationship between the empaths and the dark personalities is a complex one, mostly based on the empaths' need to be altruistic, devoted and caring, as well as their actual ability to fend for others, and their reluctance to see to their own problems first. They become victims of their inclination to trust others unconditionally, as they are unsuspecting of the possible games played at their expense, and they keep staying in the relationship in the hope that their willingness to make things work will finally bear fruit (Ward, 2012). In short, the empaths' propensity to give perfectly match the dark personalities' propensity to take, therefore the needs of both parties are met and attended to in a twisted, but, after all, logical way.

IV. Conclusion

Good-willed employees are rightfully interested in how to become better communicators and more adaptable team players, in order to be able to work with others more efficiently; after all, constant self-actualization is the key to personal progress, with subsequent wider impact on co-workers, the working environment, and organizational goals. But, in addition to this, dire reality has shown that they should also be educated on the dangers of running into psychological types whose ultimate goals have nothing to do with collaboration and the greater good of the group or of the company, but focus on ways to find twisted solutions to their own needs, complexes, and frustrations at the expense of others. Therefore, the earlier recruiting officers learn to screen out toxic candidates and the earlier employees are trained to spot possible manipulative personalities and to avoid being trapped in their games, the healthier the working environment and the more efficient the team. Having employers, current and prospective employees, as well as undergraduate students exposed to opportunities to enhance their emotional intelligence (which entails self-awareness/self-management and awareness of/ management of others' feelings) will result in more harmonious relations at the workplace.

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