



Making Requests for Action

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I recently facilitated a city council and mayor retreat and was reminded that the art of making requests is not always as easy as it may appear. The elected leaders were bouncing creative ideas off one another as they problem-solved various community challenges.

As I listened to their collaborative conversation, their requests expanded. When I stopped the conversation and asked them to clarify their request and time-frame, their desired outcome became much clearer. Now the city manager had a very specific request that he could act upon and he could keep his commitment to return to the elected officials with the information they wanted.

I certainly remember as an elected official, how I wanted to make sure all bases were covered and I, or our committee, had thought of every angle and concern. This often meant free-flowing dialogue with ideas building at a rapid pace.

Pure brainstorming dialogue can be creative but may sabotage the action that the group wants to initiate. Requests may be disguised as the ideas are generated. Those charged with fulfilling the requests, may stumble or miss the mark because the requests are unclear. **The quality of action and follow through will only be as good as the quality of the request that is made.**

As you become aware of the idea of making powerful requests, you may observe how many times you make non-powerful requests. Ever notice that many times you get excuses instead of commitments to meet your request? Do people say yes and then fail to follow-through and keep their commitment to you?

Today's work world is a complex fabric of interactions, communications, requests, agreements, commitments and promises. Much of our day is about coordinating information and people. The US Labor Department estimates that 41% of the work force is now engaged in coordination of some sort.

Leaders must therefore be adept at listening, interpreting and resolving breakdowns and problems. Some days we spend our entire day requesting information and responding to requests for information from others.

Rather than seeing work as a connection of activities (and appointing ourselves in charge of directing all those activities), work now has become a set of requests, commitments and fulfillments.

Here are a few suggestions to make powerful requests:

- **Make the lead-in to your request brief.** Get to the point without drama or long stories and explanations. If you are a strong extrovert, you may have a tendency to "think as you talk." This can lose others and create a confusing request that others may not be able to follow.

- **State your request in clear and concise language.** "Will you help me finish this brochure by Friday?" "Will you clean your room?" "Will you attend the staff meeting on Tuesday at 3 PM?" These are powerful requests.
- **Keep what you care about firm in your mind.** State your request and do not pile on details trying to convince others that your request is important or appropriate. Get to the point and "put it out there." As you do, you invite others to say no or make a counter proposal.
- **Accept the possibility of a "no" or counter a offer .** If you receive a "no" you can alter your request. Or, they may make a counter offer that gets you close to what you desire. You then can determine if you wish to accept the offer or not.
- **Avoid demands that are disguised as requests.** This goes to the intention you hold behind the purpose of your request. Are you demanding or are you requesting?
- **Once you make the request, wait for the commitment.** Without a commitment being made, the power has been drained out of the request.

If you have experience with people not following through with requests that you have made, there is a good chance it has to do with the quality of the request. Because many of us fear a "no" we may water down our requests so as not to irk others. We are conditioned to feel bad when we hear no because we are suppose to get what we want in life, right?

If we don't get what we want at work or in life, it may be due to a long pattern of non-powerful requests either disguised as demands or so unclear that others did not know how to fulfill the requests. **Either way, we begin to feel powerless and blame others for our inability to get what we want.**

When you are in a meeting or conversation and the free-wheeling nature of the dialogue has yielded many ideas, it is appropriate at any time to call "time-out" and ask for clarification. With a gentle nudge, you might ask, "What have we agreed to so far?" "What specific requests are being made today?"

As the city council and mayor retreat progressed, we stopped more than once to identify and clarify the requests that were being made of the city manager and his staff. The elected leaders left the meeting feeling heard and more confident that they had spelled out the action they want.

As you adopt these strategies and declare powerful requests, I guarantee you will get more of the action and results you want in your work and personal life.