

# Generosity as a Catalyst for Social Change

*Craig McGarry*



An essay contribution to  
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## Participant Bio



**Craig V. McGarry**

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Craig is a recovering banker that changed career directions after unsuccessfully retiring. Most recently, he served as head of university relations for his undergraduate alma mater. Backsliding a bit, he presently manages a \$100MM trust department for a Native American owned bank and provides full-time consulting services on the trust and investment activities of a Colorado Bank.

An attorney by education, Craig spent most of his career leading turnaround and reinvention efforts for trust and investment groups in the upper Midwest and Rockies.

During his first banking career, he invested most of his community service work in board roles with a focus on children and education. He currently serves on the Board of the Children's Scholarship Fund of Omaha. He has served on the board of directors for both his undergraduate and graduate almae matres. He dreams and schemes of returning to administration and fundraising in academia.

Craig and his wife of 44 years are the parents of six children with 14 grandchildren.



## Generosity as a Catalyst for Social Change

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### **Is generosity grass roots in nature?**

For those that have traveled on some of the “down the country” rural roads of Ireland, there is an imprecise and meandering quality to Ireland’s rural lanes. This exploration of the topic at hand feels like that kind of a journey. Thinking that I knew where I was trying to head, but coming over a rise I discover, to my surprise, a field entrance, a bog that impedes travel or an ancient, abandoned chapel or castle. I head out on rural lane one and end up coming back on lane two.

With a short window within which to explore “Generosity as a catalyst for social change,” I offer my thoughts as a kind of travel journal on this brief journey. My hope is that these ideas send us off down some of the same lanes that I stumbled along. It may even send us down some lanes that I totally missed. In the end, my hope is that the discussion will produce ideas that we can explore and put on like a proverbial old Irish jumper (Irish term for sweater).

Generosity is defined in Merriam-Webster as the quality of being kind, understanding and not selfish. It is generally viewed as a willingness to give money and other valuable things, including time, to others.

Using a chemistry class definition, a catalyst does not enter into a reaction and is not consumed by the reaction. In the chemistry of social interaction, a catalyst is an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action. In the fundraising world, the money given as a manifestation of generosity might well be consumed in the reaction or activity. Strictly speaking though, generosity itself is not consumed. The spirit that motivated the gift or donation is very much still there, and hopefully, willing and able to motivate another gift.

Generosity is the very special human quality that produces part of the necessary fuel that supports a significant portion of the work that most of us devote our energies to. How do we identify it, nurture it and grow it to support our present and our future endeavors.

Is generosity a grass roots phenomena? It would be fair to say that by any measure, Americans are generous. The vast majority of charitable donations come from average citizens of moderate income. Somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of all U.S. households donate to charity every year. To put it in perspective, that level of giving is about seven times as much as is typical of continental Europeans on a per capita basis. This level of

participation in giving helps explain that, of the more than \$300 billion given to charity every year, only 15 percent comes from foundation grants and just 6 percent comes from corporations.(D) The balance comes from individuals.

Overall, the data would suggest that the most generous (measured as a percentage of their income) Americans are those who are living in areas that are more rural, conservative, religious and moderate in income.(D) Religious practice is the characteristic most consistently associated with generous giving. For those that never attend religious services, less than half give any money at all to secular causes. For those that attend services regularly, more than two-thirds give to secular charities.(D)

Hidden within the averages are a couple of interesting nuggets. Some of those at the very top and the very bottom of the income continuum give a relatively higher percentage of their income. This is especially evident among those who are older and closer to the end of their lives. This may, in part, explain the higher-giving skew among some low-income donors. A slice of that group may be retired givers who have modest, annual incomes, but possess wealth that allows them to be more generous donors.(D) At the top end of the income spectrum, there is a very small portion of the wealthy population that drives up the average giving percentage. While more than 97 percent of the wealthy population make gifts, many of those donations are modest as a percentage of income. (Data derived from the bi-annual report of Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University)

The data clearly leads to the conclusion that generosity is very much “grass roots” in nature, yet I find it nearly impossible to conclude that the mere existence of generosity, even if in unanticipated quantity, proves that generosity is the catalyst or driver of social change.

If it is not generosity, what is the driver of social change? What significance does the answer have for us?

Even with an apparent vast supply of generosity, social change must be sparked and driven. While the world does not stay attached to a particular way of being (Wheatley), I believe that people do. Change must be driven, and it is driven by leaders. Most people naturally resist change. That is neither bad nor surprising. We like stability and predictability.

We all likely believe that wise action in community demands that, more than just being impacted by events, we must demonstrate our leadership and make our communities better. Most people in our sector understand that success is increasingly dependent on how well we interact with others. Wise action is more than just implementing a new procedure, developing a better brochure or making more calls. If wise action is to be useful and

successful, that success must be a function of our interaction with others. We can and should improve our networking, our collaboration with others, our assessments of peers and donors and our influencing skills. Each of these skills must be polished and honed. Even more importantly, I suspect that we all believe that the most important variable that needs to be polished and honed is ourselves. This issue or assumption is another way of phrasing the first question on our topic list. In pursuit of wise action in community, what behaviors must we as leaders adopt, model or inspire to create something meaningful and lasting for all people?

I once had a mentor tell me that being the same or doing the same is never better. The same might be just as good, or almost as good, but never better. As we work to get better in our leadership role, we can contemplate doing things differently, but it is only through a change in ourselves that we can truly create lasting change in our organizations.

Personal work on this topic, apart from this essay, led me to a book and series of studies by Adam Grant.

Two years ago, Adam Grant, the youngest-tenured and highest-rated professor at Wharton, published *Give and Take*. As one of the most prolific academics in the study of organizational psychology, some would say that he is obsessed with helping, or “giving” to use his terminology. There is seldom a case where someone asks him for help that he does not oblige. For him, helping others is not an obstacle to productivity but rather it is the motivator that drives him to increased productivity and creativity.(B)

While researchers have for years focused on the individual drivers of success: passion, hard work, talent and luck, Grant takes a very different tack. He believes that in the work environment, people fit into one of three social styles of interaction. People operate as either takers, matchers, or givers. While takers strive to get as much value as possible from others, and matchers aim to trade evenly, givers are the rare breed of people who contribute value to others without expecting anything in return. Of the three social styles that are commonly used in the workplace, givers disproportionately dominate the highest and the lowest levels of the ranks of success. It seems to me that our sector is predominately populated by individuals that use this social style as their preferred methodology. The book makes it clear that just using this style does not guarantee success. In fact, if we use these skills merely to be successful we will not be successful.(A)

Grant’s book incorporates stories of people who see helping, even extreme helping, as a way to feel good about themselves and their work. It is this feeling good about yourself and your work that makes people enjoy their work and therefore makes them more efficient and effective at it. There are some rather convincing studies that demonstrate that the traditional motivators, those that appeal to self-interest, like financial incentives, interesting

work or career advancement are far less effective. Grant argues that a focus on the contribution of our work to other people's lives has the potential to make us more productive than thinking about helping ourselves. One interesting example of his early work revolves around an effort to improve the results in a university call center. In this case, success was dramatically enhanced by helping the students appreciate the degree to which their efforts helped others, rather than any assortment of incentives, prizes and games. The study was repeated a number of times. Over and over, it demonstrated that valuing the significance of your contribution to another individual makes you more effective.

Rather than describing the latest management fad, the work is a description of real people and real studies. It gives solid examples of work and people demonstrating a way of thinking and acting that is quite similar in practice to our ambition of wise action in community.

The most important finding is that our success depends significantly on how we approach our interactions with other people. (A) I don't expect that concept to be a surprise to any of us. If a taker wins, there is a sense of jealousy and resentment. People want to bring them down a notch. If a matcher wins, everyone is satisfied that they got what they bargained for. When givers win, everyone wins. It spreads the appreciation of the win and everyone basks in it. (A) People like to be part of a group that wins. In our current society, which is becoming increasingly dependent on team and collaborative results, givers have a huge potential advantage.

I recommend Grant's book as a tool that can help us hone and polish a style that is likely already our preferred option. It is a way to make an investment in one's self that has the potential to make us vastly more successful. Most of us already believe and understand that success will come from our giving of ourselves in the workplace. The continued use of this preferred style has the potential to make us satisfied, motivated, efficient and effective beyond our imagination. With this as our preferred style, it seems to me that we have an obligation to use it in the most effective manner we can, learning to enhance it, and also learning to avoid its biggest pitfalls.

And now I offer a concluding thought on whether we might be the catalyst for social change: we are not the catalyst. We must enter into the reaction. We will be consumed by the reaction. But by definition, a catalyst is not changed. To the extent that we are the drivers of social change, we will be forever changed.

## Sources-

- A. Grant Ph.D., Adam M. *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. Viking Press. April 9, 2013
- B. Dominus, Susan. "Is Giving the Secret to Getting Ahead?" *Wall Street Journal*. March 27, 2013
- C. "The Next Generation of American Giving, The Charitable Habits of Generations X, Y, Baby Boomers and Matures," Blackbaud Inc., 2014
- D. "2012 Annual Giving Summary." *Philanthropy Magazine*. Summer 2013

**Note**—I have not listed specific pages because of variation between Kindle, online, audio and hard copy versions. I would be pleased to provide more specific reference to anyone who desires them.

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