
The Art of Taking by Giving

By Alfonso Bucero

Project manager generosity is a scarce commodity. As projects grow harder and meaner, generosity becomes even scarcer. As generosity becomes scarcer, it becomes more valuable. As a project manager needs to influence, it takes a long term perspective: generosity is all about self-interest in the long term. It helps a lot to build willing partners, supporters and allies in your projects.

You, as a project manager, should use influential generosity that I would like to distinguish by four characteristics: *customized, earned, measured and requested*. I believe that these characteristics count because they maximize the chances of the generosity being valued and reciprocated. When we follow the right principles, we can acquire allies and supporters who will help us when we need help.

Let me give you an example that will show how to be generous effectively: When working at a multinational company, as a project manager, a senior manager wanted me to move into his department. I did not know him very well, although he appeared to be supervising and sponsoring some interesting projects. I was managing a critical project in my department and was not very interested in listening to her overtures. The truth was that I had a lack of time to do other tasks. Eventually, he persuaded me to deliver a small presentation to his team on my current project. It was a chance to show off; it was easy to do and I was allowed to pick the time and place for the presentation (easy give). And I was being set up without knowing it.

At my presentation everybody was very kind and flattering. A few days later, a box with a high quality bottle of wine arrived on my desk: the senior manager had done his homework and had even found out which wine brand I liked most. I rarely bought it because it was very expensive. That detail matched on three of the four characteristics of generosity:

1. It was highly **customized** to my interests and needs; it showed that he cared. My existing boss had no clue what I liked or did not like, and did not seem to care.
2. The gift felt like it had been **earned**, and so I valued it. It was not just a gift: it was recognition of work well done, and recognition is always welcome.
3. It was a **measured** gift: he did not shower me with presents. That would have been bribery. I could not get something for nothing: rewards need to be earned.

He then asked me for another favor, helping him in on an existing project. I helped and was given more recognition. He had set up the process of give and take. Incrementally,

I was being committed to him and split from my existing boss. After a couple of months I willingly made the switch.

Give to take is a powerful way of building commitment. Let's see how the four principles of give to take can be applied in practice. In fact I usually apply this approach when managing my project team members and other project stakeholders.

Customised generosity

Generosity is not just about gifts. These things have monetary value, but not necessarily personal value. The most precious resources in an organization tend to be things like **time** and **recognition**. When you give people your time, you are investing your most precious and limited resource in them and people respond to that vote of confidence. When you give them recognition, that is also a vote of confidence in them. Once you have made the investment, you can expect to ask for a return on that investment and most people will give willingly. That way you have set up the process of give to take.

Earned generosity

As a general rule, we value what we earn more than what is free. For example when I worked for Hewlett-Packard in Spain, I found salesmen would compete to win the monthly prize, which would often be pretty much a token, perhaps a nice pen or a dinner out. At the annual kick-off meeting the salesmen would be inundated with free pens and meals and they were worthless. The monthly prize may have modest financial value, but has **huge symbolic value**. It was public recognition for achievement.

If you are going to give for free, give well. If you give and do a shoddy job, people will remember the shoddy job rather than your generosity. You will lose influence rather than gain it.

Measured generosity

Giving your best is true in terms of quality, but not in terms of quantity. *The more you give, the less it will be valued.* If we give and continue to give unconditionally, we can quickly become exploited.

Measured generosity requires **clarity about who to help**, how to help and how much to help. That means learning to say no to requests for help. This can feel awkward but it is far better to say no than commit to doing something and doing it poorly. Poor work destroys your credibility.

There are three principles to saying no gracefully:

1. Be clear about your decision
2. Be clear and honest about why you cannot do it

3. If possible, offer an alternative

Requested help

The only help people value is the help they ask for. If they don't ask, don't give. It can be difficult to resist the temptation, especially if you see a team member struggling or going in the wrong direction. They'll learn more from experience than from some unasked for interference, however well-meaning it is. If they are too shy or too proud to ask for help, an innocent "how's it going?" as you pass their desk should be enough to prompt the request.

Summary

Generosity is the art of taking by giving. It is not the objective to be popular. Leaders do not need to be popular. They need to be trusted and respected. The search for popularity leads to weakness and a cycle of ever growing expectations. Building trust builds commitment and loyalty which are much less fickle than the demands of popularity. Generosity in the project management world is about giving the most scarce resource of all, time. By creating a network of alliances, mutual obligations and debts which can be called in, the project manager invest in the future. Generosity is an habit that can be acquired.

About the Author



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