

# Don't Just 'Give Back.' Engage.

BUSINESS PEOPLE WITH GOOD HEARTS looking to make a difference usually start with three bad questions: "How can I give back?" "How do I pick a good cause?" And "What skills should I contribute?"

But the business people I've met who have made the biggest contribution usually started with a different question: "What can I get?" As a result, they engage more deeply, contribute more of their skills, and do so for longer duration.

"Giving back" is a flawed notion. It implies the philanthropist "took" from something and must now pay back. It suggests a person can contribute to the social good only after succeeding in the business world, instead of at the same time, bringing to mind the stereotypical path of that plucky entrepreneur who becomes a wealthy tycoon and then decides later in life to turn his or her attention to philanthropy.

The idea of "giving back" can lead to other problems, too. Those who seek only to give back may be most prone to fair-weather volunteering. By viewing philanthropy as a stop along their life's journey, they may be more likely to pick and choose the time and place for it rather than weaving it into the fabric of their lives. One result is that food banks are awash with volunteers on holidays, but scramble the rest of the year. Parents who take children to volunteer at Christmas or holidays to give back – that is, to show how lucky they are – can unintentionally show that giving back is one part of a transaction.

Those who look to "take" from philanthropy, by contrast, engage with nonprofits throughout their careers. This builds connections and friendships that may be hard to find in the office. It offers the chance to develop senior skills early in a career, and deliver results that might make it to your obituary. I first learned this when I was running a contact lens company in the 1990s and volunteered to be president of the board of the STOP AIDS Project in San Francisco. STOP AIDS was the world's first community-based group to show how to prevent the spread of AIDS (our solution: condoms, condoms, and more condoms). From this, I learned how to chair a board. Friends I met there helped me raise \$3 million from Sequoia Capital to launch PlanetOut, the first venture-funded lesbian and gay company, which built a range of websites. I also helped prevent some new infections, suggesting my engagement was not only good for me but for the greater cause.

Since then, I've volunteered for nonprofits in eight countries and consulted for others, first as a partner at Bridgespan Group and now on my own. I've seen many examples of the benefits of receiving from philanthropy, rather than giving back. Classmate **Joe Tye** founded STAT—Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco because of his fury at the

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delight his toddler showed for the Marlboro man. I volunteered for STOP AIDS because I was angry my friends were dying, and because I feared my turn was soon. Classmate **David Jaffe** founded the Food Allergy Institute after struggling to feed safely his four children, each with different food allergies. In each instance, we found that deep, personal relationships with organizations was better for us – and for the philanthropy – than if we had viewed our work as a temporary aspect of our lives.

Indeed, looking to "give back" skills seldom gets philanthropists far in the nonprofit world. By the time I joined my first nonprofit board, I had served on three for-profit boards, which may sound like good experience. But because I was so confident I made classic mistakes, including spending too much time worrying about overhead and not enough on fundraising. One can get further with a willingness to learn, a healthy dose of curiosity, and a spirit that money problems are fun to solve.

Not too long ago, Phil Kleweno, a friend and former colleague, introduced me to a room of Bain consultants by pointing out how our business and social careers had tangled over two decades: Bain, PlanetOut, Zitter Group, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and the Bain Gay & Lesbian Association for Diversity (BGLAD). These associations have reaped dividends for me and for the organizations. In all the years with them I never really stopped other work to "give back." But I keep receiving. ●

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