

“Requesting” is an Activity You Can Improve

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“If people would actually do what I ask them to do, this place would run a lot more smoothly!” Has that exclamation ever characterized your thoughts? Maybe you’ve never experienced lack of compliance as a source of exasperation, but I’m sure there are many readers who can relate.

When you pay people, you expect them to respond to your direction. As a leader in your organization, you certainly influence folks, and you probably wield a lot of power in doing so. But you don’t really control your employees’ choices, they do. No amount of wishing otherwise will change that!

How easily do you differentiate between what you control, what you influence, and what is beyond your control or influence? I invite you to examine your thinking about “control.” If you want to improve your organization, you may have to change your own behaviors first. (A related article is on my website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Click on “Article Archives,” then scroll down to “But Why Do I Always Have to Change First?”)

When you make a request, be it a single appeal or the delegation of major responsibility, you are actually seeking to change the future. You want to initiate something that hasn’t yet occurred, and you want someone other than you to make it happen.

Today’s article focuses on what you can do to improve the way you make requests of other people in your life, at home and at work. These concepts have been adapted from *Language and the Pursuit of Happiness*, a book by Chambers Brothers. He suggests that effective requests incorporate the following six characteristics.

Be an intentional speaker. Don’t make a request as soon as the idea occurs to you. And don’t presume the receiver will index immediately into what you want. Pause instead and spend at least a few moments in thought. Imagine extensively the outcome that you desire, and consider whether you have any requirements on how the work is to be accomplished. The clearer you can envision what you need, the greater the likelihood that you’ll communicate so that the listener will deliver what you want.

Engage the listener completely. This may seem obvious, but many leaders make a request when the person is busy doing something else. Be sure you have the individual’s total attention. Help the individual understand why he or she is the most appropriate person to take this action.

Explain context. The listener doesn’t understand the current conditions as you do. Explain the background information that will affect the situation the individual will face. Describe the benefit of doing the assigned work well, and explain what the downside effects will be if the work is done poorly.

Be sensitive to mood. Much has been written in the last fifteen years about the importance of leaders having emotional intelligence. The way the listener responds will depend partially on how he or she is feeling, so look for receptivity. If you start your request and recognize something is bothering or distracting the listener, ask about it. Remember, your approach in making your request will either contribute to or take away from your long-term relationship with this person.

Describe the criteria for satisfaction. You may have a tendency to give a quick, general description of your desired outcome. When the result comes back and is far short of what you expected, however, both you and the worker will be disappointed. Think about what is too little and what is too much. When you’ve finished describing the quality you imagine, invite the listener to ask questions. Thoughtfully answer each one, and make it clear that inquiries while performing the task are welcomed, too.

Define the timing. Rarely is “as soon as possible” the best description of when you need something. It’s far better to say “before you leave today” or “no later than noon on Thursday.” By being very clear about the timeframe, you give the listener the privilege of doing some planning.

If you follow these guidelines, you will increase significantly the likelihood that people will do what you ask them to do. When you work to be clear in making your request, folks will feel comfortable asking questions to make sure they understand what's expected. To avoid disappointing you and embarrassing themselves, they'll likely exceed your minimum requirements.

If you consistently practice these guidelines, employee responsiveness will increase significantly. You'll be pleased at how quickly your organization's culture starts delivering improved results!

Dennis Hooper helps leaders strengthen their organizational cultures through building future leaders. You may contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com or by calling him at 478-988-0237.