

Helping colleagues brings many benefits, but it may carry a cost

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“Do unto others.” The Golden Rule. As children, society socializes into us the value of helping others. Indeed, from an evolutionary standpoint, such activities were necessary to ensure the survival of the tribe in a hostile world. As it pertains to the workplace, helping others is no less important.

Although few job descriptions would list “helping co-workers” as an explicit requirement, research shows that employees do tend to feel that helping, or more broadly “being a good organizational citizen” is in fact a part of their job. This fact applies to managers as well, who do tend to consider behaviours such as helping in performance appraisals, even when these behaviours are not a formal part of the employee’s job. Managers have good reason to do this, as research shows that helping others improves not only team performance, but organizational performance as well.

However, helping others is not without cost. As anyone who has ever helped a friend move knows, when you spend time helping others, you have less for yourself that day. Unfortunately, time is not infinite; on the contrary, it may be our most scarce resource. And so, an emerging stream of research has sought to highlight that the time spent engaging in good citizen behaviors such as helping may take a toll on employees.

In recent years, scholars have written on some of the pernicious consequences of citizenship behaviors, noting that when employees take time to help others, not only might team performance actually suffer, but by taking time to help others (and, as a consequence, taking less time on one’s own job responsibilities) the helper may actually negatively impact their own career outcomes such as salary and advancement.

Unfortunately, employees face conflicting information about the effects of citizenship behavior, as an alternate stream of research has highlighted benefits of helping others in the form of increased workplace well-being owing to positive effects on the employee’s mood. The goal of our research was to reconcile these conflicting perspectives on helping in the workplace. Can it be true that helping coworkers has both a bright side and a dark side for employees?

In a recent study, we found that the answer to this question is yes. Not only do our results indicate that helping can be both good and bad, but also we can identify for whom helping may be good or bad. In a sample of 82 office and clerical staff whom we tracked over a period of ten days, we found that helping others does in fact improve one's mood, and ultimately their well-being that day. However, at the same time, these employees also reported that, as a consequence of helping others, they regularly failed to accomplish their daily work-goals. Unfortunately, this failure served to degrade their well-being each day.

Importantly, however, research has shown that employees can be classified based on the extent to which they interpret events in their life as leading to the possibility of gains, or the possibility of losses. Employees who focus on the possibility of gains view experiences in their life as having the potential to improve their lot and to increase their likelihood of success. These employees tend to feel more enjoyment from activities that they feel will help them to accomplish this.

Helping others is potentially such an activity, as helping may contribute to building social capital or developing one's own skills. As a result, helping may confer long-run benefits to a person, and so employees who are focused on gains and rewards see value in this. Accordingly, such employees tended to fall on the bright side of helping; they were more likely to feel good after helping and ultimately experienced increased well-being.

Another class of employees, however, are instead more cautious and concerned about making errors or mistakes. These employees, instead of focusing on the potential for gain, are instead focused on the potential for loss in their daily activities – specifically, on how to avoid loss. Helping others competes for the same hours and minutes in a given day as does fulfilling one's regular job duties. Given this time investment, these employees are particularly sensitive to the dark side of helping. As a result, employees focused on losses tended to fall on this negative path associated with helping; they were more likely to feel as if they had failed to achieve their work-goals for the day and ultimately experienced degraded levels of well-being.

The modern workplace cannot survive without good citizens who are willing to lend a hand to coworkers in need. Moreover, the necessity of this type of behavior will only increase as work becomes increasingly complex and performed in teams. We all need someone who “has our back” from time to time. However, both employees and managers need to be aware of the costs associated with being a good citizen. For employees, helping may indeed improve their mood. Unfortunately, helping may also prevent them from accomplishing necessary task-related responsibilities. This dichotomy of outcomes creates a tug-of-war on daily well-being.

If you are an employee reading this, ask yourself: Are you the type of person who focuses on gains and long-term rewards? If so, then you may ultimately feel better by being more available to help (just make sure you eventually do get your work done!). However, if you are more concerned with losses and security, then by helping others you might ultimately be harming yourself. If you are a manager reading this, we recommend keeping in mind that many good things are good only in moderation. Although encouraging your employees to be good citizens benefits the bottom-line, it may come with a cost. It is incumbent upon you to be mindful of this.



Notes:

- This article is based on [Integrating the Bright and Dark Sides of OCB: A Daily Investigation of the Benefits and Costs of Helping Others](#), in the *Academy of Management Journal*, April 2016, Vol. 59 No. 2 414-435
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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