

## MAKING EFFECTIVE REQUESTS

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### **Part-I: When is a request not a request -- and why you need to know.**

#### **PART-II: Five properties of an effective request. Some words work better than other words.**

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### **Part-I: When is a request not a request -- and why you might want to know.**

Ever make a seemingly reasonable request of someone and had them get their back up in reaction? Or had someone respond in a way making tragically clear they misunderstood what you're asking? Or, perhaps worse, they appeared to agree yet didn't follow through – or later denied you ever asked them?

Or maybe you've been on the other end? You're blind-sided, discovering someone's resentful or angry at you for your not having done something (perhaps something you might've been willing to do) but you can't remember they asked -- or you do recall they expressed *something* about it, but certainly you'd never agreed to it?

I've sure have been on both ends. Sure, it could be something about others that explains such bollixes – but often when I've done an autopsy on the resulting mess it became clear if I had more skill at making requests (or, more important, if I'd been conscious of whether I was subtly demanding rather than requesting) my message might've gotten through -- Or at least I'd have known it didn't and avoided the disappointment based on my mistaken assumption that it had.

These scenarios are more common than I like. Maybe it's because our culture gives us mixed messages about asking for our needs ("nice people don't put others on the spot," vs. "It never hurts to ask" and "If you don't assert your needs no one else will"), or simply because it teaches us counterproductive ways of asking others for what we want.

From my years of experience as an NVC (nonviolent communication) facilitator ([www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)), and by screwing up often, I'm convinced there are two different facets of skills and awareness in making requests, that if mastered, serve me, and those around me, well:

The first is the more important, more subtle and challenging, yet less technical, facet: It's understanding and developing consciousness of the difference between requests and demands. This may seem simple:

“Would you please ask your guests to not park in space 49?” and “honey would you bring me a glass of water when you come upstairs?” both sure *sound* like requests. By contrast “get your ass out here and help me tune this car before I kick your ass” sure sounds like a demand.

I'd agree the first two quotes are in the format of requests and the second in the language of demand. But what I'm getting at is that until we touch the spirit/energy of the speaker – and often until we see what happens if the listener doesn't comply – we don't really know if it's a request or a demand.

Imagine, in the first example, the listener responds with “Who made you the parking cop?” or “no I don’t think I will,” --- or even just with body language and voice tone making clear they don’t intend to do what you asked (or will do so resentfully.) Then, how the requester reacts to that “no” tells me (and his listener) if it was a demand in request’s clothing:

If I was making a disguised *demand* (consciously or unconsciously), when I get back the “no” I’d have morally judgmental thoughts about the person -- such as “how selfish” or “after all I’ve done it’s the least she could do”, “asshole”, etc. Or I’d apply open or subtle punishment or retribution: Maybe next time I’d tow away his guest's car without notice; others might even do something extreme such as slashing the guest’s tires. In extreme cases an event that looking like a simple request for a parking space have resulted in what we call road rage shootings.

Here’s another example suggesting words alone don’t make a request: Imagine a police officer stopping you at night on an unlighted rural road saying “Please step slowly out of your car and keep your hands where I can see them.” In that case, the “please” probably doesn't mean much: You’d probably understand that if you say “thanks for your request, but I prefer not to”, let alone say “hell no,” or leap out quickly with your hands in your pockets you could get shoved against the car and hand-cuffed or even shot.

On the other hand, in my last example, perhaps you and I are good-old-boy types with a warm relationship and a history of enjoying working on our cars together and used to cursing at each other....and you trust that my threat to “kick your ass” is just a playful way of asking you to come out and hang with me while we work on the car – and that if you said “can’t – got to finish my taxes” that I’d understand and not resent you for not helping. Then, in that case, despite the aggressive language it’s not really a demand.

Another litmus test I (or my listener) can use to check if I’m coming from a demand space with my supposed request is to ask “is there really only one ‘right’ – acceptable -- answer?”

It's often not easy to notice we're making demands, especially if we've been raised to be nice white-collar types, "good people", and polite. Decades ago I first mentioned this concept to my wife (who these days, is also an NVC facilitator): Her first reaction was "not me -- I'm not a demanding person -- If someone doesn't do what I ask I just leave 'em alone." Digging deeper she became aware that the "leave 'em alone" was tainted with a negative energy, judgment, resentment and disappointment. Sort of a "screw you anyway -- I don't need you." She was surprised to discover this, believing that she’d grown past being demanding. (Of course, there are situations where backing-off is life-serving, but if my main or only strategy for dealing with hearing or sensing "no" is withdrawing, particularly if it also involves carrying subtle resentment, there’ll be many missed opportunities and disappointments both me and those around me.)

So, then, what can I do if I’m honest with myself and I notice I *am* in demand mode: I look inside and hear myself saying “you know, as far as I’m concerned right now there *is* only one acceptable answer – a ‘yes’ -- To be honest I’m not really open to brainstorming for other solutions and I’ll be irritated as heck if he won’t agree?”

Does this mean I should stuff and bottle up all my requests, concerns and needs? Hardly – though I may need to do some internal work before trying to make my request. Particularly so if I’m angry.

We have an NVC saying about anger:

When I'm angry, three things are usually true:

- (1) There's something I'm wanting very much that I'm not getting.
- (2) I'm telling myself that someone should be giving it to me.
- (3) I'm about to speak or act in a way virtually guarantying that I won't get it -- or at least that if someone gives it to me we'll both pay an unacceptable price for me having gotten what I want through the energy of my anger and/or their fear, guilt, or shame.

In short, being in a demand space, usually means I'm pretty attached to something – that there's something I'm wanting so desperately that I'm not in an ideal space to have a real dialog -- and/or I already have in mind some unflattering *pre*-judgments about the person I'm about to request something of. To me that suggests, unless this is an emergency (the house on fire, or a financial decision needed in the next 5 minutes to avoid catastrophe) I could probably use some time out. I can use that time to get some serious empathy from myself or others to get clear what exactly my deep needs are, and what my options really are if you won't meet my request. This receiving of empathy (quite different from sympathy or agreement) -- whether from a skilled internal dialog or from someone who can give real empathic but non-judgmental listening/connection -- is a critical core process central to NVC but beyond the scope of this article. But at a minimum I can at least be aware that I'm not really making a request and not kid myself or my listener (who probably won't be fooled anyhow.) If I'm in a situation where others are expecting a response me it might be useful to create some space for myself by saying something like "I need to digest what I'm needing further before I get clear what, if anything, I might want to ask from you about this."

If you're willing to try to cultivate even just being conscious of when you're in the space of true request and when you're in the space of demand I'd bet you'll note dramatic differences in how others react and in your own balance. Personally, I can say that with a little introspection and practice this is a simple (though not *easy*) process well worth cultivating. If you don't beat yourself when you notice you're not meeting this standard, just noticing where you're at on the request-demand spectrum can naturally lead to more effectiveness and peace.

So, I hope you'll keep this distinction between the energy of request and the energy of demand in mind, because, in the technicalities of language that I'll cover in Part-II, next, my language guidelines might help you a little or a lot; but if you forget to notice whether you're in the energy of demand, but it's equally likely the listener will pick up the underlying energy of demand and finely tuning your language might not be very helpful.

In Part-II I'll also explain why, even if you develop perfect intent and spirit and perfect language skills, others may still read demands into your requests (the "chip on the shoulder" syndrome) -- and what you can do about it.

### **Making Effective Requests**

#### **PART-II: Five properties of an effective request.**

##### **Some words work better than other words.**

In Part-I we considered the profound, if often sneaky, difference between my making a request and a demand; I hope I made clear this is a difference in intent, energy, spirit, and mind-set.

Here I repeat, although there's great value in learning what speaking styles and forms can make a request effective and easier to hear, but that without developing sensitivity to and commitment to the spirit of requests – and the cautionary symptoms of demand energy – just tuning my technical language skills will at best be very a useful band-aid and at worst be a serious impediment to communication. That said, once I'm committed to trying to stay in the intent of request there are some fairly simple speaking guidelines that can be incredibly useful and powerful, and can greatly help me in my intention to live in the spirit of requests, and easier for others to hear them.

First consider a few common less effective forms of request language:

- 1) **Indirect requests and hints:** Such as “I need to get these packages to FedEx in the next hour or there'll be hell to pay!” Sure, that's what I need, but even though you're the only other person in the room I haven't made any request of you at all.
- 2) **Overly general requests** (we'll talk more about this): “Would you respect me and give me my freedom?” Sure, but how exactly do I do that?
- 3) **Any wording implying you “owe me.”** For example, “It's the least you could do after all I've done for you”:

I had an interesting experience with how subtle this “you owe me” dynamic can be, and how exquisitely sensitive to and resistant most of us are to any request that implies someone thinks we “owe” them something. Takes all the fun out of helping and cuts to the core of our desire for respect and independence:

Years ago my wife asked me “Would you do the dishes?” -- paused briefly and added “...I did them yesterday.”

I had a fascinating epiphany when I heard her second part: I replied “You know, when you asked if I'd do the dishes my “willingness meter” in my gut was up at 98%, but when you added “I did them yesterday” it sagged down to about 50%!” Just the subtle suggestion that I owed it to her took the pleasure out of doing it as a gift and instilled the fear of being manipulated. Since then, both of us have examined that phenomena in ourselves and in the couples we work with in conflict resolution. We observe it's remarkably common – if often unnoticed. Many of us tragically (although with good reason based on our cultural history) may have difficulty trusting that others would want to do anything for us unless we have some power over them, or they “owe us.” The tragic thing is that when I say something like “[after all] I did them yesterday” I may believe that will motivate you to be more willing, when usually it has the opposite effect. Or, you may do it out of guilt, but down the road both of us will pay a price for the subtle coercion.

**So here are five core technical features of the language and forms I've found effective for getting my requests across to others.** Effective requests are in what I call “Positive Present Action Language” (or concrete language.) (Notice that when I use the word “positive” it doesn't mean “nice” or “wonderful” or “uplifting” but merely that I ask for what I *do* want, not what I don't want (which would be, here, a “negative” language.)

**(1) Be specific, not general:**

If you ask something general such as “I want you to respect me,” I sometimes call that a “wish” rather than a request.

To be specific, you could ask yourself what your listener could really *do* or *say* that you, in your heart, you would trust as real evidence of respect for you. Sometimes this is called making a "do-able" request: So, instead, for example, you might make this sort of request to your listener: "I'd like you to tell me several things I've done that you find valuable and admirable. Would you be willing to do that right now?"

Similarly, "I wish you would get along better with Jill" -- and -"I want you to be more considerate of Jill's feelings" are general unspecific requests -- wishes, not concrete requests. Instead, consider asking your listener something specific, such as: "Would you be willing to agree to ask Jill what she wants before making decisions that affect her?"

## (2) Use "**Do-wants**" not "**Don't wants**":

If you ask someone to "Stop being so egotistical," you can trigger several problems: First, the listener hasn't even heard what you want them to do -- only what you want them to not do. Second, you're using "to be" as if it were a verb: That is, your listener can't even hear what you want him to stop doing, only what to stop *being*. So I suggest not asking anyone to stop "being" anything and figure out a real action they could perform that might address the core of your needs.

I suspect that we're all intrinsically creative beings-- more motivated to *do* things than *not* do things. (Think about the way you react when others tell you not to do something.)

Second, even if you'd said -- "I want you to be more considerate of others' viewpoints," there's still a gap between what you're wishing for and what listener's actions might actually manifest "consideration":

Even though in that case you've told the listener what you *do* want, your want is still in a vague general "wish" form -- maybe too general for your listener to act on.

So, to ask for your "do-want" *and* be specific you might, for example, make this kind of request instead of the one above:

"Would you tell me if you'd be comfortable agreeing to this: When other's express their opinions at the staff meeting, I'd like you to write down any good points in their opinions, then wait at least two minutes before you offer your own proposals?"

The classic true story illustrating the need to tell people what you do want, *and* also the need to be highly specific, is of woman who, after attending an NVC workshop with Marshall Rosenberg (the founder of this process) and learning about making do-want requests, asked her husband "Would you be willing take some time off from work?"

She was quite upset when in response to her request he did indeed make arrangements to take three weeks off, but had signed up to go off on a three week golf tournament by himself.

## (3) Ask in the present:

Asking "Next time get a good-night's sleep before an important meeting" is better than average as a request and it's specific; but it's set in the *future* (the "next time.")

In contrast, asking "Would you tell me right now if you're totally comfortable assuring me you'll find a way to get a good-night's sleep before any important meeting?" -- is in the *present*.

"I want you to learn how to relax when the boss in on your case", is in the *future*.

But "Would you tell me if you'd be willing to listen to some of my ideas on how you might calm yourself when the boss is on your case", is more specific and in the *present*."

This, and indeed most of these concepts, are ones effective sales people use: The car salesperson doesn't just ask "do you like this car and the deal enough to buy it?" He/she eventually gets down to asking "If I get the manager to throw in an extra CD player would you be comfortable signing this sales contract today?"

(4) **Create open ended *connecting-requests***, ones that invite further connection -- not closed requests. Avoid wording that can easily be heard as ultimatums:

Asking "are you in or are you out?" or "will you sign this contract now?" or "will you do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week" are indeed Positive (do-wants), in the Present, and Action (do-able). I like all that. Yet they invite a simple "yes" or "no" answers, rather than creating openings.

What's more, the problem with getting a "no" answer isn't only that don't get what you want, but it tends to put two people firmly in opposition – a static situation. Getting a simple "yes" might not always be great either: If the person says "yes" but is thinking "-- Yes, *but* I really have no choice; I'll sign until I can afford a lawyer and try to cancel my agreement," -- or if he says "yes" but is thinking, "-- Yes, but I'll see that everyone in town knows how he's screwed me." That's probably not the quality/type of "yes" that you really want. As we say in NVC, getting people to do what I want out of fear, guilt, or shame is usually something all of us will pay dearly for somewhere down the line.

One way of making that above example into a *connecting-request* might be to ask, "Would you be willing tell me if you could feel good about signing right now?",--- or --"Could you sign now, or tell me what needs of yours would keep you from being comfortable signing right now?" Or, in the second example converting it to "is there anything that would make you less than 100% enthusiastic about agreeing to do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week?" That unfolds things – lets both of us into the same playing field where we can really understand each other – sometimes leading to novel solutions previously invisible.

(5) **Make requests directly to individuals** – not groups:

Saying things like "I just want us to speak to each other using words other than 'liar' and 'cheater.'" -- or -- saying "I want us to negotiate a new contract" are above average in being specific, and I like that. But, these may tell your listener what you want "*us*" to do, but they don't really tell a listener what you want *them* to do.

So, instead, saying -- "I'd like to know how you'd feel about continuing this talk finding words other than 'liar' and 'cheater' to express your needs?" might be one way you could ask that directly to the individual.

In group settings it's common to hear someone asking something like "I'd like us to do X" leaving it unclear as to what, if any, responses would give the requester confidence that anyone has a position, let alone an agreement, to do X. Instead, saying "I'm wanting a policy of X. Would anyone who prefers an alternative, or who has needs that wouldn't be consistent with that be willing to let me know right now?" might be a way to speak to a group yet be still making request of individuals.

Finally, **there's a last, least controllable, element in the arena of requests:**

That's the issue of whether the listener *hears* a demand (a situation threatening his/her autonomy and creating in their mind a dammed-if-you-do dammed-if-you-don't situation) or a request (a wonderful opportunity to nurture and give a gift to a fellow human being.)

This one's tricky: I do everything "right" (be truly coming from an open ended space of request, and have perfectly tuned my words) and I still get back a negative reaction -- or a grudging agreement. Likely what happened is that, my listener heard a demand. Sigh. One trap here for me at this point is I may, although having started in the energy of request, but now I shift energy and start "shoulding" the person -- thinking "what's the matter with that asshole -- she's got a chip on her shoulder as big as the national deficit." In short "She *should* have heard a request." If I go there, things are likely to further downhill. The symptoms of whether a listener hears a demand aren't always in whether they respond with a "yes" or a "no." The signs may be grossly obvious, such as "Fuck off", or subtle, such as agreeing but with a tone or body language suggesting resentment, or simply failure to follow through. *A sure way to get a "bad" agreement is when the other person believes they have no choice.*

So what can I do? First, again, give myself, or get, some empathy, for my disappointment and frustration. Perhaps take a timeout.

Second, check in with the person to confirm that they heard a demand: "Sue, I'm wondering if when you said yes, but seemed less than enthused about it, were you maybe thinking that there was only one 'right answer' or that I'd think poorly of you, or create nasty consequences for you if you didn't agree?"

Then if the person somehow acknowledges that's indeed what's going on with them, perhaps next you could ask "Could you tell me how I could have asked you that in a way that you would be able to trust that I wasn't on a power trip -- that you had a real choice, that I'd hear you out, and might respect your choice?"

Given the history in our culture of people encountering demands, subtle and open, it's not surprising that some people, even when faced with a real request have trouble trusting it. Under those conditions it could take a long dialog and history with you -- or some dramatic evidence of your good faith -- before such a person can hear a request as a request and see it as a chance to have the pleasure of giving someone a gift.

If faced with that situation, you'll have to make your own decision as to whether you're willing to spend that time and energy to heal and mend that communication and trust. If do chose to and succeed it's likely to be a rich payoff with ripples beyond that immediate situation.

To recap, there are three critical elements in the arena of requests:

- 1) Is the speaker in the space/energy of true request?
- 2) Is the language used (the five properties) consistent with the energy of requests?
- 3) Is the listener hearing a request or a demand?

I don't know if these principles sound simple or complex to you; my experience is that they're simple, but challenging to live and apply -- yet when lived and used make a dramatic difference in my experiences with myself and others. I hope you'll experiment and see where they fit in your life, and hope you'll find them useful or even life-changing.

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