

MASTERING MANAGEMENT

with **Mark Taylor**



Make Effective Requests

One of the most frequent complaints I hear in my work with leaders of organizations is the following: “I am sick and tired of my people not following through.” As managers, we depend on our staff to get things done. Many times when we don’t get what we want, we blame our employees and make them wrong. The problem with blame is that it does not help us become more effective. This article is about what you can do to improve the likelihood of getting the results you desire. The key is to look at our communication skills. We need to make clear requests, and we need to listen for a promise from our employee. When that occurs, you will dramatically increase your effectiveness.

When your request is completed, you should acknowledge the person and say, “Thank you.” This completes the cycle.

Now, what happens if the task does not get fulfilled? My advice is to first take a deep breath. Do not make assumptions — have a conversation with the person. Sometimes they did it and didn’t tell you. Other times, they may say that they never promised. If that is not the case, check with them that they made a commitment; review the conversation that you had with them. If they did commit and did not do what they said, you will hear a story or excuse. Listen to the story. If there is not a

legitimate reason for the request not being fulfilled, you should talk to them about how this affects their relationship with you and your level of trust. Ask them to keep their word in the future. Create a standard with your staff to let you know ahead of time if they are not able to fulfill their promises.

When we look at the way we are communicating our requests, we can alter the results we achieve with our team. According to Dr. Matthew Budd, “The cardinal sin of communication, which compromises all speech and relationships, is assuming that what was said is what is heard. To avoid this you must ask, observe, inquire, discuss and listen for what the other person understands.” He goes on to say that failure to make clear requests and listen for promises is a “linguistic virus because it attacks relationships, alters the structures of the individuals in them and causes dissatisfaction, bad moods and even ill health.” ■

MARK TAYLOR is the Chairman of a New York City think tank composed of CEOs focused on “outperforming” their competition. He is with Vistage International, the world’s leading chief executive organization. He can be reached at 212-867-5849 or mark.taylor@vistage.com.

What Is a Request? This answer may seem obvious, but I assure you that to master this speech act will change your life. A request happens when you ask another person to do something. An effective request creates the result that you are expecting. There are five elements to a request, three of which can be summarized in a sentence: “**Who** do you want to do **what** by **when**.”

The first element is who. A request is made to a specific person. Have you ever made the following mistake: you speak into a room of children, “Will someone please turn down the TV?” Your success ratio will drastically increase if you ask a person by name to fulfill your request.

Second is the what. What do you want done? You need to be specific. If you ask for a glass of water, you need to determine if they are capable of doing what is requested and that they understand what you want. Don’t assume that they know unless they have successfully produced the results in the past. Otherwise, you may have to tell them that you want a glass of cold tap water without ice. It is crucial that you specify your conditions of satisfaction. Without specificity, you may get a bill for the water or water that is too cold, and you won’t be satisfied.

The third element is the when. When do you expect this task to be completed? If you say ASAP, you will probably be disappointed. Again, be specific.

Fourth is the why. This is one of the biggest mistakes I see. Some managers believe that employees should do what they are told, no questions asked. This produces resentment. A short explanation can help people to understand the bigger picture. You could also tie this to a vision or a value that you are promoting. For example, “We have a commitment to safety in our warehouse, and John, I would like you to remove and put away the items in aisle five in the next 30 minutes please. Will you do that for me?” It can help employees connect the dots.

Now, the fifth element is crucial. If you hear a response like, “I’ll try,” you shouldn’t count on it. The reply you want to hear is “yes, I will” or “no.” And if you are surprised that a “no” is acceptable, you should think about it this way: Your job is to coordinate action and get things done through other people. If you don’t have the type of relationship where your staff can say “no,” then you can have problems with resentment. Of course, you want to know why, and many times there is a legitimate reason such as something else of a higher priority takes precedence, but “no” is an answer that you can work with. What you want to listen for is the person that says yes but doesn’t do it. You want a promise. You want to have your request accepted with a commitment by a person that they will do what you asked in the time specified. You can only rely on it when you have acceptance. An unanswered email or voice mail does not count.