

# How to Ask for Help at Work

Modern workers are often reluctant to ask for help. Here's how to encourage them to do so meaningfully and efficiently.



by Wayne Baker

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# Introduction

## Asking for Help at Work is Critical to Happiness and Success

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Do you pride yourself on being a giver at work but find that it's hard for you to ask for help? Are you leading team members who have trouble asking for help?

Extensive research underscores the principle that being a giver at work makes people happier, more successful, more effective, and more efficient.<sup>1</sup> Often, it just makes us feel good.

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### What does it mean to be a "giver" at work?

Giving means generously helping others, even — perhaps especially — when they haven't helped you. It means giving without the expectation of return and without keeping track of who helps you.

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However, it's not just the giving that's beneficial. A willingness to ask for help is also central to a happy and productive work life. In fact, a reluctance to ask for help is incredibly limiting and destructive to our careers and lives.

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We need to build up the muscle that allows us to ask for help when we need it. Otherwise, we might miss out on a wealth of resources that could drive increased success and fulfillment, including information, insight, opinions, guidance, help, introductions, support, referrals, or money.

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### How can we encourage employees to ask for help when they need it?

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent review of interpersonal help-seeking literature, see Bamberger, Peter. "Employee Help-Seeking: Antecedents, Consequences and New Insights for Future Research." *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management* 28: 49-98 (2009).

# Six Reasons to Ask for Help

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There are real reasons why asking for help is hard. Sometimes we're reluctant to ask for help because we want to appear self-reliant or knowledgeable, and we're worried we'll seem incompetent if we admit we need help. Sometimes the barrier is a false belief about other people — that they won't be willing or able to help us. Sometimes we just don't know who to ask or what to ask for, which can slow us down even when real help exists in our network.

However, we have to encourage our teams to ask for help anyway. There are benefits not only for the individuals involved in the exchange, but for the team, department, and organization.

**1** When employees are willing to ask for help, team cohesion and performance improves. Team members who ask for help boost their creativity and collaboration, and they tend to have a better understanding of the team's purpose and tasks.<sup>2</sup>

**2** Research shows that **employee productivity is higher and turnover is lower** in companies where employees are supported in asking for and giving help.<sup>3</sup>

**3** Employees who ask for help when they need it can help an organization **improve operational efficiencies, product quality, and the customer experience**.<sup>4</sup>

**4** When employees voluntarily seek help from employee assistance programs, organizations experience much **lower absenteeism and higher productivity**, as well as lower medical, disability, and workers' compensation costs.<sup>5</sup>

**5** When employees network and help each other rather than focusing on individual performance, they are **more profitable**.<sup>6</sup>

**6** Failure to seek and share knowledge **costs Fortune 500 companies at least \$31.5 billion each year**.<sup>7</sup>

No matter why we're reluctant to ask for help, we need to get past it and do it anyway! The rewards are great for individuals and teams alike.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Bamberger, "Employee Help-Seeking," p. 80; Amabile, Fisher, and Pillemer, "IDEO's Culture of Helping."

<sup>3</sup> For example, Sun, Li-Yun, Aryee, Samuel, and Law, Kenneth S. "High-Performance Human Resource Practices, Citizenship Behavior, and Organizational Performance: A Relational Perspective." *The Academy of Management Journal* 50(3): 558-577 (2007).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Sheridan, Rich. *Joy, Inc.: How We Built a Workplace People Love*. NY: Portfolio/Penguin (2013). Walz, S.M. and Niehoff, B.P. "Organizational Citizenship Behaviors and Their Effect on Organizational Effectiveness in Limited Menu Restaurants." Best Paper Proceedings, Academy of Management Conference, pp. 307-311 (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Attridge, Mark. "The Value of Employee Assistance Programs". Norfolk, VA: EASNA (2015). Accessed on June 7, 2017, at <http://www.easna.org>. Eighty percent of the users of these programs are self-referrals; that is, voluntary help-seeking.

<sup>6</sup> "Breakthrough Performance in the New Work Environment." The Corporate Executive Board Company (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Myers, Christopher G. "Is Your Company Encouraging Employees to Share What They Know?" *Harvard Business Review* (website) (November 6, 2015).

# How to Encourage Team Members to Ask for Help

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Have I convinced you that asking for help is fundamental to individual and team success?

Now, how can we make it easier for our teams to ask for help?

Below are five important suggestions to help you create an environment where asking for help is encouraged and supported.

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## 1. Be a good role model.

The very best way to show your teams that it is advisable, beneficial, and advantageous to ask for help is to do it yourself. Here are some things you can ask for help with:

- An introduction or connection to a colleague you'd like to know
- A recommendation for a vendor or partner
- A piece of information needed to complete a project
- A specific skill or ability that's missing on your team
- A personal recommendation (local restaurant, babysitter, vacation spot, holiday gift)
- An idea or brainstorm
- A second set of eyes on an important presentation or document
- Volunteers to join a project or initiative you're working on
- Answers to organizational process or policy questions

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## 2. Create a team or company culture where asking for help is encouraged.

Make it easy to ask for and give help by setting the tone, norms, and practices in your work environment.

Zingerman's is a food company based in Michigan that has made a public commitment to fostering a culture of helping and giving. It's one thing to make giving one bullet of copy in a statement of corporate values, but the company has found several tangible ways to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. One is a special induction event for new managing partners where all of the colleagues in attendance are asked, one by one, how they will help the new partner be successful. Any new partner who has been through that experience will no doubt have an easier time asking for help from the colleagues who have already made these public commitments. The two founders participate, as well, sending a clear signal that the company expects and supports helping.



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## 3. Help your teams know what to ask.

Many people struggle with knowing exactly what to ask. In addition to the thought starters listed in #1, encourage your team members to focus on a current project and write down their goals for it. Take the most important goal and list the action steps and resources needed to achieve it — materials, information, data, advice. They'll then have a series of needs they can frame as questions. Another tip: Build up to asking for help with the big things by starting with asking for help with small ones.



## 4. Help your teams know how to ask.

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A poorly worded request makes it difficult to respond. A well-formulated request is **SMART**:

**S**pecific (what you need, exactly)

**M**eaningful (why you need it)

**A**ction-oriented (what needs to be done)

**R**eal (authentic, not made up)

**T**ime-bound (when you need it)

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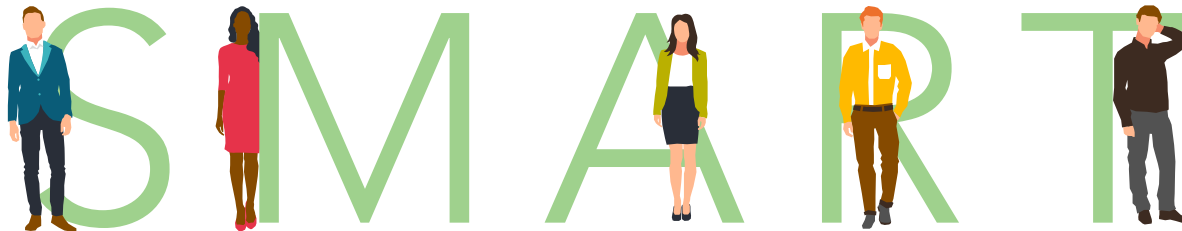
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A **SMART** request is easier to respond to than one that misses the mark on one or more of the five criteria.

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## 5. Encourage open-mindedness about the knowledge and willingness of others.

Don't assume you know who and what people know or how willing they are to help. For example, I once facilitated a Reciprocity Ring for a team working on global drug development within a large pharmaceutical company. One of the participating scientists needed a referral for an outside vendor who could help him complete an incredibly complex and expensive laboratory task. It turned out another scientist who was participating in the Ring had extra capacity in his own lab and was willing to help — the very next week. They saved \$50,000 and, perhaps just as importantly, forged a new connection.

Even if those you ask can't help you directly, they can tap their personal and professional networks.



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# Conclusion

Introduction 1

A willingness to ask for help is essential to job satisfaction, career advancement, and organizational success. Despite the often compelling and considerable barriers, team members who show a willingness to ask for help will reap significant rewards. As leaders, the best way to encourage a culture of generosity and reciprocity is to model asking for help ourselves, and to teach our teams what to ask for and how to do so.

**After all, we can't support a culture of giving if no one is asking for help!**

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# About

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**Wayne Baker** is Robert P. Thome Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business and a faculty member of the Center for Positive Organizations. His research on reciprocity, social capital, and positive organizational scholarship is available at [www.waynebaker.org](http://www.waynebaker.org). He is also a co-founder of Give and Take, Inc., along with Cheryl Baker and Adam Grant. Read more about his research at [www.waynebaker.org](http://www.waynebaker.org).



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## About Give and Take, Inc.

**Give and Take** takes the principles of generalized reciprocity and social capital made famous in Wharton professor Adam Grant's bestselling book *Give and Take* and delivers them to enterprises in an accessible, scalable, measurable platform called Givitas. By fostering a giving culture, companies of all sizes drive positive business outcomes like increased employee efficiency, productivity, loyalty, and engagement. Give and Take is headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is accessible online at [www.giveandtakeinc.com](http://www.giveandtakeinc.com).

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