



# Fitting In and Standing Out: Shifting Mindsets from Taking to Giving | Adam Grant

# At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a renegade entrepreneur named Jimmy decided to take on the Goliath of an industry.

Goliath was launched in 1768, and boasted annual revenue of \$650 million, selling over 85,000 products created by four thousand staff members and contractors to more than a hundred thousand loyal customers every year. Goliath's product was highly technical, composed of 40 million tiny units assembled by true experts in their craft.

Jimmy hired one employee, but he didn't have the funds to pay or train a team of experts, so he decided to recruit a group of amateurs and convince them to volunteer their time. In the first month, the volunteers created just 17 products, two for every 10,000 products that Goliath made. After six months, the team was up to 2,400, approaching 3% of Goliath's production. By nine months, the team was attracting 50 new volunteers a month. Within a year, there were 350 volunteers on board, and they had reached 15,000 products: 17% of Goliath's production.

Within five years, Jimmy had achieved the impossible: more than 700,000 products, eight times Goliath's output, available in over a hundred countries.

Industry insiders were stunned, but they were confident that Jimmy's productivity was coming at the expense of quality. Amateur volunteers simply couldn't outpace paid experts without making scores of mistakes along the way, and Jimmy's products must be flawed. A group of independent scientists enlisted 42 experts to intensively evaluate the quality of Goliath's products and Jimmy's. The scientists disguised the source of each product so that the experts were blind to information about who built it. The experts found an average of 2.92 errors per product for Goliath, and sure enough, Jimmy's product was worse. But it wasn't nearly as bad as expected: 3.86 errors per product. In other independent studies, the findings held up: Jimmy's products were almost as good. Jimmy was closing in on Goliath.

After eight years, Goliath's president said that Jimmy's product quality was "very uneven," with "plenty of cracks." But in a desperate attempt to compete, Goliath made a dramatic shift in its business model, copying Jimmy's strategy of engaging volunteers, not only paid experts. It was too little, too late. Within a decade, Jimmy had 25 million products and many millions of users, and Goliath was down to less than \$30 million in revenue.

Jimmy Wales is the founder of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia. His products are encyclopedia articles, and the tiny units are words. Goliath is Encyclopedia Britannica. Today, Wikipedia is one of the ten most popular websites in the world, viewed by half a billion people every month in nearly 300 languages.

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Wikipedia rose on the shoulders of people who volunteered to share their knowledge and fix mistakes made by their peers. In organizations, a wealth of evidence shows that one of the most important drivers of effectiveness is the willingness to share knowledge, step up for unpopular tasks, and help colleagues solve problems. In an analysis of more than 3,600 business units, researcher Nathan Podsakoff and his colleagues found that the more frequently employees volunteered to support each other's efforts, the greater the productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction those units achieved—and the lower their costs and turnover rates. As Daniel Pink writes in *Drive*, the success of Wikipedia highlights the extraordinary accomplishments that

are possible when a “ragtag band of volunteers” coordinate their individual actions toward a common goal.

For the past decade, I’ve been studying what motivates people to organize, join, and contribute to such productive ragtag bands. Many leaders and managers assume that volunteering is reserved for a rare breed of unusually generous people. Yet research by psychologists Marcia Finkelstein and Louis Penner shows otherwise: although highly generous people do more volunteering and helping than their more selfish peers, most of the people who volunteer and help in one organization aren’t unusually generous in other roles and organizations. Something happens that leads ordinary people to decide that they care about helping this organization and these colleagues.

This is what happened at Wikipedia: when researcher Oded Nov surveyed Wikipedia contributors about what motivated them, their primary reason for writing and editing wasn’t that they felt it was important to help others. Instead, they got involved because they thought it was fun and they believed information should be free.

Once people join a group, what drives them to contribute? In my new book, *Give and Take*, I argue that one of the keys is a shift in people’s mindsets from taking to giving. When people think like takers, they focus on getting as much as possible from others. When they operate

like givers, on the other hand, their overarching emphasis is on contributing their knowledge and skills to benefit others.

A major force behind Wikipedia's effectiveness was encouraging a wide range of people to think like givers rather than takers, freely volunteering their time and knowledge to write and correct article entries. And this mindset shift, it turns out, is a function of identification with a group.

In one study, researchers Joachim Shroer and Guido Hertel examined what predicted the engagement of Wikipedia contributors, tracking the amount of time that people spent improving the site and the number of articles in which they were involved. The strongest predictor of engagement was enjoyment, but next in line was identification—people gave more to Wikipedia when they saw themselves as Wikipedians.

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Identification is a powerful driver of contributions. People act like givers rather than takers when they've internalized a group as part of their self-concepts or identities. To catalyze this shift in mindsets, we need to understand what causes people to identify with a group.

A fascinating insight comes from research by the psychologist Marilynn Brewer, who observes that when we interact with other people, we face a tension between two competing motivations: fitting in and standing out. On the one hand, we want to belong—to experience similarity with others. On the other hand, we want to feel unique—to differentiate ourselves from others.

To fulfill these two motivations simultaneously, we search for a sense of optimal distinctiveness, or the feeling of being the same and different at the same time. Brewer finds that the most direct path to optimal distinctiveness is to affiliate with a unique group. Membership in a distinctive group fosters a sense of connection and community, and the fact that the group has an uncommon identity confers a sense of individuality and separation. When people fit in with a group that stands out, they are often driven to give tirelessly to the group, which allows them to express their distinctive identities while validating their membership in the group.

Wikipedia was a distinctive group: contributors shared a superordinate goal of making knowledge universally accessible by creating the world's first free, collaboratively edited online encyclopedia. But to encourage maximum levels of giving, Wikipedia had to combat social loafing. In a classic

experiment, the psychologists Bibb Latané, Kipling Williams, and Stephen Harkins asked people to clap and shout as loud as they could. They varied the presence of others, so participants had the chance to make noise alone, in pairs, and in groups of four and six.

The larger the group, the louder the noise—but the less each member contributed. Pairs reached 71% of their individual capabilities, groups of four performed at 51% capacity, and groups of six were at only 40% of capacity. The psychologists concluded that “many hands make light the work,” and went on to test a series of remedies for social loafing. One of the most robust antidotes was making individual contributions identifiable: people give far more to a group when they feel that their personal outputs will be visible to others.

In Wikipedia, a straightforward solution would be for contributors to sign their names on entries. However, individual authorship went against the grain of Wikipedia’s ideology, which emphasizes that the collective product is owned by the community, not individual contributors. This meant that Wikipedia needed alternative ways to enable potential contributors to stand out. Three mechanisms that emerged were unique roles, recognition for givers, and distinctive expertise. On the role front, along with writing and editing entries, volunteers could play unique roles in managing content and communication as administrators and arbitrators or mediators. Evidence shows that unique roles allow people to feel that their help is not easily replaceable or substitutable, encouraging them to give more. For example, in a study at a hospital, David Hofmann,



Zhike Lei, and I found that when particular nurses had the opportunity to step up in a unique preceptor role on a unit, they provided more help to their colleagues.

In terms of recognition, Wikipedians built a page that ranks contributors according to the numbers of edits made, began designating particular entries as “featured articles” that allow contributors to see when their work is judged as high-quality by the community, and began placing “barnstars” as tokens of appreciation on the pages of contributors who added significant value to the content or the community. Experiments led by behavioral economist Dan Ariely show that merely making people’s contributions visible in these ways can be sufficient to motivate them to volunteer more time and invest more effort in contributing.

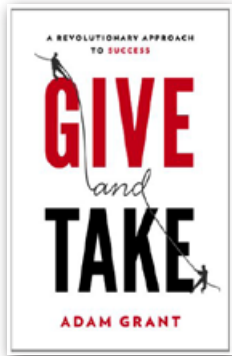
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Unique expertise was perhaps the most central way that Wikipedia volunteers could stand out. They had access to all of the entries that had been written, which enabled them to quickly spot the largest gaps between current entries and their distinctive knowledge. Indeed, a research team led by Susan Bryant found that many people started contributing to Wikipedia after they spotted an error or omission that they could address. When looking up people, places, events,

or hobbies that they knew well, people couldn't help but fix mistakes and fill in incomplete information. Outside Wikipedia, many people have a hard time recognizing when their knowledge is distinct from what others bring to the table, and emphasizing the uniqueness of their contributions can be enough to motivate them to give. In an experiment led by researcher Kimberly Ling, people were invited to contribute to a movie discussion website. Participants who were merely informed that very few people had seen the movies they rated ended up contributing 74% more knowledge than those who did not receive this information. To foster giver mindsets, we need to create distinctive roles along with distinctive groups. When people recognize the potential to make unique contributions as part of a unique community, they become motivated to volunteer their time and share their expertise.

When Jimmy Wales launched his “benevolent effort to share information,” there was no shortage of skeptics doubting whether volunteers could generate sufficient quantity while meeting quality standards. But, if we assume that people aren't capable of shifting into giver mindsets, we run the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, failing to design the conditions that allow those mindsets to catch on and spread. **If we recognize the potential for people to think and act like givers, we can sometimes bring down Goliath with a single, well-tossed idea.**📌

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Adam Grant is the youngest tenured professor and highest-rated teacher at Wharton. He has been named one of the world's 40 best business professors under 40 and one of *Businessweek's* favorite professors, and he is a leading expert on success, work motivation, and helping and giving behaviors. Previously, he was a record-setting advertising director at Let's Go Publications, an All-American springboard diver, and a professional magician. He was recently profiled in the *New York Times Magazine* cover story: "[Is giving the secret to getting ahead?](#)"

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