

What Makes Altruism Altruistic?

Facilitation Guide



Tool for

Civic Character



10 minutes



Educator-prep
Leader-prep

Materials

- Watch [The Giving Tree - Animated Children's Book](#)

Making Connections

Principled Innovation asks us to work with others and recognize the limits of our own knowledge so that we can better understand and tackle the complex issues our communities face.

Connecting Character Assets:

[Reflection](#)
[Altruism](#)

About this Guide

In Principled Innovation, shifting the notion of goodness from self-sacrifice to seeking “positive change for humanity” lifts the burden of altruism and engages our hope for a better future. Use this video to challenge participants’ reflection on what makes altruism “good.”

The goal of Principled Innovation – “positive change for humanity” – is not zero-sum. That is, the goal of Principled Innovation is positive change for as many people as possible – for humanity. In other words, Principled Innovation aims at human flourishing, at seeking to lift all boats through greater understanding of each other.

Altruism – helping others, even when it costs something of ourselves – doesn’t need to mean that we gain nothing in return. In fact, many times our altruism ends up becoming an investment that pays dividends to ourselves. On an individual level, [those investments can bring someone greater satisfaction and happiness](#), and on a community level those actions can create innovations in which we ourselves ultimately become one of the beneficiaries. Thus, putting effort into positive change for humanity doesn’t require losing sight of our own welfare.

In this video, Duke University professor Ruth Grant challenges the notion that altruism is only good if it involves self-sacrifice. Offering a critique of Shel Silverstein’s story, *The Giving Tree*, She argues that altruism is still altruism when we receive benefits – when we become happy as a result, or when our learning communities are better because of our efforts.

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Instructions

1 Situate

Explain that altruism is one of the Civic assets within Principled Innovation, and it involves seeking to help someone else, even if it involves a cost to ourselves. Explain that participants should ask themselves during the video if they agree with Silverstein's understanding of altruism.

2 Present

Present the video for the participants.

3 Discuss

The following questions may help prompt discussion on how altruism need not be a zero-sum game:

1. In this story, the tree ultimately gave everything to an ungrateful boy.
 - a. Why is this sad for the boy?
 - b. Why is this sad for the tree?
2. What makes altruism "good"? Should the ultimate aim of altruism be self-sacrifice or human flourishing?
3. If we ourselves ultimately benefit from the efforts we invest into Principled Innovation – from human flourishing – is it any less noble or good than if we received nothing in return?
4. How might helping others through Principled Innovation be seen as more good and noble if both the giver and receiver benefit in the end?