

# On Reciprocation

*“The person who receives the most favors is the one who knows how to return them.”*

[-Publilius Syrus](#)

Reciprocation can best be defined as the human tendency to try to repay in kind what others provide us whether they be favors or gifts. Those who violate it are labeled moochers and freeloaders. We will go to great lengths to avoid these labels, even agreeing to unequal exchanges to avoid them. The behavior of repayment is deeply rooted in our evolutionary behavior, dating back to our earliest human ancestors. If a member of the tribe only took from the community and never gave anything back, they would soon be cast out because they did not contribute to the survival of the in-group.<sup>1</sup>

This behavior is passed down to us in modern times where there is an innate feeling of obligation to give, receive, and repay. There is a strong cultural pressure to reciprocate a gift, even an unwanted one. It can also be used to extract concessions from us; if the other person is willing to compromise, we'll be more likely to return the favor. As you may notice, this sort of behavior can be used to take advantage of this natural human trait. It can be manipulated to extract concessions the other person wants but we receive nothing we want in return.<sup>2</sup>

For example, if someone gives you a flower and asks for a donation to a cause, you'd be more likely to comply, even if you didn't want the flower in the first place. Another example would be someone that makes a large and outlandish request, then retreats to a smaller one; we'd be more likely to make a concession and comply with the small request, even if we don't want to. Be wary of individuals you suspect are using such tactics. They are manipulating biologically hard-wired human behaviors that cannot be overridden without a strong conscious decision.<sup>3</sup>

Defense Tactic: There is great pressure for us to reciprocate a gift, but no such pressure to buy an unwanted product. So, view those trying to take advantage of your reciprocation tendencies as such: They are trying to sell you something, tangible or intangible. Perceive what you are receiving not as gifts or favors, but as sales devices. These sales devices are often in the form of unsolicited/unwanted gifts that are pressed into our hands.<sup>4</sup>

**Takeaway:** Reciprocation is our biological imperative to return a favor (even unwanted) to maintain good standing in our in-group. If you suspect you are being taken advantage of with such tactics, view the “gift” not as a favor, but as a sales device.

1-4. *“Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion”* - [Robert Cialdini](#)