

Asking for help is the smartest thing you can do

If you're feeling overwhelmed by your current workload or you are simply feeling 'blah', the smartest thing you can do is ask for help.

Asking for help has many benefits:

- It **stops us from powering through and making mistakes** that may impact the other people we work and live with
- It **creates meaningful connections** with the people around us, which improves our sense of belonging
- It **makes the 'helper' feel good**: research has shown that most living species including humans are hard-wired towards 'pro-social behaviour'.

If there are so many benefits, why is it so hard to do?

It sounds so simple doesn't it? Just ask for help! However, there are many reasons why most of us don't ask for help.

One of the reasons is due to a cognitive bias that social psychologists call the 'illusion of transparency'. Put simply, this means we assume other people know what we are thinking and feeling. We expect everyone to respond to our 'telepathic' pleas for help and then we get frustrated and disheartened when no one does.

Guess what? **You need to say it out loud.**

Asking for help also means admitting to our vulnerability: it makes us feel needy and inadequate and it represents surrendering control. We characterise ourselves as a 'dead weight' or a drain on other people's limited resources.

Why not reframe that thinking?

If you think about the last time someone asked *you* for help, it was probably a situation you felt pretty positive about: it's likely that helping someone else gave you the opportunity to apply your experience and skills to a problem. Chances are, that made you feel pretty good.

If you reframe the concept of asking for help by seeing it from the 'helper's' point of view, it doesn't seem like such a negative thing to do.

How to ask for help in the right way...

Even though it's a 'no-brainer' there is a right way and a wrong way to ask for help. Here are some tips for how to ask in the right way.

(1) Reframe your request so that it's a problem-solving conversation

In some cases, involving the other person in the problem-solving aspect is a more respectful approach. You're not just saying, 'You need to help me', rather you're saying, 'I've got this challenge maybe we can talk through some solutions together.' This approach also develops a deeper connection with the other person because it doesn't frame the request as a one-sided 'you help me' transaction.

(2) Be specific about the kind of help that would be useful to you

Sometimes putting the onus on the other person to come up with the solution by simply saying, 'help me', is asking them to do too much of the thinking. Think about specific actions would be particularly useful to you before you put in the request. This takes a lot of the perceived burden off the other person's shoulders.

(3) Be thoughtful about where and when you ask for help

Once you've identified who can best help you, consider when and where is the best time to ask them for help. For instance, don't put them on the spot by asking at the tail-end of a team meeting, with everyone else listening in. Make an effort to engage privately and set aside an appropriate time and place where you can have a thoughtful conversation.

(4) Don't apologise or frame the request as a negative when you ask for help

Opening your request with, 'I'm really sorry to ask but ...' immediately sets the request up as a negative. Similarly saying 'it's just a tiny thing but ...' immediately trivialises their decision to help. Another classic, 'I hate myself for asking ...' makes the helper feel bad for making *you* feel bad.

Similarly, framing it as 'a favour' sets them up to feel bad if they can't help you.

Helping others is a positive act, so frame your request with phrases like:

"I'd be so grateful if you could help me with ..."

"You're good at (insert specific task here) are you able to assist me?"

"It would really improve the outcome for the team if you could help me with ..."

(5) Don't give up at the first hurdle

Sometimes it's not possible for another person to help you at that moment. But that doesn't mean you should give up. If someone says they can't help you, ask them if they know someone who can. It's highly likely they will be able to pass you on to someone who does have the time and resources to help you in that moment.

Make it a habit to ask for help

Social psychologist, Jeffery Davis says that “learning how to ask for (and accept) help is perhaps one of the greatest skills you can develop.” And with the current workplace model – where a lot of us are working remotely and relying on digital and virtual interactions for our social connection - it’s more important than ever to create rich and meaningful working relationships with our colleagues.

If you need help, don’t try to go it alone. Just ask.

In which case, it’s important to pick the right person to help you.

For example, ask yourself:

1. What kind of help do I need right now?

- Help from a colleague or peer?
- Help from a manager or supervisor?
- Help from a specialist in a particular field?
- Help from a mental health professional?

2. Who is in a good position to help me?

- Think about who has the time and resources
- Think about who has the right expertise

Asking for help takes courage

You get what you give. This means, if someone asks you for help, take the time to listen and consider their request with the full weight of your empathy. The more we facilitate a habit of asking for help, the more it will become an accepted part of our workplace culture. And that works for everyone.



We asked Keshni Mala (Senior Manager COVID-19 Response, People and Culture Division, CSV) for her thoughts on asking for help:

“I’m often contacted for input and support and I view it as a privilege because it enables me to focus on what I’m good at. It’s also recognition that I have certain skills and expertise that are valuable to other people. Another advantage is, when I help someone, I know that somewhere down the line if I need help from them, they’ll be more than happy to reciprocate.

Whenever people ask me for help, I view it as a strength of their character, because asking for help requires a willingness to be vulnerable. It’s a skill that gets easier with practice. I believe it’s a privilege when someone asks me for help because they are demonstrating their vulnerability and trust in me. I am always asking for help when I need it.”