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# Creating a Culture of Reciprocity



By Schon Beechler , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour

## **Reciprocity rings can help bring hidden resources to the surface and encourage a culture of generosity.**

When Rui Kang, a December 2017 MBA candidate at INSEAD, arrived in Fontainebleau, France to start her programme, she worried about getting to see her fiancé on a regular basis. He lives in Lille, two hours' drive away and with no way to get there, Kang needed some help. But, as she quickly discovered, she was in luck.

INSEAD's December 2017 MBA students took part in the inaugural round of "Reciprocity Rings". The ring consists of a group of people who get together and ask for something they each need and cannot get or do for themselves. In addition, as each person takes a turn articulating their "ask", the other members of the reciprocity ring are encouraged to think about the resources they might have to help the person asking for help and to make as many offers of help to others as possible. Even if they are not able to help personally, participants can also connect the person to someone in their network who might be able to help them. Reciprocity rings were introduced during the MBA Orientation Week to break down barriers and add to a culture of reciprocity at INSEAD.

When Kang, originally from China, asked to share transport with anyone heading to Lille on a regular basis, Ruxandra Tosun, a campus recruitment coordinator at INSEAD who volunteered to facilitate the Reciprocity Ring exercise during orientation, answered the call. Her partner, Maxence Torillioux, visits Lille almost every weekend to see his parents. Two days later, Kang was in the car with Tosun, Torillioux and their dog, heading to northern France. They struck up a friendship, learning things from each other and providing additional help. For example, Torillioux, a wedding photographer, gave Kang some ideas for her wedding.

Kang was also a valuable source of information for Tosun. “She gave me some insight into student life, what they were doing for the welcome week, what the students are talking about. For me, that was really amazing because we work with students all the time but if you have a good relationship, you can understand them better,” she said.

The friendship would never have come about if Kang hadn’t asked and if Tosun, a facilitator who wasn’t “officially” a member of the Reciprocity Ring group, had not been generous and volunteered to help.

### **Pay it forward**

The reciprocity ring concept was developed by Professor Wayne Baker, a sociologist at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business, and his wife Cheryl Baker, CEO of Humax. It rests on the idea of generalised reciprocity, a powerful way to spread gratitude.

Generalised reciprocity is triggered when a person receives help from someone else, but instead of paying it back to the person who helped them, they help someone else or “pay it forward”. Take the “Kidney Chain” as an example. In 2009, Matt Jones from Michigan wanted to donate a kidney to a total stranger just because he could. Barbara, who lived in Phoenix, was dying from kidney disease. Jones’ kidney saved her life. Her husband Ron would have donated one of his kidneys to her but they didn’t have compatible blood types. However, he was so grateful that he donated one of his kidneys to another stranger, whose relatives were also so grateful, they did the same. And on it went to become the longest-running transplant chain, changing the lives of 20 people.

### **Creating cultures of reciprocity**

According to Baker's research, the simple act of helping someone else compels the person receiving help to help others. In the paper, **"Paying it Forward vs. Rewarding Reputation: Mechanisms of Generalized Reciprocity"**, he studied two ways of facilitating generalised reciprocity. One way was by rewarding reputation, i.e. peers monitor one another in their organisation, helping those who help others and refusing to help those who do not. The other method was the "pay it forward" mechanism, which naturally occurs when members of an organisation help third parties purely because they themselves were helped.

Baker found that altruism had stronger and more lasting effects than rewarding those based on their reputation. The most sustainable way of facilitating generalised reciprocity, therefore, comes from creating a "pay it forward" culture.

Paying it forward is an organic movement, but it needs a trigger. That trigger comes in the form of activities such as a reciprocity ring, a guided and structured exercise that can start the ball rolling. But there are a few considerations for facilitating an effective reciprocity ring.

First, it's best for it to take place in person. **Recent research** shows that requests made in a face-to-face setting are 34 times more likely to be answered than those over email.

Second, participants need to have clear goals. We ask our students to come up with two SMART goals – one professional and one personal goal. These are specific, meaningful, action-oriented, real and time-bound. Meaningful goals can be incredibly powerful. When I took part in a reciprocity ring at the University of Michigan a few years ago, one of the most memorable requests came from a woman who got up and asked for help on behalf of someone else. Her friend had a very serious and rare disease and had to travel frequently between Michigan and Texas for treatment. Due to the expense, she simply asked all of us if anyone was willing to donate some frequent flyer miles to help him pay for the travel. Most of us who were able to donate our miles did so.

Third, small groups are best, with a maximum of 25 people. If any requests go unfulfilled, the request can go out to a larger or different group in the organisation. During our Reciprocity Ring exercise in January, in the unusual case that a request went unfulfilled, we put the request to all of the other groups in the room. In the end, all requests were met with resources from

one or more people present.

### **Don't be afraid to ask**

Another important role of a reciprocity ring is having people get over their fear of asking for help. They don't want to appear weak and often grossly underestimate how willing other people are to help. In a [paper](#) by Frank Flynn of Stanford Graduate School of Business and Vanessa Lake of Columbia University, the researchers found that people underestimated by 50 percent the number of people they expected to ask to get a certain number to agree to a request. The researchers also found that asking for a favour verbally was more effective than handing out a flyer with the same request.

As a result of the introduction of reciprocity rings at INSEAD, students used their new-found connections and resources to form tutoring groups for students keen to brush up on finance, mock interview groups in preparation for recruitment, a wine club and even a band.

Kang became more confident about helping others when she saw how generous people could be. "Maybe I won't pay back Ruxandra directly, but if someone needs my help, I would be happy to give it. Since the exercise, I've offered help to my peers when they needed explanation of some concepts we learned in class. I've offered to introduce my personal contacts in the automotive industry for those interested in a career in that industry. I've also helped organise some student events. I am certainly inspired to continue this once I become an alumna," she said.

It is for these reasons that organisations should try, where possible, to facilitate an asking culture. Such an approach could also help companies start to address gender disparities. Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University shows in her [research](#) that men are more likely than women to ask for what they want. Levelling the playing field with a universal "asking" culture could make women more likely to step forward.

For the ever leaner corporation and for those facing new challenges and opportunities, a reciprocity ring can be a low-cost method of uncovering unknown resources and helping to connect the many dots between employees and other stakeholders. Reciprocity is about both offering and asking for help and, at INSEAD, we are using reciprocity rings to help us unleash the diverse resources and generosity of INSEADers.

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