

Rule 6: Ask For What You Need

From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict

I had a love-hate relationship with my old boss. The love part was my incredible respect for this former Olympic gold medalist turned CEO of one of the leading professional development companies in the world. He was one of those people who could make an audience laugh, cry, and get inspired—all at the same time. People always came up to me after one of Terry's amazing speeches to say how lucky I was to work for this man. I'd smile and say, "I sure am", knowing I was lying through my teeth.

In hindsight it was awfully ironic. Here we were, a company best known for our leadership development programs and materials, and yet we didn't practice a lick of it within our own company. We were a walking contradiction. Do as we say...not as we do!

Here's the hate part. Our CEO, Terry, ran the organization with an iron fist. It was the classic parent-child dynamics...and I'm talking about the relationship between Terry and his managers, of which I was the newest. He was a short man who sat behind a very large desk. In fact, his desk was so large that he'd literally be looking down at you as you sat in one of the two little chairs out in front. I can't remember, did I emphasize the parent-child dynamics? Anyway, you could sum up his management style with these three words: command-and-control. But wait, I'm just getting started.

Whenever Terry wanted to see you, he wanted to see you NOW...not in ten minutes, not when you have time...but NOW! And since he was a man of few words, he'd never tell you why he wanted to see you. As a result, you didn't know if you were in trouble or if you would be expected to summarize something from one of your past reports that he's just now getting to. Instead, all you got was, "Can you come down to my office!" It wasn't a question, but rather a demand...and it was agonizing for me.



And to add insult to injury, his office was on the opposite side of the building, in its own wing no less. The laborious walk over involved ambling down an assortment of long hallways, like an unending maze, until you'd eventually pop out right in front of his old and grouchy secretary who seemed to never know you were coming.

“What do you want?” she’d say, without looking up. You get the idea.

The part that still baffles me to this day is how all the other managers seemed okay with Terry’s abrupt and controlling style. In fact, they seemed to almost welcome the dysfunction, enabling it whenever possible. In hindsight, I think Terry’s ineptness provided comic relief for them. And get this, every Friday all of us managers would sneak out to lunch (we didn’t want Terry to know we were getting together) and meet up at a local pub where we’d take turns sharing Terry-stories over beers (keep in mind this was over twenty years ago).



Unlike my peers, the Terry-bashing every Friday at lunch didn’t alleviate or justify his behavior. I still struggled with it and one Friday decided to bring it up at lunch. “I just don’t think it is right,” I’d say, “And he needs to know that we can’t always come running every time he needs something.”

The other managers laughed. “Are you serious?” they’d say. “The last guy to take on Terry was immediately shown the door,” as they all nodded together.

So much for their support, I mumbled to myself.

As the weeks went by, my resolve to change my relationship with Terry increased with every *Can you come down here* phone call. I thought and thought and thought. I knew that his sense of urgency and abruptness was an annoyance for me, but there had to be something else. Why was he making me so mad?



And then it came to me...

It wasn't the immediacy factor and it wasn't the rudeness...it was not knowing what he wanted that was killing me. You see, Terry never took the time to set a context for his requests. He preferred to wait until you were standing in front of him before he'd explain himself. I often felt very incompetent walking down to his office, wondering what he was going to throw at me. Not an efficient use of anyone's time in my opinion. Plus, I'd usually end up having to run back and forth to my office to get information or a file that I didn't know I needed.

So I've identified the root of the problem...now what?

This is where **Rule 6: Ask For What You Need** comes in. I needed Terry to change his behavior just enough so I could not only get my needs met (i.e., my need to feel competent) but to also have greater efficiency when we do meet. And truthfully, all he would have to do was take an extra few seconds to explain why he needed to see me before hanging up the phone. That's not asking too much, is it?

The key to asking for what you need with your boss is to make it a mutually beneficial request, causing your boss to want to change. A request, I might add, that is stated in a positive way, making it almost impossible to be turned down. Some call this *managing up*...and they are correct. It's the same thing.

But isn't this a form of manipulation, you ask?

Yes and no. *Yes* in that you are purposely crafting your words to solicit a desired response, but *No* in that you are simply asking for what you need. What we are talking about here is diplomacy. Instead of criticizing your boss, you turn whatever need is not being met into a request. The end-results are the same...your boss changes his/her behavior and you get your needs met. The best part is that you didn't upset your boss in the process. How cool is that?



So here's how it went down

At the end of our next weekly one-on-one meeting I said, "Terry, there's one more thing."

"What's that?" he said.

"You know what would be helpful to me?"

“What’s that?” he said (again).

“When you need me ASAP, do you mind taking a second or two to tell me what it’s concerning? That way I can be more prepared and not have to waste your time by running back and forth to my office.”

He smiled, “Sure.”

I did a double-take. Sure! That’s it! You mean to tell me I’ve spend all these months agonizing over this and that’s all you have to say!

But it worked! Not only that, that request gave me permission to gently remind Terry of our agreement the few times he forgot later on.

So, the next time you are either in a conflict and/or have needs not being met in a relationship, your first obligation is to simply ask in a respectful way for what you need. In preparation, answer these questions:

1. What need of yours is not being met?
2. What is the impact of that need not being met?
3. What do you need differently?
4. What would that look like?

Now put this in the form of a request, making sure you include how the other person will benefit by this as well.

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