

## How Giving an 'A' Allows People to 'Wow' Us

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Super quiet. Shy. Invisible. That was me in high school. I think my peers saw me as relatively smart, but being introverted and rather shy, they saw me (or, didn't see me), as simply that – the quiet girl. And in turn, that's how I saw myself for a long time, even after I had outgrown the "box." This internal struggle of how I defined myself often affected my behavior, in both positive and negative ways.

Although we are certainly different individuals in our 20's, 30's and 40's compared to how we were in high school, the labels, definitions and reputation others give us more often than not have some effect. They can force us to make a choice, either disagreeing with their words, or are pleased with what we hear and their comment may reinforce a certain behavior all the more.

Working in a team setting, it's vital individuals have a positive self-image and are surrounded by others who empower them to be their best selves. Leadership guru Dale Carnegie advocates this principle of giving individuals a fine reputation to live up to, not only reinforcing their good qualities, but also motivating them to be successful.

This principle is put into very practical terms in one of my favorite books, *The Art of Possibility*. Within the book, husband and wife Rosamund and Ben Zander outline practices for shifting one's mind to that of infinite possibility. One technique proposed is the idea of 'Giving an A' – the practice of giving individuals a goal or reputation to live up to from the very beginning. Instead of coming at his students from a perspective of 'earn your A,' Ben would begin his class telling his students they already had their 'A.' He began with a foundation of trust, and invited them, in essence to break boundaries, scale mountains and explore virgin territory without fear of the repercussions – they already had their 'A.'

In addition to telling them they already had their pinnacle 'A,' one week into the class, he would ask them to write him a letter, only it would be from the person they would be at the end of the school year, months from that present moment. He wanted to have them define why they had earned their 'A.' What was different about them in June, as opposed to September, 10 months prior. How had they changed? And then, with this visual set, they could spend their time in class developing and growing into that person, rightfully earning their 'A.' The results he saw were astounding, and he watched over the course of those 10 months, students transforming before his eyes.

Such practices easily transition to our work environment. Below are a few examples of how we can give individuals a fine reputation to live up to, empowering them to reach their full potential and succeed:

- 1 Let them catch you complimenting them to others;
- 2 Be lavish when introducing them to others – not to the point of excessive exaggeration, but giving them a reputation to meet and exceed;
- 3 Show appreciation – pointing to specific projects. For example, saying "Amazing job on the monthly report. The detail and full context provided in the upfront summary was exactly what we needed." helps direct the individual to how they can do just as well next time, instead of simply saying, "Good job!"; and
- 4 If you notice someone is not paying attention, or they seem disengaged, treat them as if they were one of the most engaged team members, asking, "Is there anything wrong?" They may be very much immersed in work, but are simply giving off the wrong impression.

To truly strike a chord within an individual, we must show them their best self, lifting them up, giving them something to work towards, and providing them the opportunity to 'wow' us.

Also, if you have a few moments, check out [Ben Zander's TED Talk](#). His vibrancy, energy and enthusiasm are contagious.

I was introduced to the idea of “Giving an A” when reading *The Art of Possibility* by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander. I loved the concept!

The authors point out that “the main purpose of grades is to compare one student against another.” They believe that “in most cases, grades say little for the work done.” When compared to other students, grades focus more on performance rather than mastery of the material.

How often do you measure your successes to another? How often do you compare yourself to someone else and feel less competent, less confident, or lower [self-esteem](#)?

On page 26 they say, “Michelangelo is often quoted as having said that inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue; one need only remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within. If we were to apply this visionary concept to education, it would be pointless to compare one child to another. Instead, all the energy would be focused on chipping away at the stone, getting rid of whatever is in the way of each child’s developing skills, mastery and self-expression.”

They further state “We call this practice giving an A. It is an enlivening way of approaching people that promises to transform you as well as them. It is a shift in [attitude](#) that makes it possible for you to speak freely about your own thoughts and feelings while, at the same time, you support others to be all they dream of being. The practice of giving an A transports your relationships from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility.”

They talk about giving an A to people from all walks of life – to everyone and anyone.

Imagine speaking to people without needing them to measure up to your personal standards or expectations. Approaching people from a place of respect

and appreciation of who they are, gives them the room and freedom to realize themselves and their unfolding potential.

Your [exercise](#) over the next 30 days is two-fold.

1. Practice giving an A to people in your life – both to people you know and strangers. Observe what you notice about yourself, the other person(s) and the experience as a whole. Write it down.

2. Give yourself an A. Do this as a buddy [exercise](#) with someone you are close with. Write a letter to your buddy (and that person will do the same) dated one year from the day you do the [exercise](#). Using the example in *The Art of Possibility* on page 27, the instructions for this exercise are: begin the letter with, “Dear (your friend’s name) I got an A because..... and tell a story, in as much detail as possible, about what has happened to you over the year that is in line with this extraordinary grade. Place yourself in the future, and write the letter looking back over the year recording the insights acquired and milestones achieved. Write everything in past tense as if the accomplishments were already in the past. Fall passionately in love with the person you are describing in the letter!

3. Above all, enjoy the experience!

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Ben Zander (pictured) conductor for the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and professor at the New England Conservatory of Music, faced the same problem at the start of each semester. His students, all gifted instrumentalists and singers were so anxious over the measurement of their performance that they were reluctant to take creative risks and open themselves up to the possibility of making mistakes. And this, of course, inhibited their ability to be creative and learn.

With Roz Zander (therapist and co-author of *The Art of Possibility*) they devised the following approach—All students would receive an 'A' grade at the beginning of the course on one condition. They were required to write a letter future-dated to the end of the semester to Ben Zander describing in as much detail as possible, how they came to achieve their 'A'. In other words, the students had to define, at the beginning of the course, who they will have become and what insights and milestones will they have attained to justify top grade.

As Zander relates, that 'A' changes everything. By giving each student an 'A' at the beginning, a universe of possibility has suddenly been invented. On this now-level playing field the students were able to learn and take creative risks—free from anxiety and fear of failure. The 'A' grade was no longer an expectation to live up to. Instead, it became a possibility to live into. And Zander gave compelling evidence for the amazing effect of this practice on his students.

The practice of giving someone or some situation an 'A' is a very simple idea albeit one that has very powerful consequences.

The practice of giving an A can be transformative by inventing a different, more creative context of relating and working for both the giver and the receiver (of the figurative A).

To be more specific it gives people permission to shine by:

*Geoff Blair Positive Outcomes*

Recognising that actually people do want to contribute and give their best (regardless of how below-par their performance may currently be.)

Being aware that you will probably elicit the response you expect from someone i.e. if you think someone is a certain way and treat them accordingly they will tend to behave that way.

Remembering that it's always much more interesting (and easy) to work with people who respect you/your work (and vice versa) And, of course, you could always choose to award yourself an 'A' by finding your strengths (<http://lifetravelling.com/2009/10/finding-your-strengths/>) and operating within a framework of possibility. It's all invented anyway and it's a lot more fun being an A player!