Givers, Takers, and Matchers

An excerpt of *The Art of Connection: 7 Relationship-Building Skills Every Leader Needs Now* by Michael J. Gelb

In any relationship, at home or at work, the balanced and harmonious exchange of energy is important. Adam Grant, professor of organizational behavior at Wharton Business School, offers an evidence-based, useful way to think about balance in relationships, whether at home or at work. Grant divides people into three categories: Givers, Takers, and Matchers.

**Givers** focus primarily on the needs of others. Givers’ first instinct when they meet someone new is to wonder, “What could I possibly contribute that might benefit this person?” Givers are always ready to help. They share credit freely, look for opportunities to be of service, and do so without an expectation of benefit for themselves beyond the pleasure they get in helping others.

**Takers** focus primarily on their own needs. When meeting someone new, Takers’ first instinct is to assess, “How can this person add value to my life? What can I get from this person?” Takers aim to exploit every interaction for their own profit and seek to claim credit, and turf, for themselves whenever possible.

**Matchers** focus on balancing the fulfillment of their own needs with fulfillment of the needs of others. Matchers calculate the exchange of energy and value in relationships and seek to maintain a dynamic balance.

In his book *Give and Take*, Grant reports on years of research into how these fundamental approaches affect our lives. He concludes:

- **As you might expect, most people are Matchers.**
- **Takers**, about 8 percent of the population, can thrive in the short term, but they ultimately don’t do as well as Matchers, and some Givers.
- **Givers** are overrepresented at the top as well as the bottom of most success metrics. Givers often make the most productive salespeople, “those who put their customers’ interests first,” and they may achieve success in a number of realms. But they can also be easily exploited by Takers, entering into codependent relationships that drain their resources and energy.
- **The most effective and ultimately fulfilling style is to be a Giver with some strategic Matcher competencies.** These “otherish” people focus primarily on benefiting others, “but they also keep their own interests in the rearview mirror…. They will look for ways to help others that are either low cost to themselves or even high benefit to themselves.”

Ironically, although Givers seem altruistic, they often find themselves less able to benefit others consistently because, as Grant explains, “My data, and research by lots of others, show that they’re actually less generous because they run out of energy, they run out of time, and they lose their resources, because they basically don’t take enough care of themselves.”

Being “otherish” is the way to go! Matchers believe in and carefully monitor fairness and equality of energy exchange in relationships. They are offended when they witness Takers taking without giving in return. Matchers do what they can to rein in the exploitation of Takers. As Grant reports, “The data on this suggests that Matchers will often go around trying to punish [Takers], often by gossiping and spreading negative reputational information.” And when Givers are successful despite their lack of boundaries, it’s often due to the support of Matchers who are sensitive to fairness and who will go out of their way to help
Givers get rewarded appropriately.

Cultivating wise, creative “otherishness” is an important element of the art of connection. When my future wife brought up the issue of balanced energy exchange on our very first date, she invoked an awareness that led us both to aspire toward mutual otherishness. We’ve learned that it truly is an art to maintain the balance of energy that allows us to meet each other’s needs in a sustainable and joyful way.

For many Givers, the greatest point of leverage in this art is to develop the courage and skill to say no when appropriate.

**Learn the Power of a Positive No**

*There is no meaningful “yes” unless the individual could also have said “no.”* — Rollo May

Would you like to find a better balance in your relationships, but like many Givers and even some Matchers you have trouble saying no? Or do you say no in a way that exacerbates problems?

William Ury, coauthor of the negotiation classic *Getting to YES*, offers help in his book entitled *The Power of a Positive No*. Ury shows how the ability to say no is essential to managing one’s energy and resources. A positive no is really a yes to a priority. Ury notes that common alternatives to a positive no fall into what he calls accommodation (fear leads you to say yes, but you don’t mean it), attack (anger or resentment drives you to say no in a negative and unskillful manner), or avoidance (the inevitably futile attempt to ignore problems).

There are three steps to a positive no:

1. Say yes to your deeper need. Affirm that need for yourself and express it clearly.
2. Say no to what does not support your need in a respectful manner.
3. Express your intention to seek a positive outcome and offer creative ideas to get to an alternative yes.

The positive no is a critical key to focusing on and realizing your priorities. Entrepreneur and businessman Steve Jobs (1955–2011) stated, “Focusing is about saying ‘no.’” When we say no to something that is not a priority, we liberate attention and energy to say yes to what’s most important. Former British prime minister Tony Blair explains, “The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes. It is very easy to say yes.”

If you have trouble saying no, it’s a good idea to practice, beginning with little things in everyday life; for example, practice saying no to the upsell at the restaurant: “Thanks, but I prefer my burger without the fries.”

You can cultivate the art of the positive no by learning to reframe. For example, let’s say you’re a manager and one of your team members requests funding for executive coaching sessions. If you answer, “No, it’s not in the budget” (We’ve all heard this one!), you risk alienating your team member. Instead, learn to respond with an affirmation and a creative challenge: “I’d like to approve funding for coaching, but we’ve got a limited budget. Let’s explore how we might be able to find the funds.”

Sam Horn, author of *Tongue Fu*, has a black belt in re framing a negative no into a positive one. She invites us to imagine this scene. You’re the boss and an employee asks, “Can I have my paycheck early? I’m going to Las Vegas this weekend.” You answer, “Sorry, you can’t because it hasn’t been approved by
payroll.” That’s the truth; however, the employee may get upset because you’re rejecting the request. The words can’t because are like a verbal door slamming in the employee’s face.

Sam counsels a more positive alternative. You can often approve requests with the words Sure, as soon as or Yes, right after. Reword your reply: “Sure, you can have your paycheck, as soon as it’s approved by payroll. Why don’t we give them a call, explain the circumstances, and see if there’s any way they can speed things up.”

The same strategy works at home. One of Sam’s clients explains how he applied it:

My kids see me as a big meanie, because they’re constantly asking for permission, and I’m always telling them no. Next time they ask if they can go outside and play with their friends, instead of telling them, “No, you can’t, because you haven’t finished your homework,” I’m going to say, “Sure you can, right after you finish your homework.” Instead of seeing me as the one who’s keeping them from what they want, this makes them responsible for getting what they want. It changes the whole dynamic of our relationship.

The other side of this important equation is learning how to find the yes behind others’ no, even if they aren’t skilled at expressing it. If we can free ourselves from the tendency to judge and interpret a no as a rejection, in other words, if we can avoid taking it personally, then we may be able to discover and empathize with the needs behind the other person’s unwillingness to assent. Awareness of those needs opens new possibilities for connection and creativity.

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