Book Summary: Give and Take, by Adam Grant

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1-Page Book Summary of Give and Take

There are 3 reciprocity styles. Takers like to receive more than they give. Matchers balance and give on a quid pro quo basis. Givers like to give more than they get.

Professionally, most people tend to be matchers, partly because they believe the workplace is zero sum, partly because they're skeptical of takers and don't want to make themselves vulnerable. This can create a pernicious vicious cycle leading to bad work culture.

Benefits of Giving

Givers end up more successful by building better reputations and more useful networks. Increasingly true as economies shift to collaborative knowledge work.

Giving gives you an advantage because you can't predict who's going to be helpful to you in the future. This means some people are undervalued by takers/matchers at present. If you help these people, they will be grateful. Givers tend to see potential in all people as diamonds in the rough. (In contrast, takers

Givers focus on the success of the group rather than the self. This inspires trust in their motives and creates a safe space where ideas are shared without fear of exploitation (where a taker would claim credit) or retaliation (where a taker may reflexively shoot it
The givers also earn “idiosyncracy credits” where their controversial ideas may be given more hearing time, since listeners know the givers have the group’s interests at heart. The givers have previously demonstrated that they’re putting the group before themselves. As a result, the group is more receptive to odd ideas instead of skeptically dismissing them as ways to merely get ahead.

Giving is contagious. Giving seems to create a safe space in a group, where people are comfortable adopting giving behaviors knowing that takers won’t exploit them. Since most people are matchers, they reciprocate to the network.

- In contrast, a bad taker apple can spoil the batch. Takers can spur zero-sum behaviors that drag the whole group down, and people become wary of sharing ideas out of fear of exploitation.

Why Taking is Bad

Takers are punished societally through spreading of a bad reputation or active punishment (withholding of information, exclusion). Nowadays, the Internet makes taker reputations even harder to reverse.

Takers tend to take credit because they suffer responsibility bias and cannot cross the perspective gap to their teammates. They see only their pain and contributions, and not those of others.

Takers assume that most people are takers and thus place little trust in other people. They’re afraid of being taken advantage of, so they close themselves off to full-hearted collaboration. Furthermore, takers suspect that others would take advantage of them if they had the opportunity, so they justify their own taking behavior.

How can you spot a taker? They might kiss up their superiors but they treat their subordinates poorly in private. They use egotistical speech that places themselves above their organization, using “I” instead of “we.”

Demeanor and agreeableness is not a reliable signal of giving behavior. There are disagreeable givers and agreeable takers.

How to Act as a Giver

“Generous tit for tat” is an effective stance to adopt as a giver. Start out trusting someone and leaning to the generous side. If she responds by taking and competing against you, then switch into a matching relationship. But once in a while, forgive the person and give again, to allow her to redeem herself. This forgiveness avoids a vicious cycle of taking and competition after a single mishap.

Givers practice powerless communication by asking questions, signaling vulnerability, and seeking advice. Powerless communication is effective because people are naturally skeptical of intentions, bristle at being ordered around, and have their own egos to protect. When givers ask questions and indicate vulnerability, they become approachable, show reception to new ideas, and learn new information that helps them persuade. This makes for more effective sales and negotiations.

- In contrast, Takers practice powerful communication to dominate the scenario, which makes them seem more authoritative but closes counterparts off from fear of retribution.
- However, powerful communication works when listeners are dutiful followers (picture Steve Jobs speaking powerfully to Apple fans)

How to Avoid Getting Pushed Over

The biggest risk of being a giver is giving too much of yourself, at your own expense. You give too much of your time and energy and have too little left for yourself; you let others seize opportunities that should be yours.

The mindset to guard against this: self-interest and other-interest do not lie on the same spectrum. You can be motivated by both self-interest and other-interest at the same time, practicing “otherish giving.” This allows givers to avoid being doormats and giving too much of themselves when giving.

Being a giver leads to potential pitfalls, each with individual remedies:

- Givers are prone to burnout if they practice selfless giving. To reduce this, make the impact of the giving clear, and chunk your giving into fewer time slots so you preserve more of your personal time.
- Givers tend not to advocate for themselves for fear of offending the other party. They are more effective when advocating for other people (like family or a cause) since this aligns with their giving standpoint. For instance, in a negotiation about getting a raise, pitch it not as getting what’s fair for you as a person, but rather as helping out your family to move into a more
appropriately sized house.

- When negotiating, givers often feel empathy for the counterparty, which makes them afraid of being too offputting and then dials down their self-interest. To avoid this, take the other...

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Here’s a preview of the rest of Shortform's Give and Take summary:

### Give and Take Summary Chapter 1: Why Givers Succeed

People fall into one of 3 groups for their stance on reciprocity:

- **Takers** like to get more than they give. They feel the world is a zero-sum game, for them to win means others must lose. They self-promote and make sure they get credit. They help others strategically, when the benefits to them outweigh their personal costs.
- **Givers** like to give more than they get. They help others when the benefits to others exceeds their personal costs.
- **Matchers** like to balance and giving exactly, practicing quid pro quo.

Outside the workplace, giving is quite common, especially in marriages and friendships. But in the workplace, people tend to adopt a matcher style.

The roles are fluid. You may act like a taker when negotiating a job offer, a giver when mentoring an intern, and a matcher when sharing information with a colleague.

Interestingly, according to *Give and Take*, both the worst and the best performers in a firm tend to be givers. The givers at the bottom tend to give away too much time to get their work done, or were too nice to customers. But givers also fill out the top ranks.

This tends to be true across industries, from medical school students, to engineering and salespeople.

### The Rewards of Giving More Than You Get

In true zero-sum interactions, giving rarely pays off. But most of life isn't zero-sum. Givers take some time to build goodwill, but eventually their reputations and network build their success in a virtuous cycle way.

**Example:** in the first year of medical school, givers earned lower grades. Here, helping other students meant necessarily that they earned lower on the scoring curve. But in later clinical years, where teamwork is necessary, the givers perform better with their peers and patients.

**Giving is valued.** In the majority of the world's cultures, survey takers rated giving as their most important value, above wealth, power, and pleasure. People prefer service providers (doctors, lawyers, teachers) who are givers to them, who will contribute value without claiming it back.

But givers...
Give and Take Summary Chapter 2: How Givers Build Networks

Networks provide private information, diverse skills, and power. Givers tend to create more helpful networks than matchers or takers.

The core of why giving works works in building networks is that you can't perfectly predict who will be useful to you in the future. Someone you help might unpredictably become your boss or client in the future. If you selectively target only people you believe will help you, you ignore all the unproven people whose connections would have turned out to be helpful. Plus, because most people professionally tend to be matchers, the "lower status" people you help as a giver tend to really appreciate your giving.

In contrast, takers and matchers take advantage of the reciprocity tendency. They offer favors to people whose help they want in the future. But there are two downsides to this approach. First, the recipients often feel like they're being manipulated. This ends up feeling like a transaction more than a meaningful gesture. Second, matchers tend to build smaller networks than givers or takers, because they help only people for whom there is an immediate benefit. Thus, matchers tend to have a smaller network of ties that are made up of quid pro quo relationships.

"The true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good." – Samuel Johnson

Weak Ties and Dormant Ties

Your social networks are composed of strong ties and weak ties. Strong ties are people whom you're very close to, people you might invite over for dinner. Weak ties are acquaintances, people you know on a casual basis.

Surprisingly, people are much more likely to benefit from weak ties than from strong ties (like your close colleagues and best friends). Strong ties tend to be people belonging to the same group whom you interact with consistently, thus limiting access to new ideas. In contrast, weak ties provide access to information and people from different niches, facilitating creation of new leads.

Adam Grant introduces a type of a weak tie – a dormant tie, someone whom you used to see often but have...

Shortform Exercise: What Style Are You?

Reflect on your reciprocity style.

Of the three reciprocity styles (giver, taker, matcher), which do you most strongly identify with? Do you feel you give more than you expect to receive?

What Our Readers Say

This is the best summary of Give and Take I've ever read. I learned all the main points in just 20 minutes. Learn more about our summaries →

Give and Take Summary Chapter 3: Givers Collaborate Better

Americans tend to see independence as strength, and interdependence as weakness. Takers tend to see themselves as superior to others and collaboration as opening vulnerabilities to being overtaken.

In contrast, givers focus on achieving the goals of the group and see collaboration as harnessing the best of multiple people. They take on tasks that are in the best interest of the group and not necessarily of themselves. This isn't necessarily purely
altruistic -- givers understand that the best thing for themselves is for their group to perform as well as possible.

(Shorform note: In venture capitalist's Ben Horowitz's terms, "two percent of zero is zero." If you're a taker and fight for your share but the team fails, you own two percent more of nothing.)

Benefits of Giving in Collaboration

Evidence shows that the more giving group members are, the more successful they tend to be in group performance and individual raises. There are a few reasons for this.

When givers show they care more about the group, they signal that they care less about themselves and intra-competition. In turn, they earn their collaborators' respect and trust, which opens bandwidth of collaboration. Takers no longer feel competitive with a giver, matches feel they owe a giver, and givers identify with a giver.

As described before, giving and taking are both contagious. Because many people are matchers and use tit-for-tat strategies, adding takers to the mix promotes competitive and zero-sum behaviors that can drag the whole group down. People are wary of sharing creative ideas for fear of being exploited -- indeed, taking behavior tends to lower creativity.

But adding givers to the group can push the whole group to focus on the overall goals and increase collaboration. Among a group of predominantly givers, people can feel more comfortable opening up and sharing ideas, building psychological safety. It feels safe to exchange information in an environment where you won't be punished by bad actors.

Idiosyncrasy Credits

Giving also gives you a personal...

Give and Take Summary Chapter 4: Givers Find the Diamond in the Rough

Assessing future potential is difficult. As discussed above, matchers and takers have a disadvantage in creating valuable networks -- they seek out only people who can benefit them today. This ignores undervalued people who blossom into great success, whom givers help without expectation of return. We'll discuss why givers tend to be better judges and developers of talent.

The Pygmalion Effect -- Self-fulfilling Prophecies of Potential

Confounding the potential problem is the Pygmalion effect -- a self-fulfilling prophecy where having higher expectations about a person leads to performance increases in that person.

This effect has been experimented with in a wide range of professional and educational settings. Usually the experiment is conducted by having all students take a faux exam, then randomly assigning a percentage of students into a false "high potential group." Instructors are then told which students were identified as high potential (again, in reality, since they were randomized, the high potential students are no different).

In a variety of environments, the falsely labeled "high potential" or "bloomers" achieve better gains.

- In grade school students, bloomers gained ten IQ points more than their peers over 2 years.
- In the military, high potential trainees do better on expertise tests and weapons evaluations.
- In the workplace, new employees whose managers are told of their high promise receive higher performance ratings.

The Pygmalion effect occurs because the teacher reacts differently to a person based on her expectations. To someone of high promise, a teacher sets higher expectations, communicates more warmly, calls to answer more often, gives more advice and feedback, and attributes failure to the task rather than the person. The student responds to positivity, setting into place a positive feedback loop that leads to a sustained self-fulfilling prophecy.

In contrast, to someone of low promise, a teacher does the inverse: she attributes failure to the person's low promise, gives fewer chances to...
Give and Take Summary Chapter 5: The Benefits of Powerless Communication

There are two modes of communication: powerful communication and powerless communication.

**Powerful communication** tries to establish dominance, and takers are attracted to this style. They speak loudly and forcefully, express certainty, promote accomplishments, and have large body language. Picture a military general issuing orders.

**Powerless communication** tries to build prestige and admiration, and givers are attracted to this style. Powerless communicators speak less aggressively and assertively, express doubt by using disclaimers and hesitations ("um", "sorta," "this may be a bad idea, but"), signal vulnerability, ask questions, and rely on advice. Picture a warm, supportive teacher.

Adam Grant examines how givers and powerless communicators succeed in four areas: presenting, selling, persuading, and negotiating. **In sum, powerless communication is effective because people are naturally skeptical of intentions, bristle at being ordered around, and have their own egos to protect. By asking questions and indicating vulnerability, givers become approachable, show reception to new ideas, and learn new information that helps them persuade.**

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**Presenting Powerlessly**

When giving a presentation, revealing vulnerability and humanity make you approachable and get people to empathize with you. **Givers are interested in helping others, not in establishing dominance, so they’re not afraid to show vulnerability.**

In contrast, takers worry that showing vulnerability will limit their ability to gain dominance. Their powerful communication, however, can clash with other people who want to assert dominance, or when the audience is skeptical of your influence, and the message gets lost.

When presenting to senior military officers, Adam Grant started his presentation with a powerless joke: "I know what you're thinking: what can I possibly learn from a professor who's twelve years old?" This approach lowered the officers' defenses and led to a better reception. Instead, if Grant had tried to present his credentials and puff up his chest, the...

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**Shortform Exercise: Communicate Powerlessly**

Try to communicate powerlessly to get more of what you want.

Think of an upcoming situation where you'll need to impress someone. How are you naturally thinking of making your first impression?

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Give and Take Summary Chapter 6: Avoiding Burnout as a Giver

It's a myth that self-interest and other-interest lie on the same spectrum, and that caring about yourself necessarily means not caring about others.

Instead, **self-interest and other-interest are completely independent motivations** – you can have both be very strong, or both be weak, forming this 2×2 matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Other-Interest</th>
<th>High Other-Interest</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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Givers are universally high in other-interest, by definition. But givers vary in self-interest.

Givers who have low self-interest are **selfless**: they sacrifice their own gain for the benefit of others. This *pathological altruism* decreases their own well-being and risks burnout. Interestingly, selfless givers also tend not to ask for help, as they’re determined to be in the helper role and don’t want to inconvenience others.

Givers who have high self-interest are **otherish**: they’re ambitious and have goals relating to gaining influence and attaining excellence. Otherish givers still give more than they receive, but they are discriminate with their time, choosing how and to whom they give. They want to grow the overall pie and see the world as more than zero-sum...

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2) 1-page summary, to get the main takeaways
3) Full comprehensive summary and analysis, containing every useful point and example

**Give and Take Summary Chapter 7: Don’t Be Treated as a Doormat**

In the workplace, some givers pave the way to early promotion, and others are treated more like doormats, trod upon by co-workers. In a study of consultants, givers had 1-2% lower salary increases, 15% lower rate of being promoted to managerial roles, and took 2 more months on average to get promoted.

How do you avoid this doormat effect? We’ll cover a range of strategies: detect takers; practice generous tit for tat; and advocate for other people instead of yourself.

**Detecting Fakers**

Givers tend to see the best in everyone and operate assuming everyone is trustworthy. Thus givers tend to be twice as susceptible
The key for givers is to distinguish between real givers and fake takers. Fake takers are people who try to appear to be givers, but really behave as takers.

But it's not hard to detect fake takers. Many people confuse agreeableness and giving. Agreeable people come across as warm and cooperative, and we tend to interpret agreeable behavior as a signal of giving tendencies. In contrast, we perceive disagreeable people as tougher, colder, and more skeptical – naturally, these people don't seem to have your best interests in mind.

In reality, giving behavior is based on internal values that can accurately be inferred only from behavior and reputation.

- Takers can be agreeable - they're slick talkers and pound you on your back, when really they intend to manipulate and exploit unwitting people.
- Givers can be disagreeable - they can be unpleasant in demeanor, but ultimately care deeply about people.

Figuring out another person's true behavior is critical to building mutually beneficial relationships. It avoids givers from being exploited by takers.

Givers tend to be more accurate judges of character than matchers and takers, because givers are more attuned to others' behaviors and feelings. By trusting others, givers also tend to lower other people's behavior guards and can observe genuine behavior more often than matchers or takers can.

By detecting fakers, givers can screen people to...

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Give and Take Summary Chapter 8: Social Environments for Giving

The final strategy for givers to avoid being exploited is to actually change other people's behaviors – to create an environment where even takers are motivated to give.

Why Do People Give to Begin With?

There are two schools of thought. C. Daniel Batson argues we give out of pure altruism, not because it makes us feel good but because we care for the other person. In contrast, Robert Cialdini argues there's no such thing as pure altruism – we give because we feel pain, and helping relieves our own pain. In Cialdini's view, giving is actually selfish.

Batson argued that if Cialdini were completely right, then all people would just relieve empathetic pain by leaving the situation. In one experiment where people watched a woman getting shocked, 75% of people left. But a percentage of people stayed and offered to help take the shocks in her place, so some people help for reasons other than solving their own pain.

In return, Cialdini then argued, with experiments, that when we see someone suffering, we essentially become one with the victim – we see ourselves in the victim, and that's why we help. The more we see ourselves in them, the more we help.

In return, Batson argued – this is altruism.

There is no definitive answer given in the book, but just as in otherish giving, the answer need not be purely one or the other. We can give both out of self-interest and out of other-interest.

Common Ground and Identity

Per Cialdini's stance, when you identify more strongly with someone else, you tend to help more. Not only do we see ourselves in them (and thus we're helping ourselves), if you belong to the same group, then helping them helps yourself.

In an interesting study, soccer fans of Manchester United were asked to answer questions about why Manchester was their favorite team. They then walked between buildings, where they saw a person wearing 1 of 3 shirts slip and grab his ankle in pain. Depending on what the person was wearing, the Manchester fan had different propensities to help:

...
Give and Take Summary Chapter 9: Givers, Break Free

People generally believe that gives are the least successful of all 3 types, but Adam Grant argues vehemently that that's not true – recall the examples of VC David Hornik, Adam Rifkin, basketball scout Stu Inman, the optician salesperson, Abraham Lincoln.

Givers get to the top without cutting others down and pride their achievements by how much they help other people. The rise of collaborative knowledge work and the internet enables givers to develop stronger reputations than ever before.

At this point, you might be tempted to become a strategic matcher, finding people and appearing as a giver to achieve all the benefits described in this book. It’s unclear whether we should define reciprocity styles by the actions, the motives,...

Give and Take Summary Shortform Actionables

As a summary, here are actionables arising directly from the book, or inspired by its concepts.

**Mindset**

- Adopt a giving attitude. If this isn't your natural orientation, start with small giving behaviors to people you care about.
- To cross the perspective gap, understand the pain of others in their contributions, rather than centering around your own contributions. This applies to both subordinates, colleagues, and bosses. Avoid the Jonas Salk credit problem.

**Giving Behaviors**

- Ask in every interaction, how can I help you?
- Five minute favor: if you can help someone within 5 minutes, do so. Give honest feedback and make introductions.
- Make your giving reputation known – this will increase reception by people approaching you, no matter which of 3 stances they belong to.
- Don’t buy gifts off registry – you’re projecting your own preferences onto the recipient.
- For your kids, find teachers who are caring and enthusiastic and make learning the subject fun. This will develop an interest and allow kids not to distrust teachers’ motives.
- To avoid burnout from giving, make the impact of people’s work salient – create customer videos, publicize testimonials and results.
- Practice powerless communication. Ask questions, seek advice, admit vulnerability. This should open people up.

**Techniques for Givers to Help Themselves**

- When negotiating for your own self-interest, take the viewpoint of an advocate of people you care about. This will make you fight harder on their behalf.
- Practice perspective taking rather than empathy. Adopt their perspective
- Find other givers by joining a giving community
- Seek help more often. This can kick off a virtuous cycle of giving, where people tend to enjoy helping
- In couples, advocate for your side to find the best joint outcome. Don't let empathy bowl you over

**In Organizations**

- In reviews, ask people first to itemize what they like about a company and what you or the company has done...
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