

## Anatomy of a Request

Making effective requests in an organization can increase the speed with which issues are addressed and resolved. Many managers and executives are not well practiced in the art of making requests. This paper presents the anatomy of a simple request.

### Step 1: Designing the Request

A request is asking for an action of some kind from someone who has the power to say “Yes,” “No,” or renegotiate. Requests need to have enough specificity so that both parties will know what they are agreeing to. Requests should always include:

- Who will receive the request – do they have the power to meet the request and give you a “Yes,” a “No,” or renegotiate?
- A specific action that is requested;
- A definition of when the action is requested;
- Any other terms that would be important to negotiate.

For example: “We need a report on staff productivity” meets none of these specifications. To be effective, you would need to decide who is the best person (or persons) to do the report, by when do you need it, and how long do you want the report to be, what it should cover, etc.

An important part of designing a request is to be clear about the “**Conditions of Satisfaction**,” that is, the terms that define successful satisfaction of the request.

Consider the following request: “Please meet with me tomorrow at 3:00pm to discuss the staff meeting agenda.” This meets most of the requirements for a good request as long as all the requester is asking for is a meeting and a discussion. He/she may have other conditions of satisfaction about the level of preparation, intent of the meeting, etc.

A more complete request that expresses all conditions of satisfaction would sound like this: “Please meet with me tomorrow at 3:00 to discuss the staff meeting agenda. By the end of the meeting, I would like to have finalized the agenda. To speed us along could you come prepared with a draft of the agenda and your recommendations for a process to make decisions on the new equipment management process?”

This more complete request gives the receiver a complete and clear picture of what he/she is agreeing to. The possibility for surprise and disappointment is greatly reduced. Clear Conditions of Satisfaction help the requester make sure that he/she is making a request of someone who does in fact have the power to meet the request.



## Step 2: Setting Context/Creating Relationship

Very few people are sitting around waiting for you to make a request of them. The first step in making the request is to create enough relationship and context that the person is at least open to hearing a request from you. Sometimes creating context and creating relationship is no big deal. Other times it will require creating a conscious strategy all its own. A good rule of thumb is to always ask if it would be alright to make a request and be ready to hear a “No” and work from there.

### Step 3: Make the Request

Too often our requests are hidden behind indirect verbiage and hedge words. Using a simple format for a request can help cut through this verbal underbrush to a clear request. Here is the language of a request:

“Jane, may I make a request? Great, thank you. I request that you... [action requested] by... [time needed]. To be clear about my request, I... [state the conditions of satisfaction here]. Can you agree to do this?”

Using the example of a productivity report a request might sound like this: “Jane would you please prepare a report on staff productivity for our next staff meeting. I would like to receive it by Friday, close of business, so that I could review it over the weekend to get ready for Monday’s meeting. I am thinking it can be a simple, 1-2 page analysis of staffing hours per day, by day of the week, for the last six months. Can you do this?”

### Step 4: Negotiate Agreement

Requests always have the possibility that the other party will say no or want to negotiate timelines or other terms. In the face of a “No,” you can request information about what it would take to get a “Yes.” It is easy to hear negotiation as a “No.” Resist that temptation and seek mutually acceptable terms for a “Yes.”

### Step 5: Agree on Next Steps

At least two areas need to be covered before the request is complete:

- Make sure the due date or next milestone is clearly understood.
- Make sure you have agreement that if the due date/milestone cannot be met, you will be notified **as soon as this fact is known**. If this occurs, you will renegotiate the request (or deal with consequences) as needed.

Other areas may also need to be covered before a request is complete. For example: resources, authority, rewards, communications and other factors may also need to be negotiated. The requestor has the responsibility to make sure that the requestee has what they need to complete the request. The requestee has a reciprocal responsibility to make sure he/she has what is needed to complete the request.



## Notes On Resistance to Requests

Resistance to requests can come in these most common forms:

1. **“I do not have the right to make a request”** – In Western culture many of us have been brought up to believe that direct requests are impolite and put people on the spot. As a result many of us have little or no practice in making clear, direct requests with both conviction and respect. If we never get this practice, we are not very good at the skill and tend not to use it.
2. **“I am afraid of getting a ‘No’ to my request”** – Many of us interpret that the response of “No” to a request as a personal rejection that reflects poorly on us. It is true that if we have a lousy relationship with someone, he/she is more likely to give us a “No.” This is why paying attention to the relationship in making requests is so important. In most cases a “No” is just a “No.” Given a reasonable relationship, a “No” forms the basis for working together and finding an approach that will meet both parties’ needs.
3. **“Other people in my organization will not understand requests and think I am strange.”** – Since this may be true, it is useful to practice requests on people with whom you have a good relationship and with someone likely to appreciate the clarity of good requests. With practice, you will be able to make requests in a way that anyone can understand without being put off.
4. **“People will be angered by my directness.”** – One way to minimize this response is to make sure that you are making requests of people that truly have the power to satisfy the request. Being asked to do something beyond a person’s skills or authority puts most people off. Another very important factor is to make sure that you are ready to hear a “No” without getting angry or disappointed and that the other party knows that a “No” is an acceptable answer. Anger about a request usually comes when someone feels their back is to the wall because “Yes” is the only acceptable answer.
5. **“I don’t really know what I want so it is hard to make a request”** – This is the best time to NOT make a request and stay in the planning stage. Perhaps the best request you can make in this situation is for a dialogue about an issue in order to identify what requests would be reasonable and who should receive those requests.
6. **“People agree to a request and then don’t deliver. What are my options?”** – Your first and best option is to talk to the individual about a missed deadline or incomplete response. Find out what is going on and negotiate a new request. Make sure they understand the consequences of making commitments and not following through. DO NOT simply let it go or take the request on yourself. These responses will only serve to weaken your ability to make effective requests in the future.