

How to Ask for Help

Brought to you by Assemble You.

For many of us, asking for help doesn't come naturally. From fears about appearing incompetent to concerns about burdening people, there are so many reasons we might avoid asking for the support we need.

But being able to request and accept help can benefit your performance, your working relationships, and your well-being.

Let's explore how to get more comfortable with asking for help, when and who to ask, and how you can do it in a way that respects people's time and energy.

Asking for help can feel very negative. It often means something's gone wrong, or you're having to admit that you can't do something. But if you can reframe it as a sensible, intentional choice, you'll hopefully find that it feels more comfortable.

Academic Wayne Baker is the author of the book "All You Need to Do is Ask". In a piece for UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, [he explains](#): "When we seek help as an individual, a team, or an organization, we're better at learning and problem solving, more creative, more satisfied with what we do, more efficient, and less stressed and burned out."

Having the confidence to request help means you can also make the most of chances for development. Writing [for Forbes](#), David Sturt and Todd Nordstrom point out that being in a position where you need to ask for help often means you're working in a "discomfort zone" that is forcing you to grow and learn.

You might also stop yourself from asking for help out of fear of inconveniencing or irritating your colleagues. In fact, people generally view being able to help as a really positive experience.

Academics at Stanford University studied people's assumptions about how others would feel when asked for help, then compared them with how those other people actually felt about being asked. [They found](#) that: "those needing help consistently underestimated others' willingness to help, underestimated how positively helpers would feel, and overestimated how inconvenienced helpers would feel."

Imagine you have a colleague who is really efficient at a certain task. You might think that asking them to show you how they do it would be a waste of their time and that they'd resent you for it. In reality, they'd probably be pleased that you'd noticed and would get a boost out of sharing their strategy.

So, rather than admitting a weakness, try to view asking for help as a way to increase the likelihood of finding a good solution, gain valuable knowledge, and strengthen your working relationships.

The next stage is thinking about when you should ask for help.

One situation where asking for help can be very valuable is when you're not sure what to do next, or you realise your project would benefit from specialised knowledge.

Think about the last time you were stuck and decided to push through, rather than asking someone for their input. You might have been able to get the task done eventually, but was it the most efficient use of your time? And did it turn out as well as it could have?

While it can be good to work some things out for yourself, struggling in silence can also be counterproductive. Asking someone the right question at the right time helps you to learn while also preserving time and resources.

When it comes to determining which questions you should work out for yourself and which questions you should ask aloud, careers expert and author Gorick Ng provides this advice for the [Harvard Business Review](#):

"Picture three concentric circles. The innermost circle represents what you currently know. The middle circle represents what you don't currently know but can figure out yourself. Any question that sits within this middle circle is a "bad" question."

If it's a question with multiple possible solutions, he suggests assessing different options and the pros and cons of each. As he puts it: "If you can identify an option that is clearly superior to the others and is a decision you can make without impacting other people, then no need to ask your question either — you just found the approach that others would have suggested."

There's a very different situation where it's vital to ask for help, and that's when you're feeling overwhelmed. Perhaps you've overcommitted yourself and have

suddenly realised that you can't handle all the tasks on your plate. Alternatively, you may be struggling with stress or burnout.

Not asking for help could even be contributing to these feelings. [Writing for HBR](#), executive coach Rebecca Zucker explains that when she surveyed 730 working professionals, she found that not asking for help was one of the strongest predictors of feelings of overwhelmingness.

It's better to admit to someone that you can't cope as soon as you become aware of the problem. Otherwise, the situation might spiral out of your control, having knock-on effects on your work and well-being.

The next decision to make is **who** to ask.

Writing [for HBR](#), social psychologist Heidi Grant warns against making a general request of a group. That causes something called diffusion of responsibility, making it less likely that someone will step up. So, try to make individual requests instead.

In some circumstances, the person you need to talk to is clear. For instance, you can refer IT questions to your organisation's IT team. Alternatively, if you're struggling with your workload, then it would be appropriate to talk to your manager.

But if there isn't a designated person to ask, Gorick Ng advises approaching the most junior of your coworkers who is likely to have the information you need. If they can't help, then ask someone more senior.

You could even consider asking someone if they know who you should ask. As Wayne Baker explains: "Even if you don't know who the expert is, you may know someone who probably does know."

**

Finally, you need to carefully plan your request.

As Heidi Grant explains: "You want people to feel that they would be helping because they want to, not because they must, and that they're in control of the decision." To do this, you should avoid phrases like "Can I ask you a favour?" as this will make them feel trapped.

You should also steer clear of apologies or justifications like "I don't usually do this". That will make offering help a much less positive experience for them.

Grant also recommends helping people to focus on their effectiveness. You can do this by highlighting the impact their help will have so they know it's worthwhile.

As for the request itself, try to be as specific as possible.

Gorick Ng says to avoid open-ended questions. That's because this represents a much bigger demand on someone else's time and energy. They have to guess what it is you need and what kind of help would be most relevant.

Instead, provide context: explain the situation and why you feel you need their input. Then, ask them a question that's as closely targeted to your current problem as possible.

Say you want to ask a senior member of your team for career progression advice. Rather than asking, "Do you have any tips?" you could ask them to recommend a book or an online resource about an aspect of their role that you're keen to learn more about.

Of course, it may not always be possible to make strategic requests like this. If it's a broader issue you're struggling with (like your mental health), then just starting a conversation with someone is a good first step.

As Heidi Grant puts it: "The helper must realize that you need help. Human beings are, as a rule, preoccupied with their own affairs." She goes on to explain that even if they are aware that you're struggling, they might not realise you want help and might be afraid of overstepping. So, let them know that you would welcome some assistance.

That being said, remember that it shouldn't always be on you to reach out. Your workplace should be actively engaging with you to ensure that you have everything you need. Knowing how and when to advocate for your needs is an important tool, but it shouldn't be a replacement for a supportive environment.

Asking for help can enable you to perform your role more effectively and efficiently. It can also help you to grow and develop. While it might feel like an imposition sometimes, it could actually strengthen your working relationships.

Remember, an effective request for help is specific, provides context, and makes the person being asked feel that they have a choice. If this isn't possible, though, you should still start a conversation and make people aware that you're in need.

The best way to get more comfortable with something is to practice. Why not think of a small request you could make of one of your colleagues right now and try out some of the tips we've covered in this lesson?