



WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

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What is the 'reciprocity urge'?

An interesting story appeared in the UK 'Telegraph', recently. It was about a prisoner who appealed against disciplinary action that had been brought against him, because he called a warder by his last name.

Apparently, when the warder asked the prisoner to address him properly, the prisoner replied "You do not call me mister, why should I call you mister?"

An independent ombudsman backed the prisoner and said that the disciplinary charge should not have been laid.

This story illustrates a basic law in social psychology, which says that how you treat someone will strongly effect how they respond back to you. Behavior you send out will often come back to you – like a boomerang. In this case, the prison warder addressed the prisoner by using his last name. And, as a result, the prisoner felt a strong urge to respond in the same way. This instinct is called the 'reciprocity urge'. What goes around comes around! (or to use some other famous sayings that describe the essence of the 'reciprocity urge': 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' & 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'.)

Evidence of the 'reciprocity urge' has been found in every human civilisation. It has even been observed among primate groups. It is 'hard wired' into us. When someone shows us a kindness, or does us a favour, we feel this strong desire to reciprocate, or repay the favour. But, as the prisoner story shows, we also feel a desire to reciprocate when someone does something bad to us. Then, we feel the desire to get revenge.

Why should we learn about the 'reciprocity urge'?

We at Ash Quarry Productions believe that everyone should be thoroughly familiar with the 'reciprocity urge' and its implications.

Let me explain why.

Once you understand how the 'reciprocity urge' works, you begin to realise that your behavior has a significant impact on the behavior of others around you. Now, most people have little, or no, idea of this. They see that there are difficult customers, or unmotivated staff, or uncooperative team members, or uncommunicative managers, but do not realise that many of these behaviors, in others, are responses to how they themselves are behaving in the first place.

To use the metaphor of a boomerang, most people do not realise that many of the boomerangs they receive, are the same ones that they had thrown earlier.

Or to put it another way, most people see themselves as the hapless victims of difficult people and situations around them. They fail to realise that their own behavior plays a major part in CREATING those difficult people and situations.

So, the first major implication of the 'reciprocity urge' is that rather than just complaining about the behavior of others you need to HAVE A GOOD LOOK AT YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR as one explanation of their behavior.

But how do you increase self awareness?
How do you learn about what boomerangs

you throw out? How do you find out about how other people view you?

Many organisations are using 360 degree feedback systems to help. We, at Ash Quarry Productions, have developed a paper based and Internet based system that allows learners to assess their own skills and get feedback from others on the same skills (see www.skillsindicator.com). What is often of greatest interest are the discrepancies between how a person rates their skills and how others rate the same skills. These 'blind spots' are opportunities for the learner to really increase their self knowledge and improve the influence they have on others.

Asking for feedback from others in a casual and informal manner can also be useful. Even just exploring the possibility that how you behave may be influencing how others behave is a fantastic step down the road to knowing your boomerangs (eg: "Do you think it is possible that Kim is acting like that because of something I am doing?").

Once you can see the boomerangs you throw out you have the power to choose certain boomerangs. This is a powerful way to INFLUENCE others' behavior. See **The Taxi Driver and the 'reciprocity urge'** (box below) for a good example of how to influence another person's behavior this way.

The Taxi Driver and the 'reciprocity urge'

Let me tell you a real story. I caught a taxi from the airport, recently, after a 24 hour flight. The taxi driver was really unfriendly, almost rude. He didn't help me with my bags. He cursed at other drivers. He was pretty unpleasant. Now, I was sitting in the back of the taxi and I could feel myself reacting negatively to him. I didn't like him and I didn't like his attitude.

So, he was throwing out a negative boomerang and I was strongly tempted to return one back to him.

Then, I thought to myself...let's see if I can turn him around. Instead of just reacting to his negative boomerang, I chose to throw out a positive one, instead. He had just turned the radio up a bit...there was an old Bee Gee's song playing. So I said to him. 'You obviously like the Bee Gee's....they are a great old band, aren't they?'

Well how do you think he reacted? He started talking about his love of that band, and music in general, and within a few minutes we were having a

great conversation about 70s and 80s music. When we got to my house, he jumped out of the cab, helped me with my bags and wished me a pleasant day.

What had I done to achieve this remarkable change? Simple. I did not react to his negativity....I chose to throw out a positive boomerang instead....and I turned him around.

So, the real power of learning about the 'reciprocity urge' is that you can CHOOSE THE BOOMERANGS YOU THROW OUT to others. And in this way, you can exert a strong influence on the behavior they exhibit back to you.

So, if you are in CUSTOMER SERVICE and you want your customers to be polite and not rude, you need to make sure you are polite and not rude. If you don't, they won't.

If you are a MANGER or TEAM LEADER and you want your people to listen to you, ensure you listen to them. If you don't, they won't.

And if you work in a TEAM and you want others to be supportive and cooperative, make sure you set the right example.

In conclusion

The 'reciprocity urge' is a basic part of how we are all 'hard wired'. Understanding its lessons can empower people at all levels to choose their own behavior. And, in doing so, they can influence those around them to behave in ways that are productive, cooperative, and respectful. And isn't that what we would all like? Remember, the boomerangs you throw are the same ones that come back to you, whether good or bad. The 'reciprocity urge' is a piece of ancient wisdom that many have forgotten in these supposedly advanced times. Make sure you don't forget it!

(Ash Quarry Productions is proud to have released 'BOOMERANG', a 10 minute motivational and instructional video which explains the power of the 'reciprocity urge'. Available from www.7dimensions.com.au).

