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# Improve Quality by Making Clear Requests and Commitments and Avoiding the “I’ll Try” Trap

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## Abstract:

### Managers Slaying Dragons and Employees Being Thrown to the Wolves

It is widely known that the economic environment has contributed to difficult and stressful work environments. Often, employees are being asked to do more with less – fewer people to do the same amount of work, less budget and often greater client requests. And, the environment is changing at what seems like a faster and faster pace. The result is that managers are being asked to slay dragons every day – to solve complex problems that seem never-ending – and employees often think they’re being thrown to the wolves and getting eaten alive by all the work that comes their way.

### Increase in Quality and Effectiveness

A question that this paper will consider is how making clear requests and commitments will result in great increases in effectiveness and quality of work especially in challenging times. Each time a fuzzy request is met by an unclear commitment, time and energy are lost. Considering how this is multiplied by many employees in an organization, it is easy to imagine how work slows down significantly while waiting for clear agreements about what work is really required and what can realistically be accomplished by when. This situation is slowed down even further when someone says “yes” when the answer to whether they can meet a request by a certain timeframe is really “no”. Unrealistic goals and unclear expectations are self-defeating for everyone.

### Making Effective Requests and Commitments and Enemies of Saying “No”

The focus of this paper is to provide two methodologies; one methodology consists of skills to make an effective request and commitments. The other methodology is to understand the enemies and barriers that prevent us from saying “no” when we can’t meet a request and identifying some strategies to overcome those barriers. The skills of making effective requests and commitments include six practical steps. The steps are important, yet simple to apply. For example, it is much clearer to say “I need the updated Project Plan by the close of business on Friday” than to say “I need it as soon as you can”. This simple change can result in a more effective and efficient agreement.

All methods presented will be practical and could be applied the day after the conference.

### Author Biography:

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She has an M.A. degree in Coaching and Consulting in Organizations from the Leadership Institute of Seattle (LIOS), an M.B.A. in Information Systems from George Washington University, an M.S. from Syracuse University and additional coaching credentials from the Newfield Network in Boulder, Colorado. Pam holds the highest certification for Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® practitioners, including the MBTI® Step II. She facilitates workshops on Accountability for Teams. ©Brave Heart Consulting Inc. 2009

## Introduction

What would your life be like if:

- Everyone you work with made clear requests and agreements?
- If you knew it was OK to say “no” when you knew you couldn’t meet a request?
- If you and others made commitments they would follow through on every time?

When **unclear requests** are made (for example, “Can you get me an update to the project schedule as *soon as possible*”) and are met with **unclear commitments** (e.g. “Sure, I’ll *try* to get that to you *when I have a chance*”), the end result is often frustration, extra time, low trust and most important of all, missed deadlines and poor quality because of lack of clarity about the request and the commitment when the request and commitment were made. Sometimes, the response is “I’ll try” when actually the person is aware that there is currently not enough time to get it done. But saying “no, I can’t get that done by the deadline” is seen as “not being a team player” or some other belief about why it’s not OK to say ‘no’. This lack of specific requests and commitments and the hesitance to say “no”, is experienced everywhere - in projects, work teams, families and the community. The result is that sloppy or vague requests often cause multiple ineffective conversations about one issue.

**What will be described in this paper:**

- Creating a culture of accountability
- What’s in it for you to make these changes in communication
- Six practical steps to clear requests
- Saying “yes” when you mean “no” - overcoming the “I’ll try” trap
- What are some enemies of or barriers to saying “no” and how to overcome them

## Creating a Culture of Accountability

Making clear requests and commitments and making it acceptable to say “no” when a request cannot be fulfilled are some of the foundational skills for creating a **culture of accountability**. In a culture of accountability, the language that is used is clear and complete, typically in the first conversation. In a culture of accountability, commitments that cannot be fulfilled as promised are addressed directly and corrected. People say “yes” when they mean they can fulfill a commitment and say “no” when they cannot fulfill the request as it is initially made. In a culture of accountability, when someone says “no, I can’t meet the request as you requested it”, the next sentence is usually, “What changes can be made, such as taking things off my plate or changing the deadline, so I can meet the request?” In a culture of accountability, each person knows they have the skills and have the willingness to do what they personally can to improve a situation vs. saying that “someone else” should do something about this mess.

A culture of accountability applies to work organizations and teams, softball and other sport teams, as well as families and community organizations. This applies to all parts of life.

In this paper, the focus is on the language skills that provide part of the foundation of accountability: making clear requests and agreements and saying “no”. Resources for continuing the process of creating a culture of accountability are provided in the references at the end of this paper.

## What's in it for you to make these changes in communication?

Let's go back to the questions "What would your life be like if..."

- People made clear requests and agreements?
- If you knew it was OK to say "no" when you knew you couldn't meet a request?
- If people made commitments they would follow through on every time?

Many people respond that their life would be easier and less stressful; they would get more things done quickly because they would know right away what they had to do and what others would really do. They would have a higher level of trust in the people they interact with because commitments would be fulfilled the first time more often and a conversation about missed commitments would be an easy process because it's expected and everyone would be trained in how to do it. "No" would stop being a difficult word to say to someone who made a request if you could not fulfill the request.

### Benefits of a culture of accountability include:

- Builds confidence in making commitments or decisions
- Builds relationships and trust
- Prevents problems and saves time
- More efficient – reduces number of steps to getting things accomplished
- Saves frustration, waiting for someone to fulfill a request that was not clear or had fuzzy deadlines, quality standards or directions
- The skills can be applied immediately to many different situations
- Increased clarity to the job
- Builds competence

## Six Practical Steps to Clear Requests

**Why do we make requests?** We make requests because we want something. We want cooperation, help, different results, someone to take action. It seems obvious that we make requests when we want to change the future by *asking* someone to do something. The first time I thought that a request changes the future, I realized that just *asking* someone to do something is taking action. I used to think that action was me having to do the work myself. Now, I see that the request is part of the work and making an effective request is part of how I can create the future and the results that I want. And I'm much more motivated to make clear requests because I can see how I'll benefit and so will the team.

Some of the steps to an effective request seem very obvious and simple, yet when analyzed, can be very challenging. For example, it may seem obvious that a Committed Speaker and Listener are requirements for an effective request. Yet, it is tempting for me to try to do two things at once and have a conversation to make a request while doing email or texting.

Sometimes we do not state clearly what future action and conditions of satisfaction are wanted because we don't know that they are. We may not have taken the time to analyze what's required and make a fuzzy request because we lack the clarity. In this instance, often the results are mediocre or not what is needed and have to be re-done. The cost is time for doing it over, frustration and lower quality. And, I don't have time, can't stand low quality and really don't have the energy to be unnecessarily frustrated!

## Six Elements of Effective Requests

### 1. **Committed speaker – you**

It is not an anonymous or vague requestor. A committed requestor does what it takes to get a committed listener. You are not doing anything but making the request – not doing email, texting or talking on a cell phone. Example: An uncommitted speaker might toss a request over their shoulder as they pass someone in the hall. A committed speaker will stop and directly address the person. A committed speaker understands the objective and clearly frames and describes the request.

### 2. **Committed listener**

Not someone on the phone, doing emails, texting, talking to someone else or on their way out the door. That's right, neither you nor the person you're talking to should be reading email or texting at the same time you're making the request. Both of you need to stop and take the time, often one minute, to take the first action in making the request. Ask the listener "Is this a good time for us to talk about...If not, when would be a good time?" Sounds simple, yet sometimes it's not easy to stop and ask. Can you relate?

### 3. **Future Action and Conditions of Satisfaction**

Give enough detail about what will satisfy your request so that what is "obvious" to you is also "obvious" to the other person. For example, "What I mean by 'update the Project Plan' is to revise the timelines for all the action items for our team. I'd like the report to be sent to all the Project Leads". I know that you might not want to have to give all that detail. You might be concerned that the listener will think that you're talking down to them or telling them something they already know. And, until you tell them exactly what you need, without any assumptions that they already know it, you can't be sure they do know it. Besides, telling them is another chance for them to ask questions and to be sure you'll get what you need.

### 4. **Timeframe**

Detailed enough to get the results you want. Not "as soon as possible" or "when you have a chance" or "in a timely fashion" or "promptly" or by the end of the week (is Friday the end of the week? Is Saturday? Sunday?). This change alone was the best and easiest way I began to make more effective requests. I realized that I was fuzzy and not really telling others when I wanted something. Now, I'm forced to figure out when I really do want the request to be fulfilled before I make the request. Sometimes it's a 20 second thinking process, "Do I need this by Thursday or Friday?" and I can usually find 20 seconds!

**For example,** "It needs to be submitted electronically by the close of business on Friday (5 p.m.) Pacific Time"

### 5. **Mood of the request**

The frame of mind, yours and the other person's, affects how the request will be received. If you (or the other person) are angry when the request is made, the person listening will be less likely to respond favorably or be able to hear the request. Determine your mood and estimate the mood of the other and determine if it's suitable to make the request. Sometimes making a request when angry will work. But often the other person can't hear anything except the irritation. When the irritation/anger is all they hear, they can't hear your request. If you determine you or the other person is not in the right frame of mind, wait for a more appropriate time or change your frame of mind. (Of course, you can only change *your* frame of mind!)

### 6. **Context.**

Context is everything. Context is background information that can be helpful in preparing the listener to listen to what you have to say. For example, "The reason this request is important is that the main client has an opportunity to use our software with one of their new clients if we can guarantee the project completion date." In another context, say without a client request, the deadline not be important enough to implement.

## Saying “yes” when you mean “no” – Enemies and Barriers to saying “no”

**Why is “no” sometimes a difficult word to say?** Let’s say the following request is made, “Can you revise our department budget this week?” If the organization culture is such that saying “no” is considered to be “not a team player”, then team members will say “yes” or “I’ll try” when realistically they have more commitments than are possible to fulfill in the required timeframe.

### Enemies and Barriers to saying “no”

We each have some habitual reasons we might say “yes” when we mean “no”. There may be certain situations where this is more common – never saying “no” to your favorite professor, your spouse, parent, child or your best friend. An “enemy” is a common reason or habit that gets in our way of saying “no”. Review the following list of typical enemies and barriers to saying “no” and determine which ones are the favorites, or most commonly used, for you and/or your organization.

### Common Enemies of Saying No

1. **Discomfort with saying ‘no, I can’t meet that request’.** Sometimes we grew up in families or now work on teams where we have to say ‘yes’ and saying ‘no’ isn’t allowed. Saying ‘no’ often does require personal courage and the belief that telling the truth clearly is the most respectful action that can be taken. *Saying “no” to a request or offer is not a rejecting the person, it is simply declining the request or offer.*
2. **Needing to be positive and seeing ‘no’ as a negative response.** This response is related to wanting to please and be liked. This calls for seeing ‘no’ as a truthful, respectful, clear response that is full of integrity. It is, in fact, a very positive response because you hold the requester as capable of hearing the truth, hold yourself as capable of telling the truth and believe that saying ‘no’ clearly will result in the most efficient response.
3. **Wanting to be a good team player.** We’ve commonly seen good team players as being ‘can do’ folks who will take on any task. Unfortunately, there are limits to what can be accomplished by anyone. Knowing your limits and when you can or can’t fulfill a request is an important part of being on a high performing team. High performing teams promise what they can deliver and deliver what they promise.
4. **“I can just work a little harder and try to get it done.”** This is a particularly seductive belief because it eats away at our ability to set limits and promise only what we can deliver. This devilish voice in our heads adds just a few minutes to every day until we’re always working. I’ve gotten sucked into this one more times that I’d like to admit. And, I’m getting better at realizing when I’m at the edge of what I can do realistically and that cutting out exercise or hiking so I can work a little harder and get a few more emails done doesn’t serve me or the organization.
5. **Living in constant over-commitment.** Always being overcommitted often becomes a habit and leads to burnout. It’s a primitive strategy that we learned early due to messages such as “everyone needs to give 120%”. The result is that you run out of full capacity, experience exhaustion and often find yourself in a mood of resignation (meaning you think there’s nothing that can be done about it...it’s just the way it is and will always be). Worst of all, you’re not producing quality work efficiently and often your non-work life and health suffer. Ask yourself if you’re living in a perpetual state of having way too much to do and commitments that you made not be completed. How is that working for you?

## How to Say “No” in a Culture that Won’t Allow “No”

Sometimes organizational cultures simply won’t allow people to say “no”. I get that. So what’s a person to do when they can’t say no, but also know they can’t meet the request and they’re tired of making false commitments?

Here are some alternative responses that get to the same desirable end result: an agreement that can be fulfilled. Use these after you’ve exhausted all the other enemies of say ‘no’ and making sure that you’ve carefully examined whether you just don’t want to try out saying ‘no’.

### Other Ways to Say “No” to the Request as Originally Made

- I can do that if the due date changes to...
- I can complete that if I take something else off my plate
- I’m already booked up between now and when you want this.
- I want to say ‘yes’, but only if we change the scope
- “I can if....”

## Overcoming the “I’ll try” trap

### What are the results when someone says “I’ll try” or “yes” when they mean “no”?

The results are that relationships and trust are damaged because an inaccurate response was given. Yes, we begin to say to ourselves and maybe to others, “I can’t count on Marie (names have been changed to protect the innocent!) because she doesn’t follow through on what she promises.

Another result is that the item can often be delayed while the requester is waiting for someone to “try”. In the original Star Wars movie, **Yoda says to Luke, “Luke, there is no try”**. There is no “try” because either you make a commitment to actually complete the task or you say “no”. There are obviously times when we do not completely fulfill our commitments, but not because we had a halfhearted “try”, it’s because of many other issues such as underestimating the time or effort required etc. When we say “I’ll try”, it often is intended for us to have an excuse for not meeting the commitment.

In reality, saying “no” when it is the straightforward truth is the most respectful response that can be given. It assumes that the listener is capable of handling the truth and that all parties will be better served to have the truth on the table as soon as possible so an alternative can be found that will allow the request to be satisfied.

### Next Steps: Where to Start?

You know you’ve been moving fast and not as clear about requests and commitments. You’d like to make some changes but it seems overwhelming to all of a sudden start saying ‘no’ and turning down requests. Where do you start?

First, just notice what you do. Notice how many times you say something like, “I’ll get back to you ASAP”, without being specific. Once you notice your common patterns, add a clear date or deadline to your request or response. It’s that simple. Then, notice the results. What happens when you’re more specific with your requests or commitments (e.g. when you say, “get back to me by Friday at noon” instead of “ASAP”)?

Second, take a minute before you ask someone to do something to write down, or at least clarify in your head, the exact request that you want to make.

Third, talk with your manager and/or your team about whether or not you're meeting deadlines and getting the results you want. If the answer is that you're not getting the results, have a team conversation about whether requests and commitments are clear enough. Use the Six Elements of Effective Requests as your guide.

## **Conclusion:**

In this paper, foundational skills for creating a culture of accountability were presented: How to make effective requests; understanding the barriers and enemies to saying "no"; and why saying "I'll try" is an ineffective response to a request were also discussed. Making these changes in your team, organization, volunteer group and/or family may lead to greater clarity, trust and getting more accomplished with less stress. Start today!

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