



### **All You Have to Do Is Ask**

How to Master the Most Important Skill for Success

By Wayne Baker

15-minute read

#### ***Synopsis***

*All You Have to Do Is Ask* (2020) provides a set of tools that will help you improve your ability to ask for the things that contribute to success. It identifies eight main obstacles that stop us from making requests and examines how they can be overcome or circumvented.

#### ***Who is it for?***

- Team leaders and managers
- CEOs
- Entrepreneurs

#### ***About the author***

Wayne Baker is the Robert P. Thome Professor of Business Administration and Professor of Management & Organizations at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. He is also the faculty director of the Center for Positive Organizations. He has published six books, and numerous scholarly articles.

### ***What's in it for me? Learn how to ask your way to success.***

Why do some people succeed while others fail? Why do some projects take off while others fizzle out? Is the magic ingredient talent? Money? Dumb luck?

None of those things hurts, of course, but, in many cases, whether or not you succeed depends on a somewhat less-obvious skill: your ability to ask for help.

And yet most people struggle to request assistance. They worry that such a request will make them look incompetent or that it will simply be denied. But when we allow ourselves to ask for help, we unlock resources that may have otherwise remained forever hidden to us.

As you'll find out in these blinks, asking doesn't just benefit us personally; it can also work wonders for our teams and organizations.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- the four styles of giving and asking;
- three steps to learning how to ask for what we need; and
- how to create a psychologically safe workplace.

### ***Asking for help is the bridge between us and success.***

A baby was once born in Romania. Her name was Cristina, and, not long after her birth, she developed craniosynostosis, a rare condition that causes the bones of the skull to fuse prematurely. Craniosynostosis can result in a permanently misshapen head and distorted face. Surgery can resolve the problem – but it was difficult to find a specialist capable of conducting that surgery in Romania.

Don't worry – this is a story with a happy ending. Cristina did get the operation. But she wouldn't have if someone close to her hadn't leveraged the power of asking.

### **The key message here is: Asking for help is the bridge between us and success.**

If we don't ask, people won't know what we need. And if people don't know what we need, they can't help us.

Luckily for little Cristina, her aunt, Felicia, was aware of this. Even luckier for Cristina, Felicia happened to be taking part in an activity called the Reciprocity Ring when Cristina developed craniosynostosis. A Reciprocity Ring is a guided group activity that allows participants to tap the collective knowledge, wisdom, and resources of a large network to obtain the things they need. Felicia, who lived in France, used this opportunity to ask for contact with an experienced pediatric cranial surgeon who could help her niece. One

of her fellow participants was a pediatrician, and he introduced her to a relevant specialist. The rest is history.

You never know what people know – or whom they know – until you ask. If Cristina's story wasn't enough to convince you, here's another illustrative example: a senior engineer at a major auto company had encountered a complex technical problem. After grappling with it for a long time, he finally decided to reach out to his network of colleagues to ask for an expert who could help him. The first person to respond was a newly hired 22-year-old administrative assistant. It turned out that her father had the very expertise needed to untangle the problem. What's more, her father had recently retired and had lots of free time. Who would have thought that a young administrator would hold the key to the solution?

All this anecdotal evidence is backed up by hard science, too. In fact, studies show that as much as 90 percent of the help provided in the workplace occurs only *after* assistance has been requested.

So next time you feel stressed at work, don't hold back. Reach out to a colleague and experience the power of asking for help.

### ***We routinely underestimate other people's willingness and ability to help.***

Imagine the scene: You have to make an urgent phone call, but your phone battery is dead. Would you have the courage to ask to borrow a stranger's phone? Even if doing this didn't feel far too awkward for you, you might assume that no one would say yes.

But you'd be wrong. Psychologists at Columbia University have found that many strangers in New York City were willing to oblige when participants in a study asked to use their cell phones. In fact, it took, on average, only two tries to get a New Yorker to lend a phone. Believe it or not, participants didn't even have to make up a sob story about why they needed to borrow it.

### **This is the key message: We routinely underestimate other people's willingness and ability to help.**

People help one another more than you might think. One global Gallup survey found that 73 percent of Americans had helped a stranger within the past month. What's more, the majority of people in more than half of the 140 countries surveyed had done the same. Gallup also estimates that, worldwide, roughly 2.2 billion people help a stranger every month.

Still, many people struggle to make requests of those outside of their closest social circles. But this is a mistake. Our acquaintances can be a bridge to different social circles. Making requests of them can open the

door to new information and new solutions, not to mention other resources.

Friends from your past can serve a similar function. You might assume that your attempts to reach out will be rebuffed, or that your former friends may resent you reaching out just to ask a favor. But most people are, in fact, both happy to hear from an old friend and eager to help. Given that your life and theirs have gone in different directions, it's also likely that your knowledge and social networks no longer overlap as much as they once did. This could be just what you need to solve whatever problem you're facing.

Sometimes, however, what stops us from speaking up has nothing to do with individuals, but with our organization's systems and procedures. That's what we'll examine in the following blink.

***A company's culture, systems, procedures, and practices may stop us from asking for and giving help.***

When you're applying for a job, how much consideration do you give to a company's culture? For some, it's as important as the job description and financial reward.

So what's the most important ingredient in an organization's culture? According to researchers at Google, the answer is clear: psychological safety. When a workplace is psychologically safe, employees feel comfortable asking questions, admitting mistakes, and bringing up problems.

In fact, Kathryn Dekas, a senior manager at Google, says that psychological safety has been integral to the tech giant's ability to drive innovation in their products.

Sadly, in some organizations, asking for help may have negative consequences. In such situations, both the employees and the organization suffer.

***Here's the key message: A company's culture, systems, procedures, and practices may stop us from asking for and giving help.***

There are other things that may deter individuals from asking for help. Sometimes, it's that an organization has hired the wrong people. Employers can be so focused on an individual's skills and experience that they don't consider how that person will fit into the team, let alone whether the employee will be willing to help others or ask for help.

Rich Sheridan, CEO of Menlo Innovations, a leading software firm, learned this the hard way. When hiring programmers, Menlo Innovations used to consider only software and technical skills. Now, it seeks people who have "good kindergarten skills" – that is, people who are respectful, play well with others, and are willing to share.

Competitive rankings and individual rewards can also have a negative impact on cooperation. For example, if a company only recognizes individual achievements, it may develop a competitive culture in which asking for or giving help is not the norm.

Organizations that grow quickly may fragment into multiple small, disconnected departments that slow down collaboration. Globalization can also put the brakes on collaboration, with people separated by distance, time zones, and cultural norms.

Clearly, there are many obstacles to asking for help. But we can begin to overcome them once we understand the law of giving and receiving. We'll discuss that next.

***Asking for help is as important as giving it.***

"There is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving" – or at least so says an ancient proverb. But does this mean that it's wrong to receive? Not at all. In fact, these two acts go hand in hand. It's impossible to give without receiving, and vice versa.

The law of giving and of receiving – or asking – is not about helping those who help you. It's about helping others regardless of whether they've helped you or are likely to help you. It is an investment that will yield powerful returns over time.

The design firm IDEO is already reaping the rewards. That's because of its active "culture of helping," which encourages colleagues to share what they know and ask for help when they need it.

***The key message here is: Asking for help is as important as giving it.***

There are four general styles of giving and asking.

First, there's the overly generous giver. People like this spend so much time giving that they may suffer from "generosity burnout." They enjoy the gratitude of others. But because they don't disclose their own needs, overly generous givers miss out on the ideas, information, and opportunities they need to be successful.

Second, there's the selfish taker. Such people are so self-focused that they rarely, if ever, repay the generosity of others. There are times, though, when even the most selfish takers will give. Studies have proven that this happens more often when their actions are public than when they are private. This is because they are concerned about their reputations and don't want to appear selfish.

Then there are the lone wolves. These value self-reliance. Lone wolves hardly ever seek help – and they hardly ever give it. As a result, they tend to become socially isolated. This is the worst giving-asking style to have. Even a selfish taker is connected to a network.

The best giving-asking style is that of the giver-requester. These individuals are popular among their colleagues because they give help. They also seek help and receive what they need to succeed. For example, in the study of a telecoms firm, the giver-requesters were the most productive and well-regarded employees.

In the following blink, we will learn how to formulate requests.

### ***Learning to ask for what you need will help you get closer to your goal.***

For some people, asking is easy. The problem is that, even if you're one of these people, it can be hard to know precisely what to ask *for*. What do you need to achieve success? Or you might know what you need, but have no idea *whom* to ask. On other occasions, we know what we need and who can give it to us, but simply aren't sure how to express ourselves in a powerful way.

### **Here's the key message: Learning to ask for what you need will help you get closer to your goal.**

Making an effective request involves three steps. First, determine your goal. If that's a struggle, why not put pen to paper? Write down what you are working toward and why it is important to you.

Once you know your goal, you can develop your request using SMART criteria. SMART stands for *specific, meaningful, action-oriented, realistic, and timebound*. If your request is all those things, it's bound to be effective.

A specific request is more powerful than a vague one – so let people know why you need what you're asking for. Providing the why will also make your request more meaningful. Keep in mind that the why won't always be about you. It might be about your organization's objectives and priorities. Next, clearly state which actions a person needs to take to assist you. Your request also needs to be realistic. That is, it needs to be something that can happen even if it appears to be unlikely. Finally, make it timebound by laying out a clear timeline.

Now that you know how to ask, it's time to figure out whom to ask. It's not just about "who knows what," but also about "who knows whom." Sometimes, those we know can connect us with those who have the knowledge to assist.

Now you're ready to make your request. Precisely how should you do it? Well, that's up to you. Research has shown that a face-to-face request is 34 times more effective than an email message. The most important thing is to adapt to your audience. Do they prefer verbal or written communication? If they are going through a busy or stressful time, it is wiser to wait until they can consider your request properly.

But what if you get rejected? Well, don't lose heart – and don't give up. Did you know that J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter book was rejected by publishers 12 times? Rejection isn't personal. It's an opinion. And that opinion could be wrong.

In the next blink, we'll look at how a company can build a culture in which it is OK to ask for help.

### ***Devise team norms and routines that give employees permission to ask for help.***

Have you ever made a mistake at work? Were you able to discuss it freely with colleagues or ask for help in resolving it? If not, what stopped you? Was it the culture within your team or organization?

Companies need to create conditions in which team members feel comfortable asking for help and discussing mistakes.

It is vital that leaders set an example by asking for help when they need it. This is what Dr. Salvador Salort-Pons did when he took charge of the Detroit Institute of Arts. His leadership team was initially surprised, but it soon became a practice among all of the team's members.

### **This is the key message: Devise team norms and routines that give employees permission to ask for help.**

So what can encourage employees to reach out for support?

Select employees who not only have the right skills and abilities, but who are also requesters and generous givers. Then build a workplace that is psychologically safe – one where team members feel it's OK to ask for help and admit mistakes. If a team is new, give them time to get to know each other before diving into a project.

Why not use a variety of tools to create a psychologically safe workplace?

For example, you might adopt a practice called *stand-up*. Here's how it works: once a day, team members take 15 minutes to stand in a circle and take turns giving a brief update. At the software firm Atlassian, each team member answers three questions: What did I work on yesterday? What am I working on today? What issues are blocking me? Menlo Innovations takes it one step further, asking, What help do I need? This question is powerful because it normalizes making requests.

Another tool is the Reciprocity Ring. This guided activity makes it easy for people to tap into the power of a network to get what they need. It's done in a group of 20 to 24 people and everyone takes a turn making a request. The others then pause to consider how they can help. There have been some spectacular results. For example, someone who had been adopted at birth wanted to find the last names of his biological parents.



A fellow participant was able to tell him how he could do it and even coached him through the process.

What about collaborating across organizational divides? We'll discuss that in the next blink.

***Broaden the pool of people and resources you can tap into with your requests.***

If you have ever worked for a large organization, you may have observed that some teams or departments work independently of each other. Some even work on identical projects without being aware of it. What a waste of time and resources!

Sometimes companies are structured in a way that worsens these divides. For instance, consider Kent Power, where communication between superintendents who oversaw operations in the field and company executives had broken down completely. How did they bridge the divide?

The 17 executives and superintendents played a game that involved regular one-on-one phone calls over a period of three months. The catch? They could not talk about work. This game did the trick. By the end of the three months, the two groups had reestablished productive communication and improved their working relationship.

**The key message here is: Broaden the pool of people and resources you can tap into with your requests.**

Another way to bridge structural divides is continuing-education programs. These are customized programs specially designed for corporate clients and are open only to employees of a particular company. The attendees may come from different departments or offices, or even from different countries. Such programs give employees a chance to get to know each other, collaborate on team projects, and socialize.

The experience of Robert, a national sales manager for a major corporation, gives us some idea of the impact of these programs. He'd attended an executive education program that put him in a position to help when a challenging issue arose. A store manager was angry because of an error in a letter sent to customers from the company's headquarters. Robert realized that the letter had come from the department of someone he'd met in his program. As a result, he was able to work with this person to resolve the issue quickly and effectively.

Flexible budgeting is another useful tool. This means one department gives a portion of its budget to another department or project. Does that sound implausible to you? It's almost unheard of for any manager to give up some of her department's funds willingly. Yet this regularly happens at Hopelab, a social-innovation lab in California. When an exciting strategic communications opportunity came up, the only obstacle was the

\$100,000 price tag. But flexible budgeting allowed Hopelab to gather the funds needed. One project manager even scaled back efforts on one of his group's projects so that he could contribute a five-figure sum!

But even with a company's best efforts, some individuals may still struggle to ask for support. What else can companies do? Let's find out in the final blink.

***Recognize, appreciate, and reward those who request help as well as those who give help.***

Doesn't it feel good when you receive praise? Sadly, over 20 percent of full-time employees in the United States report that they never get recognition for their work. That's according to a survey by the Globoforce Workplace Research Institute.

Recognizing and rewarding employees is critical to building a more engaged, motivated, and productive workforce. Companies that are serious about creating a culture of asking should make a point of recognizing and rewarding staff members who request help. But take note: to be effective, recognition must be frequent, repeated, authentic, and personalized.

**Here's the key message: Recognize, appreciate, and reward those who request help as well as those who give help.**

Even if you think that your company has "asking" embedded in its culture, you may need to take extra steps to reach specific individuals.

In its written guidelines for staff, the Levine Greenberg Rostan literary agency emphasizes the importance of asking for help. Imagine, then, the surprise of the principal agent Jim Levine and his partners when they found out that Cristela, the assistant to the team manager, had failed to speak up when she needed help. Her shyness had held her back from reaching out for assistance, despite the agency's clear direction to do so.

Levine then realized his mistake. He hadn't been recognizing people for asking because he'd assumed that it was fully ingrained in the agency's culture. So during team meetings, he started giving people who had been asking for help shout-outs by name. Not long after, Cristela asked Levine and the other partners for an expanded role in the agency's work. You can imagine how pleased they were.

If your company already has a recognition program, why not tweak it to reward the people who request help? Argentis, an HR outsourcing firm in California, has developed the High-5 program. This allows any employee to give a colleague a High-5 for going above and beyond to help them out. The value of High-5 is a \$25 Amazon gift card. This program increased collaboration among teams and made those people supporting their coworkers even more visible. How easy

would it be to allow staff also to award High-5s to those who reach out for support?

When employees realize that asking is not just acceptable but even praiseworthy, it can break down any lingering inner resistance to requesting support.

### ***Final summary***

The key message in these blinks:

**Expressing our needs has multiple benefits. We become more effective at our jobs. It opens up new job opportunities. It can help us adapt better and more quickly to new circumstances. It boosts team performance and creativity. So next time you need help, don't hesitate to reach out.**

Actionable advice:

**Create a gratitude wall for both askers and givers.**

Create a wall in your office with blank "thank you" cards. Staff members who wish to express gratitude can use these cards to write notes to colleagues. These can be delivered personally or stuck back on the wall. Appreciation can be expressed to those who request help as well as give it.

### **Got feedback?**

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [remember@blinkist.com](mailto:remember@blinkist.com) with *All You Have to Do Is Ask* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

**What to read next: *Doesn't Hurt to Ask*, by Trey Gowdy**

You now know that the road to success is often paved with questions. But how can you act on that knowledge and take your question-posing skills one step further?

A great place to start is the blinks to *Doesn't Hurt to Ask*, where you'll discover how to truly leverage the power of questions. Are you ready not only to communicate clearly and connect with your listeners but to persuade them? Then head on over to the blinks to *Doesn't Hurt to Ask*!