

By Invitation

What it means to give

The act of genuine giving is a perfectly rational one and benefits the giver in ways that are often not obvious at first sight



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For The Straits Times

Earlier last week, I delivered the keynote address at a forum titled Giving Matters, organised by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre.

The cross-sector event brought together more than 300 individuals from government, corporates, social enterprises and non-profit organisations to share their experiences and ideas about giving, which includes volunteering and donating.

After my speech, some participants shared with me why and how they give as well as their personal experiences in interacting with givers and recipients. Many had mixed feelings and unresolved questions. Is giving rational or emotional? Should we remind people to count their blessings to encourage them to give? How do we motivate volunteers?

I hope this essay on the psychology of giving will help shed light on the issues raised. As we reflect on what giving means to us personally, the hope is that we are inspired to do more and encourage others as well.

GENUINE GIVING AND RATIONALITY

We sometimes hear people say they want to volunteer or donate but do not have enough time or money. Yet, across different socio-economic backgrounds, there are people who give a lot of their time, effort or money, and they do so quietly without any tangible rewards or recognition. Clearly, humans are not purely economic beings who spend their lives calculating gains and losses to arrive at decisions.

If you believe humans are homo economicus, then you will find this even more puzzling – studies show that we feel good when we give, and better when we give away something precious to us than something we have plenty of or do not need. Behavioural sciences tell us that this is not irrational, the motivation and decision to give genuinely reflect a core aspect of human rationality.

We are rational when we do things that we believe will help us progress

from the status quo to reach our goal. That goal, however, need not be about material possessions or power or fame. When our goals are about lived experiences involving personal meaning, purpose and passion, our behaviours directed towards our goals are sustained, sustainable and satisfying.

Since genuine giving is unconditional, would it not result in a loss situation and so produce negative emotions for the giver?

On the contrary, studies consistently show that genuine acts of giving are associated with better physical, mental, emotional and social well-being. The benefits to well-being are long term. There is positive impact on health and lifespan, even after taking into account other factors known to lower risk of mortality such as genetics, physiology, exercise, diet and wealth.

These results are not affected by demographics, such as sex, age, race and nationality, or background like education, income, occupation and retirement status.

Givers themselves also attribute their better well-being to their acts of giving. What this means is the giver's experiences and causal beliefs create a self-reinforcing process that sustains their giving behaviours. In short, genuine giving is rational and it involves positive emotions. There is no contradiction. Not only that, rationality and emotions also complement each other to motivate people to continue giving.

THE 4GS OF GIVING

We see both rationality and emotions at work in our own

experiences of giving in Singapore. These can be looked at via what I call the 4Gs of giving – goodness, generosity, governance and gratitude.

Goodness

In parenting, and also education in schools, we try to inculcate the value of giving as a good thing in itself. Not just volunteering and donating but also the simple idea of giving or sharing with others what we have without expecting to receive something in return.

Generosity

Generous giving impresses because it goes beyond what is predicted or expected. It receives much publicity when the absolute amount given is large. Million-dollar donations or hundreds of volunteer hours by an individual are praiseworthy and newsworthy. But generous giving is most inspiring when the amount is large relative to what the giver had. It is breathtaking to see someone, especially a low-income individual, donating a substantial proportion of his money.

Another inspirational situation is when the giver chooses to be anonymous – the act is clearly about benefiting the recipient, not the donor through praise or public recognition.

Governance

We are more likely to give if we know what happens to what we give, and the way it is used fits well with why we give. So for giving to be sustainable, good governance in the charity and volunteer sectors is critical. Transparency and accountability are the key

governance features that affect public trust in these intermediary organisations.

That is why it is important to have laws, regulations and codes of practice to enhance good governance in the giving sectors. They must be effective to deter, detect and deal decisively with mismanagement and wrongdoings. They must also be practical, so that they do not escalate compliance costs and create unnecessary rules that demotivate the intermediaries and stifle giving.

Gratitude

When we are grateful for our situation (count our blessings), we are more likely to engage in volunteerism and philanthropy. The converse is also true. When we help

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others, we become more grateful for our own life conditions as we appreciate the situation of those who are less fortunate. We will also gripe less about our life and thus experience less negative emotions. Gratitude and giving influence and reinforce each other. Should we then make people feel grateful so that they give to those in need?

Educators and leaders in politics, public service and non-profit sector often try to evoke gratitude in people to nudge them to contribute to society. They highlight how much we have all personally benefited from the community and so should aim to give back to it.

Moral obligation and a sense of duty to members of one's group (organisation, community, country) make up what psychologists call normative commitment. This "ought to" commitment increases when we feel proud of the group to which we belong and identify strongly with it.

Normative commitment can evolve over time. But gratitude can neither be demanded nor requested. The gratitude message from educators and leaders works well if it is consistent with the quality of our actual lived experiences. And if we see the educators, leaders or other messengers themselves practising what they preach. To lead in changes to become a giving nation and caring society, leaders need to be role models in genuine giving.

Rather than constantly dropping heavy hints about the need to give back to society, it may be better to set up ways and means that will make it easier for people to extend

help to others. The sense of well-being that comes from doing so is more likely to sustain the act of giving in the longer term.

Important as they are, the 4Gs are not all that matters. We need to move beyond them because there is much more to giving. Or, more accurately, the 4Gs truly matter only when they are focused on the positive impact on people's lives.

WHY GIVING MATTERS

Four positive people-centric outcomes make clear why giving matters.

First, giving benefits those in need and can transform their lives. A caring society must not neglect the needs of the poor and persons with disabilities. There are also other vulnerable groups, especially children, youth and elderly in dysfunctional families with problems that are multifaceted and inter-related. It may not be obvious but their unmet needs are urgent because one problem rapidly leads to many others.

The most impactful giving is not handouts. It is giving that helps the vulnerable address the root cause of their problems, and acquire work and life skills that build and sustain their self-efficacy to solve problems, self-esteem from solving them and self-reliance to face the future.

Second, giving can produce positive outcomes for the giver. Many studies have shown that people who volunteer or donate are more likely to be satisfied and happy with their lives. This relationship between giving and subjective well-being is robust and it remains even when controlling for income status and other background variables.

Third, giving can build and strengthen a strong organisation. When employees give through meaningful corporate social responsibility programmes, it does not just increase the organisation's public reputation and attractiveness, it also produces positive attitudes in individual employees, builds team cohesion and contributes to organisational commitment.

Finally, giving is critical for a strong society. When people give and care for one another, the community develops social networks with interpersonal trust and reciprocity norms. This builds social capital.

Both givers and recipients develop self-efficacy, become optimistic, possess hope and become more resilient. This builds psychological capital.

Social capital and psychological capital are necessary resources to develop a strong Singapore society of adaptive individuals and communities. They contribute to the nation's total defence, with people and communities cohering when faced with national security threats and in times of health, economic, social or political crises.

In sum, the simple act of giving is more complex than we think. But however complicated the threads that bind the giver, the recipient and society, the tapestry it creates is indeed a many-splendoured thing – especially if we understand how it works.

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