



(Bonus tool from: *The Mentally Strong Leader*)

### **The Helping HANDS tool (principles to remember when asking for help)**

Research shows that self-reliance is one of many people's ten core values. But while self-reliance is admirable, it can also be self-limiting. CEO of the Lego Group, Jorgen Vig Knudstorp, takes it further by saying he believes that blame isn't for failure, it's for failing to ask for help.<sup>1</sup> When you do ask for help, it can change everything. The truth is, asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of wisdom. It's a hallmark of being mentally strong.

You just need a little wisdom in how to go about it, some helping HANDS. That is, follow the acronym, HANDS, to ask for help in the right way:

**Have a specific ask** – Be able to articulate why you need help so you can pinpoint what help you need. Then, be specific in what you ask for as it will produce a more beneficial reaction. Research among panhandlers bears this point out.<sup>2</sup> In one test cell the panhandler simply asked for money, with 22 percent of people complying and giving an average of \$.50 each. In the next scenario, the panhandler specifically asked for \$.37, and 36 percent of people complied – a better financial outcome. The study showed that when we give specific asks, it gives people the concrete criteria against which to decide if they want to help or not. Such asks are more likely to be acted upon because it's clear what can be done to help.

**Ask for advice versus help** – An effective way to ease the unease of asking is to turn it into an exercise of seeking advice. Research from the Harvard Business School and the Wharton School indicates that advice-seeking is a different, easier bridge to getting help.<sup>3</sup> This is because you're seeking information to inform a course of action, retaining control over the decision-making process, and flattering the other person by indicating that you value their knowledge and experience.

**Never ask timidly** – When we do muster up the courage to ask, we often still do so with trepidation, for fear that we're putting the other person out, or that we'll get rejected. However, research indicates that our fears are most often unfounded. The truth is, we vastly underestimate just how willing others are to lend a helping hand. To illustrate, researchers from Columbia University instructed test participants to ask a stranger to borrow a cell phone, or ask for an escort to a gym they couldn't find.<sup>4</sup> Those that did, indeed, ask for help, underestimated by as much as 50 percent how likely the other person would be to help. It turns out that we also underestimate the social cost (feeling embarrassed) that others experience if they say no to our request for help. So, ask away, and when you do, do so with confidence. It will make the other person even more likely to want to invest what it takes to help you.

All of this said, research shows you double your chance of getting a positive reply to your help-request when you also reinforce they have the freedom to say no. Doing this sets the lowest bar, “you can say no,” and who doesn’t want to clear a bar if they know they’re able to?

Also note that research indicates there are four “magic words” you can use when asking someone for help that will dramatically increase the likelihood they’ll help you.<sup>5</sup> That is, adding the words, “or someone you know.” As in, “Could you, or someone you know, help me with this?” It works because you’re providing an alternative way the person can help. And in many cases, it’s a lower-energy way they can help, while enabling them to avoid the awkwardness of giving an outright “no.” Remember, though, since people being asked for help often don’t think about making a referral to someone who is better suited to help, it’s up to you to ask for the referral (which means getting over your fear of annoying someone by doing so).

***Do your due diligence*** – It’s one thing to help the truly helpless, but quite another when approached by someone being helpless. Don’t be that guy/girl. Make yourself helpable by showing up prepared, with a specific ask (as mentioned earlier), and even with options. Be sure that you’ve exhausted what you can do on your own. Be ready to share what’s been tried and why it didn’t work, why you feel that the person you’re asking for help is the right one, and what you’ll do with help if given. Finally, think through how the request for help could be a mutual win (for you, and the person you’re asking). And if you’re making a request through email, follow Mark Twain’s advice and take the time to write a shorter e-mail. Harvard research shows making your email as brief as possible doubles how often you get a response.<sup>6</sup>

***Start with a foundation of being helpful*** – First, it’s much easier to ask for help when you know you’re a helpful person. Beyond that, being helpful triggers human nature and a desire for reciprocity. Neuroscience research shows that we are hard-wired to show reciprocity in three ways.<sup>7</sup> First, directly; you helped me, I feel compelled to help you. The more people you help, the broader your base of future supporters. Second, indirectly; others feel compelled to help you based on your reputation of being helpful, even if they haven’t received help from you directly. Third, pay-it-forward reciprocity; where people simply want to help others because they themselves have been helped by someone else in the past. While, of course, being a helpful person is just the right thing to do, it also triggers a virtuous cycle of reciprocity.

#### Notes

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2. A. Ayres-Deets, “How to Ask for Help (And Not Feel Bad About It),” thenextweb.com (August 1, 2014).
3. S. Voza, “How Leaders Can Ask for Help and Keep Their Team’s Confidence,” fastcompany.com, (June 25, 2015).
4. S. Roesler, “Help and How to Ask For It,” allthingsworkplace.com, (June 5, 2009).
5. Y. Park, K. Nault, K. Kuwabara, “When brokers don’t broker: Mitigating referral aversion in third-party help exchange,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process*, vol. 180, sciencedirect.com, (January, 2024).
6. T. Rogers, J. Lasky-Fink, “When Writing for Busy Readers, Less is More,” behavioralscientist.org (September 11, 2023).
7. T. Watanabe, “Two Distinct Neural Mechanisms Underlying Indirect Reciprocity,” *PNAS* Vol. 111, pnas.org. (March 18, 2014), as cited in W. Baker, “5 Ways to Get Better at Asking for Help,” hbr.org, (December 18, 2014).