

COLLABORATION

# 5 Ways to Get Better at Asking for Help

by [Wayne Baker](#)

December 18, 2014



It seems like leaders are always lamenting the lack of cooperation and collaboration in their organizations. But more often than not, the culprit isn't their employees' unwillingness to give others a hand — it's the fact that most people simply don't, or won't, ask for help.

Why? First, asking for help is often perceived as a sign of weakness or ignorance, implying that someone can't get their work done on their own. A second common barrier is nervousness about incurring social debts or obligations — "What do I owe this person now?"

Third, and for American workers in particular, personal values can get in the way. Self-reliance is one of the 10 core values that I recently documented in four national surveys, and while it's an admirable trait, it's also self-limiting. In today's organizations, you can't be successful if you don't ask for what you need.

So how can you make asking for help easier? Below are five important lessons for how to ask for assistance at work, and how organizations can create environments where asking for help is encouraged. These lessons are based on my recent research with Innovation Places Principal Innovator Nat Bulkley, along with years of experience using the Reciprocity Ring — a structured process of asking for help — in companies and executive education.

**1. Earn responses to your requests by generously helping others in the first place.** By building a positive reputation as someone who helps others; others will then want to help you — even those you haven't directly helped. But keep in mind that the effects of reputation are short lived, as Nat and I learned in our research: An old reputation for helpfulness gets you nothing. You have to continually renew your reputation by helping others on a regular basis.

The desire to repay help appears to be hard-wired in the human species, as neuroscientists have shown in experiments, and the norm of reciprocity is so powerful that you can generally expect help if you've helped others. This also yields a psychological benefit for those wary of reaching out — it's much easier to reconcile asking for help when you yourself have been helpful.

**2. Know what you want to ask.** This sounds elementary, but I've observed many people struggling with the task of coming up with a request. A common refrain is this: "I've always wanted to be in a room with knowledgeable, well-connected people and be able to ask for anything. But I can't think of a thing!" Here's something you can do to prepare for this situation: Focus on a current project and write down your goals for it. Take the most important goal and list the action steps and resources needed to achieve it — materials, information, data, or advice. You'll then have a series of needs that you can frame as questions, using the SMART request methodology outlined below.

Longer term, consider creating a vision of greatness — a written detailed description of your preferred future, which was first developed by the late Ron Lippitt at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research and brought to a high art by Zingermans, a renowned community of food-related businesses in Ann Arbor, MI (you can find step-by-step guides using either of the previous links). Your vision should be both inspiring and strategically sound, with goals embedded within. Select one of the most important ones and ask, "What do I need to achieve this goal?" Go through the same process described above, writing down your action steps and resources required. Then, ask for what you need.

**3. Ask SMARTly.** Many requests are so poorly worded that it's difficult to respond. A well-formulated request is SMART: Specific, Meaningful (why you need it), Action-oriented (ask for something to be done), Real (authentic, not made up), and Time-bound (when you need it). A SMART request is easier to respond to than one that misses one or more of the five criteria.

**4. Don't assume you know *who* and *what* people know.** Underestimating the willingness of others to help is a common mistake, according to my observations and research by Stanford Graduate School of Business's Frank Flynn and his

colleagues. The fact is, you never know *what* people know or how they can help until you ask. For example, when I facilitated the Reciprocity Ring for a global drug development team, one scientist made a request that he thought no one could fulfill: “I’m about to pay an outside vendor \$50,000 to synthesize a strain of the PCs alkaloid. I need a cheaper alternative.” (I had to look this one up. Basically, it’s drugs from plants.) Another scientist responded. “Oh, I didn’t know you had that need. I have slack capacity in my lab and can do it for you next week — for free.”

The obvious benefit was a cost saving of \$50,000 for the team and the company. But there were more benefits. This act of asking for and receiving help demonstrated the power of asking for what you need while not prejudging what others know. And it laid the groundwork for future cooperation among the scientists.

Even if those you ask can’t help you directly, they can tap their personal and professional networks. Until you ask, you don’t know *who* other people know. I once made what I thought was an impossible request. Our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary was coming up and the gift my wife wanted was to be on the Food Network show *Emeril Live!* I made this request to our MBA students. Several came forward with connections. The one that worked out was an MBA student who was friends with Emeril’s producer. He put us in touch via email and we were Emeril’s guests — for the filming of the Valentine’s Day episode.

**5. Create a culture where asking for help is encouraged.** Make it easy to ask for and give help by setting the tone, norms, and practices in your work environment. Industrial design firm IDEO has strong norms that motivate asking for and giving help. As Teresa Amabile and colleagues describe, in this culture of helping designers are coached from the get-go to expect that they will need help and to ask for it. Watching others give and get help reinforces norms and creates a feeling of

psychological safety. IDEO's leaders model behaviors by asking for and giving help. The result of this culture of helping is a track record of superbly designed products that clients love.

Zingerman's, a Michigan-based food company, also has a positive culture of helping. One of its unique practices involves the induction of new managing partners. During the event, attendees are asked, one by one, to state what each will do to help the new partner to be successful. I've witnessed over 70 people doing this for a single new partner. These public commitments to help make it easier for the new partner to ask for help. The two founding partners participate, modeling their expectations about helping. The results are more engaged employees, better decision making, and even better service for customers.

Remember that reciprocity is a two-way street. Giving *and* taking are essential for individual success and positive cultures. If you're a giver but don't ask for help, remember that people want to reciprocate. And as a leader, make asking for and giving help a regular practice.

---

**Wayne Baker** is Robert P. Thome Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business and a faculty member of the Center for Positive Organizations. His research on reciprocity, social capital and positive organizational scholarship is available at [www.waynebaker.org](http://www.waynebaker.org).

---

**This article is about COLLABORATION**

 Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Difficult Conversations](#)

