

A WEEK IN *Learning*

GOODWILL HEROES: UNDERSTANDING ALTRUISM

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It was a typical January afternoon in Manhattan; congested streets, civilians wrapped up in scarves, and busy subways with infinite destinations. However, the day was anything but ordinary for Wesley and Cameron – two New Yorkers who would soon have an 82,000-pound subway train hovering over them.

Alongside his two daughters, Wesley approached the edge of the subway platform to wait for the next train. Beside him was a young student named Cameron. Suddenly, Cameron’s body began to rapidly convulse, and before anyone could help, he stumbled off the platform and onto the tracks. Wesley turned his head to see the No.1 train quickly approaching. Without hesitation, he jumped from the platform and threw himself on top of Cameron – hugging both their bodies as close to the ground as possible. Screams from the crowd filled the subway as the train screeched its brakes, but it was too late. Five train cars had rolled over Wesley and Cameron. Miraculously, both men survived with only bruises and scrapes.



“**WE** are an incredible example of altruism within an organization.”

- **Trisha Martin**

This true story is one of many others that display acts of altruism. When asked about his heroic act, Wesley simply stated, “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right.” When we think of altruistic acts, it’s easy to notice big efforts like the one Wesley made. However, there are many more simple acts of altruism out there too, such as buying a stranger’s groceries.

Altruism Defined

At its most basic, altruism is a displayed behavior motivated only by the want to increase someone else’s welfare. In other words, a selfless good deed. The key word here is *selfless*. If you are motivated to help someone because you will be rewarded, feel obligated, or are trying to relieve some guilt, then it is not an altruistic act.

Understanding Altruism in Individuals

So, what is the explanation behind altruism? I wish I had a simple answer for you. Truth is, altruism has been studied

from many different angles, with a lot of interesting findings. For our purpose, let's breakdown two of the most well-known explanations:

Empathy – It should come as no surprise that empathy plays a crucial role in our altruistic actions. Empathy is the ability to sense and understand another person's emotional state. So, it is reasonable to say that people with higher levels of empathy engage in altruistic behaviors; big or small, family member or stranger.

Our Biology – Some of the most profound findings center on our biology, more specifically, *what's going on inside our brain*. Researchers have been able to identify varying levels of altruism in humans based on the size and activity of our amygdala. The amygdala is part of the brain's limbic system, and is most known for its role in processing emotions like fear. Studies have found that some amygdalas are more reactive to the distresses of others. These findings have also been linked to people who have done extraordinary acts of altruism – confirming that some people are more altruistic than others (think about our Subway Hero, Wesley).

Organizational Altruism

Now consider altruism from an organizational point of view. We'll use an example that should be familiar – Goodwill. What would motivate someone to begin a social enterprise to help others move out of poverty by connecting them with productive work, regardless of race, disability, or criminal history? Perhaps our founder, Edgar J. Helms, had higher levels of empathy or a more reactive amygdala, but more importantly - what about those who followed him and helped shape what the organization is today?

Edgar J. Helms led a great path for our organization, but it wouldn't be where it is today without all of our team members, donors, and community. **WE** are an incredible example of altruism within an organization. Consider these points:

Donor Altruists – Our donors could easily sell their own donations. With the expansion of used goods online, it has become more accessible for our donors to profit off their items. However, they choose to donate to an organization with a mission to support members of its community.

Goodwill Altruists – That's right, **you!** You chose to work for an organization that does extraordinary things for the community. Think about how large of a role **empathy** plays in our everyday work! Whether you work directly with the donated goods, support other departments, or get to have face-to-face interactions with those we serve – you are engaging in organizational altruism in some way.

I'll leave you with these questions: **what are some other altruistic acts you do in the organization?** Perhaps it is for your team, or even a coworker. And, **what do you believe motivates you to carry out these acts?** We aren't all Subway Heroes like Wesley, but I think being a Goodwill Hero is pretty extraordinary.