

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - WAYNE BAKER (Katie Elliott & Dr Wayne Baker)

Dr Wayne Baker is a professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business and the author of new book, *All you have to do is ask*. In the words of his colleague Adam Grant: "Wayne is one of the world's foremost experts on building and strengthening connections and his advice will put you in a better position to achieve your goals and build stronger relationships along the way."

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Dr. Wayne Baker - thank you for joining me this afternoon.

Well, thank you Katie. I'm glad to be here.

I've just been reading your latest book, which is called *All you have to do is ask*. I've been really enjoying it and it's been making me think a lot, not just about why it is that I like to give, but also why it is that I personally find it so difficult to ask for help. And I wondered if you could tell us how you became involved in exploring the nature of giving and asking.

Well, the situation you just described is very, very common. Most people find themselves in the situation of being what we call the 'overly generous giver'. That's someone who freely, generously helps other people, but they don't ask for what they need. And what that means is they're not as successful as they could be. They don't get the inflow of information, ideas, referrals, connections, opportunities, advice, you know, all this stuff that you need to be successful to perform well, to reduce your stress and so on. So it's a very common thing to do - and that's what really motivated me to write the book. Because about 20 years ago, Cheryl Baker and I created an activity called the Reciprocity Ring. And this is a group level activity in which people are required to ask for something they need and you spend most of your time helping other people fulfil their requests. And way back then I thought that getting people to give to help, to be generous, I thought that would be the real problem. It rarely, rarely was the problem. The real problem was getting people to ask for what they need. It's funny, I used to start the introduction with the importance of being generous but it switched over time and I talked about the importance of being generous and asking for what you need. You know, because if everyone wants to give, no one's willing to ask - nothing happens. In fact, in the workplace we find that people are generally willing to help. But because most people don't ask, no help is given, you know? And most people don't like to get help they have not asked for - unsolicited help. But unless you do ask,

unless people are telepathic and they can read your mind, there's no way they can help you.

Why is it that we find it so difficult to ask? What is it that gets in the way?

Yeah, it's a very interesting thing. So I've looked at it two ways, through my research and then through the experience of working with thousands of people over the last several years, many years actually. And what I found, there's a couple of things really do get in the way. One is that people fear that they'll seem to be incompetent or weak or ignorant or not able to do their jobs. Well, what's really interesting is that we need to update that belief based on new research. There was a research team from Harvard and Wharton that studied this and they found as long as you make a thoughtful, intelligent request, people think you are more competent, not less. So that's a common barrier and that's where the research helps us to update our beliefs. Another very common barrier is that people think that no one is willing or able to help. And there was a study done where the participants had to go up to a stranger and ask to borrow their cell phone. And all they could say was, "Can I use your cell phone to make a call?" And they couldn't tell a story or explain or plead or beg. And a number of participants quit the study when they learned what they had to do because the mere thought of approaching a stranger and then asking for a cell phone was more than they could take. But those who did do this experiment, they asked them to fill out a little survey ahead of time saying, well how many people do you think you're going to have to ask before you get a phone? People estimated, you know, a pretty high figure, 5 - 10 people they would have to ask. And what they found is that you got a cell phone the first time you asked and if not, then probably the second time. So that's another place where we need to update our beliefs. People are willing to help if you ask.

It's funny isn't it? Because I think very often if we are asked to do something, it's quite a nice feeling isn't it, to feel that you have something that you can contribute, to feel that somebody values you enough to ask you for something?

That's right. If you ask someone for help, for advice, whatever it might be, what you're conveying to that person is that you have confidence in them, you see them as the expert in something and also displays what we call an affiliative motive. You're basically saying you want to have more of a connection with that person and for all those reasons, people are quite willing to help when they are asked.

So how can we practise getting better at creating environments in which it's easy for us to ask and it's easy for us to give?

Well, I found that one of the barriers is people are not always sure what to ask for. There's been many, many times where I've run one of the activities in the book, where somebody has taken me aside and said, "You know, I've always wanted to

be in a situation where I could ask for anything and there was a group of generous, well connected, helpful people, but I can't think of a thing." So the first thing is to figure out what is it that you really need. So I have some methods in the book for doing that, but they start with this idea that you need to figure out what's the goal, what's the destination, what are you trying to do? Once you figure that out then you can say, okay, well then what kind of resource do I need to fulfill that goal, or at least move in the direction of fulfilling that goal? And then to formulate that request using what we call SMART criteria. And I'll come back to that in a moment. And then going out and asking a person. And oftentimes that means asking outside your comfort zone. So the SMART request, I mean that in a different way from what it's usually used for. So it's Specific. You want to ask for something very specific that's important. A specific request triggers people's memories of what they know and who they know - those are the two ways they can help. The M is for Meaningful. Now M usually means Measurable and that's important, but Meaningful - I need to explain the why of the request, that really motivates people to respond. The A is for Action-oriented. You're not asking for the goal, you're asking for something to help you reach the goal. So you ask for something to be done. The R's to make sure that it's Real or Realistic and that can be a stretch, and I'd never advise people to hold back because you don't want to prejudge the capabilities of a group, but you know it has to be realistic in the sense that if you say I want to colonise Mars tomorrow, it's probably not going to happen. And then the T is for Time-bound. What's the deadline? So if you use those five SMART criteria, you're more likely to get a positive response. And what's very interesting is that you don't have to believe the activity is going to work for it to work. You just have to do it. And that's a very important thing that I've learned and I've now I've collected, you know, probably 30 different tools and activities that I discussed in the book and that are all based in on this same idea that you'd want to change behaviour first to change what people think and believe. So that's true for an individual, it's true for a team, it's true for an entire organisation. So I say, you know, just try these things, commit to trying it for a month and see what happens. And most of the time what happens is that people change their beliefs and say, wow, I really do see the power of figuring out what I need and asking for it.

So sometimes people need to see the possibility before they can start to believe it?

Exactly. I think that's really true. You know, because we've really been taught to try to go it alone, you know, to be the rugged individualist. Or to put your head down and just really working hard - that's going to be the path to success. But just like the 'overly generous giver' is kind of a trap because you're not getting the inflow of resources that you need, what we call the 'individualist' or the 'lone wolf', that's another kind of trap because you're not helping anyone and they're not helping you. The best place to be is what we called the 'giver-requester'. That's someone who freely and generously helps other people and asks for what they

need when they need it - they actually do both. They participate in the full experience of asking for what they need and giving help to other people.

So if somebody wanted to create an environment which was a bit like a Reciprocity Ring - I mean, what does that look like in practice? How can you create something like that for yourself?

Well, a good place to start is to take the assessment that I offer in the book and I developed that assessment with my PhD student, Hilary Hendricks. It's quick, but it's very, very revealing of where people are and the kind of style or type that they are. Are they the 'overly generous giver' or are they the 'selfish taker' or are they a 'giver-requester' and so on? Oh, by the way, that assessment is available free on our website for the book and if you take the assessment through the website, you also get comparisons to a baseline population that we have of other working adults. And what I bet is that you'll find like most people, you're a generous giver but you don't ask very much. So that helps to motivate people and then we can go through that experience of saying, okay, well what am I trying to do? What am I trying to achieve? What are my goals? What do I need? Now in a group setting there are a variety of ways - some are formal, some are very informal. I can describe one that I think is really effective. It's called The Standup and essentially it works this way - the team or the group gets up, they stand in a circle and they take turns and they go right around and each person is required to say three things: here's what I worked on yesterday, here's what I'm working on today and here's the help I need. And help is given later on after the standup is concluded. And I've seen it with a group of 50 or 60 it takes maybe 30 minutes to do the whole thing, so it can be very quick. And one of the reasons this works is that it normalises asking. In fact, you're letting the group down if you don't answer that third question, what help do you need? And some groups do it on a daily basis - so every morning at 10:00am, for example - others do it on a weekly basis. But it starts that routine for a group, to make asking for and giving help normal and expected behaviour.

Mm. So one could be doing that in any kind of work setting, I guess, and perhaps in community organisations too, you could do an equivalent activity?

Absolutely. I've done it in schools, we've done it with executives in major corporations and associations, in a community group. You know, all these methods really are universal. They seem to apply everywhere. In fact, the Reciprocity Ring, for example, has been done in 20 different countries, 12 different languages, all different cultures. People have often said, okay, it will never work in - and they named some country. And I said, well, it has worked there. It does work there. You know? And I think, I think the reason is that it really taps into a basic human principle, which is this idea of connecting, of giving, asking and receiving.

And I'm just thinking if there are people who perhaps aren't working or who feel a little bit isolated but would like to be creating more opportunities to receive help, but also to offer to other people - how could people be connecting in that way if they're not part of a bigger organisation?

Well it's a really good question - and I think that's where technology helps. So there's all kinds of social media tools or platforms that are out there. And a lot of these implicitly are communities in which people give and get help from one another. So I would encourage people to find a group of people like you, where you have a common interest, a hobby, work occupation, whatever it might be, and offer help to people. You know, when people talk about what they need or make a request, respond to that. In fact, that's one reason why we created Givitas. Givitas is the online or digital version of the Reciprocity Ring. So you could do it on a much, much larger scale - the groups can be much, much bigger - and you don't have to be in the same place at the same time. In fact, we have a number of Givitas groups that people can join. So if they went to the website for Givitas, which is giveandtakeinc.com, you could find a group to join there.

I have to enthuse about the experience of taking part in a Reciprocity Ring there because, to be quite honest, if it weren't for that, this podcast wouldn't be happening.

I know it's a perfect example, you know, that you were involved in Givitas and it was very useful for you and then a connection was made and one thing led to another - and here we are today.

I have to say that I would not have asked for help had there not been a specific instruction to do so, because naturally that would have gone against the grain for me. And when I did ask for help, I was a little bit worried about drawing attention to myself, I suppose on a platform full of people I didn't know. I felt quite nervous about doing it. And it was the most extraordinary experience because the response I got was massive and I didn't think that anybody would be very interested in what I was doing because I had no, no credibility whatsoever. And so many people reached out and offered help. And so many of those people have now either been on the podcast or become good friends of mine. It's been the most incredibly rewarding experience.

Well Katie I'm so glad to hear that because that's what we wanted to achieve. And the experience you just described is very common. You know, people are reluctant to ask, particularly the first time. In fact, I've had some groups where people will just kind of hold back and they kind of lurk and they see what's happening and they don't want to make a request yet. I call it the empty restaurant problem. Have you ever walked down the street and you're looking for a place to have dinner and you walk by a restaurant and you look in and there is no one in there. You're

probably going to keep walking and find some other place. You want to see some people in there first before you go in. I don't know if you're like that. I'm like that, many people are, you know. But that's a very common thing and so I congratulate you on taking that risk, that step of asking for what you need. And the experience you had is common - that when you do ask, the help is overwhelming. We have some groups that we've done the Reciprocity Ring with or Givitas with, where near miracles have been achieved because people were willing to ask for what they really needed and people stepped up and were really generous helping them.

It's a life-enhancing experience, I have to say, and amazing actually how much potential there is available at any time. I think that's what is so easy to overlook when you get a group of people together. Within those people there will be so many interests and gifts and talents and abilities and and a willingness to share those things and contribute. It's so easy to underestimate the power contained within a group of people.

Absolutely. I always say never underestimate or prejudge the capabilities of a group. You know, when you think about it, everyone knows lots of things. They have lots of experiences, accomplishments, achievements over time. They know lots of things, but they also know lots of people - and those are the two ways that a group can help, is that the resource or the answer is right there in a group - someone has it and they could share it. If not, everyone's got great networks that extend out into the world and they can tap their network and make a connection or a referral. You know, I would say if you can't help, think of somebody in your network who might be able to help and make a connection.

Mmm. So come up with a SMART request. Find other people that you can ask, whether that's on social media or within your workplace or your community group, wherever that might be.

That's right. And there's a couple of additional methods I could describe. One is to use what I call the two-step method. So could be that you don't know who to ask, but you know someone who might know someone to ask. That's the two-step method. So that's another way. Another is to think about what we call your 'dormant ties'. Now a 'dormant tie' is a connection or relationship you had in the past, but you know, you've kind of gone separate ways. So it could be an old college roommate, someone who knew in high school, could be a coach, it could be somebody you worked with, you know, 10 years ago. Our network includes a lot of those dormant ties or connections. So the research shows that those dormant ties are extremely valuable. And the reason is that because your lives have gone in different directions, that they know different things and their networks are different from yours. Now there's interesting research done on this. It says that people are often reluctant to ask their dormant ties, but when they do, they discover that people are delighted to be reconnected. And not only that, because

they know different things and their networks are different, they can be really, really helpful. So that's another way - you've got to think outside your inner circle of friends and acquaintances to think about, okay, let's use that two step method. Who do I know that might know the person I need to connect with? How about my network from long ago - people I used to know? And that's why things like LinkedIn are really valuable because you can always find someone on LinkedIn it seems.

Yes. Wonderful. So loads of practical things that we can be trying out. In addition, do you have a *Little Challenge* for us that people could try at home?

I do have a *Little Challenge*. So I have three methods in the book for figuring out what to ask for. One is called The Quick Start Method and it's just like the name implies, it's quick to do. And so I will read two sentences from The Quick Start Method and invite listeners to think about how they would fill in the blanks. So these are sentences that you need to complete. The first one is: "I am currently working on..... and I could use help to do..... " And then the next one would be: "One of the biggest challenges in my life is to..... and I need advice on....." So if you complete those two sentences, what you're currently working on and what help you could use, the other is what's the biggest challenge in your life and the kind of advice that you need - that really starts you down the road of figuring out what to ask for, why you want to ask for it. Use the SMART criteria and then those various methods for figuring out who to ask.

Well, just listening to you say those sentences, I can kind of feel the power in them. It's funny, isn't it? Because we don't get specific about things. It can be so easy to think, "I've got all these things that I'm working on, all these things I'm trying to do and it's really difficult". But until you actually ask yourself those kinds of questions, you don't unlock the possibility of making it easier.

Yeah. Usually we're just racing ahead, forging ahead, trying to get stuff done. And what this does is that it compels you to take a moment to sit down, answer these questions, complete these sentences, and it opens your eyes to the kinds of things that you really do need to ask for. And that will be really beneficial. And we found that when people do that, when they do ask for what they need, they're more productive, they're more satisfied with their work, they're happier, and they have less stress as well.

Amazing. Amazing. And the kind of connections that come from that, I can vouch from my personal experience, are really precious. So Wayne, thank you so much for explaining that. The new book is fantastic - and can you tell us a little bit more about where people can find that book and find out more about what you're doing?

Well, thank you Katie. I really have enjoyed our conversation. So the book is called, *All you have to do is ask*, and that is the website for the book as well. So

allyouhavetodoisask.com and there you could find information about the book, you could take the free assessment, we have this free downloadable infographic that we just completed, and I invite people to download it and to freely share it. So there's a lot of material right there for people to use.

Perfect. Thank you so much.

Well, thank you Katie. I really appreciate the opportunity to connect with you and I'm delighted that Givitas was a part of it.

So am I. So am I. Thank you.