

Why Is Asking for Help So Difficult?

By Alina Tugend

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RAISE your hand if you have ever asked for help at work or at home.

Raise your hand if you have ever felt shy or stupid in doing so.

I think I can safely assume that most of us are waving our arms wildly.

Requesting assistance from colleagues or friends, whether it be for a work assignment or to help care for our children when we are sick, is something many people have trouble doing. (Some, on the other hand, are all too comfortable leaning on others. We will get to them later.) In a society largely based on helping yourself — just go to any bookstore or library and browse the voluminous self-help section — it may seem odd to promote the idea that we need to learn better ways to ask for and receive assistance.

But a small movement is saying just that.

M. Nora Klaver, whose book “MayDay! Asking for Help in Times of Need” (Berrett-Kohler Publishers) will be out this month, says learning to ask for help is not just good for altruistic reasons; it makes business sense.

“People often believe they don’t have trouble asking for help, when they do,” she said. “Sometimes they sit on projects for weeks because they didn’t want to ask for help.”

There are many reasons people fear requesting assistance, primary among them not wanting to seem weak, needy or incompetent (any of these ring a bell?).

“There is a tendency to act as if it’s a deficiency,” said Garret Keizer, author of “Help: The Original Human Dilemma” (HarperCollins, 2004). “That is exacerbated if a business environment is highly competitive within as well as without. There is an understandable fear that if you let your guard down, you’ll get hurt, or that this information you don’t know how to do will be used against you.”

The danger, however, is that stalling can let the situation grow from a problem into a crisis.

Credit counselors see that all the time. Caryn Bilotta, manager of education services at Advantage Credit Counseling Services, based in Pittsburgh, said people waited too long to seek help. “People don’t want to think about it. They don’t know how to handle it.”

Had they sought assistance earlier, she said, her organization could have worked with them on budget counseling, instead of how to get out of debt.

Also, Ms. Klaver said, it is “very hard to sound centered and grounded” when coming from a place of panic.

“People like some advance notice,” she said. “It’s like the people who call for a loan for rent on the first of the month rather than a week before. And then it costs me more money to make the immediate transfer. It drives me crazy.”

Although it is always dangerous to generalize (I can see the e-mail messages coming my way), it does appear that men often have a harder time asking for help than women.

Ms. Bilotta said, for example, that her company’s advertising is limited, but what advertising it does is often aimed at women.

“Not because women get into more trouble, but because women tend to make the call,” she said. “Like my husband will say, ‘You’re better at that than I am.’ ”

Another fear is that if you ask for help, you will be surrendering all control, and that the person you want assistance from will take over the entire project. Even outside the office, sometimes we fear if we ask for help, “we’ll get more than we want or need,” Mr. Keizer said.

“Most healthy individuals want to help and need to help and derive pleasure from it,” he said. “But if you present that need to the wrong individual, you’ve bought a hovering, patronizing relationship. You’ve asked for help getting across a stream and they’re building a boat.”

He recalled a woman who told of a friend who did not want to stop comforting her after a bereavement, even when the woman was ready to move on.

There is also the fear of what someone is going to ask in return.

“What’s the price? What’s it going to cost me?” Ms. Klaver said.

No one likes to feel indebted, and asking someone else to come to your aid can shift a relationship's power balance. Most of us prefer that the situation be reciprocal: I will help you on this report; you help me with this client. I will pick up your child from school; can you have mine over for a play date next week?

The relationship becomes unbalanced in two situations. The first involves those who frequently ask for help but never reciprocate. They need no lessons in asking for help, but rather in giving it.

The second involves those who are more than happy to rush to your aid, but refuse to ever let you return the favor. In theory, it may seem great to have someone who is always willing to lend a hand without needing anything in return, but I know I start feeling uncomfortable with that equation fairly quickly.

"When we get into trouble with help is when we don't want equality restored or achieved," Mr. Keizer said.

Ms. Klaver knows that problem all too well. As with many people, she used to confuse dependence with co-dependence.

"I had created this life of self-sufficiency, and the people I surrounded myself with were takers," she said. "There came a point when I needed their help and they disappeared. I said, 'I need to change my life — I need to be comfortable giving and taking.' I needed to say goodbye to some friends and business associates."

One reason asking for help is difficult, Ms. Klaver said, is that most people have never been taught how to ask properly.

So we do it badly, sometimes using guilt, coercion and blackmail. We solicit pity when we want assistance. We ask the wrong person. We might have felt humiliated doing it in the past, so we fear doing it in the future.

So, she offers some tips on asking for help:

¶ Be straightforward. Ask in specific terms, but do not micromanage.

¶ Rely less on the obvious people. When seeking a doctor, for example, do not just ask your friends, but go to a nearby gym and ask who the athletes see.

¶ Bypass phone calls or e-mail messages if at all possible and make your request in person and in private. Sometimes anonymity is useful, however. Ms. Bilotta, the credit counselor, said that people often feel more comfortable discussing money issues over the phone rather than face-to-face.

¶ Pick up on cues — is that an enthusiastic or a reluctant yes?

¶ Say thanks when the agreement is struck, when the need has been met and when you next see the person who helped you.

I think I am now fully prepared for the next time I need help. I will ask early, clearly and concisely, without making the person I ask feel guilty.

And if all else fails, there is always cold cash.

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A follow-up on my last column about ways to get rid of books: Many of you wrote in to say that one of the best sites for both receiving and passing on used books was www.paperbackswap.com. Other suggestions on where to donate books included www.readertoreader.org, the United Service Organizations and prisons.