

Trust In the Power of Your Asking

“Hey, since I gave you advice about your girlfriend the other day, can you loan me five dollars?”

Those words were literally spoken to me by a friend several years ago. As if the question wasn’t already laughable, it gets even funnier when you consider the fact that we had already been really good friends for more than five years when he asked for the loan.

Me: What do you honestly believe I would say if you just flat out asked me for five bucks?

My friend: You’d probably just give it to me because we’re homeboys.

Me: So why throw in the extra part about you helping me out in the past?

My friend: (laughing) That’s insurance in case you don’t feel like helping me out.

At least he was honest. Of equal importance, at least he was conscious of what he was doing. He was aware of the fact that he didn’t trust my willingness to help him based on our friendship alone, so he gave himself a buffer by making me feel obligated just in case.

My friend and I laugh about this experience today (partly because it’s not the only time he’s used this strategy), but it contains an important lesson about asking for help and knowing how to play your cards.

The Buffer Strategy

Let’s call my friend’s question-asking approach “the buffer strategy.” And let’s define “the buffer strategy” as “the act of including a piece of information in a request as a tactic for making the other party feel guilty or threatened in order to provide them with extra motivation for helping you.”

It’s important to distinguish the buffer strategy from the value-creation strategy. The latter is when you incentivize someone to help you by appealing to something positive that’s in it for them. An example of this might be a request like “I have over 100K subscribers on my podcast and I would love for my audience to hear more about the philosophy behind your latest book.” In this example, I’m trying to provide a little extra motivation by offering the person I’m seeking help from a platform for promoting their book. That’s value-creation.

The buffer strategy appeals to a person’s potential fear of a negative consequence. An example of this would be “If you don’t get over here and fix the plumbing like you promised, I’m going to sue you” or “If you don’t refund my hotel room costs, I’m going to write a negative online review.”

The buffer strategy is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. It’s purely contextual. For

any given relationship, professional or personal, there is a conceivable instance in which it's appropriate, justifiable, and most effective to use this approach. When people owe you something and they repeatedly fail to respond to reason or sincerity, it might be time to whip out your contract or firmly remind them of the precise nature of your agreement.

Now that we've defined the buffer strategy, illustrated it, and given the necessary "it's not inherently bad" disclaimer, here's today's two cents:

Never waste social capital by using the buffer strategy unless or until it has been made necessary by the other party's clear unwillingness to cooperate.

Keep Your Ace in The Hole

Poker players use the phrase "keep your ace in the hole" to convey the importance of never showing your most powerful card too early in the game. Revealing your most powerful card too early reduces the amount of money you can win by scaring people away at the outset and it compromises the amount of power you have by alerting people to your strategy while they still have time to prepare for you. Think of my above suggestion as an application of the "keep your ace in the hole" strategy to conflict-resolution and customer service.

Having leverage in your relationships is a very useful thing, but it usually works against you if you build a reputation for flexing your muscles at the very beginning of a negotiation.

Very rarely is there an expiration date on your ability to appeal to guilt or make a threat. And even if there is an expiration date, you're likely better off waiting until you get really close to that date before putting all of your cards on the table.

Asking for what you want, without dramatizing your request with accusations or appeals to guilt, is a surprisingly simple and effective strategy for getting what you need in personal and professional relationships. This is especially true if the other party is already obliged to you in some kind of way.

The Day I Bought Coffee for My "Enemy"

Last year I requested some help on a maintenance issue from my property manager. It was a malfunction with my shower. He promised to send someone by the next morning between 8am-9am. That worked for me. The next day arrived and no one showed. I wasn't happy about that. I work from home so it wasn't the biggest inconvenience, but I'm also the kind of guy who expects people to be there when they say they're going to be there.

To blow off some steam, I decided to walk down the street to Starbucks and grab a coffee. My initial plan was to stop by the office when I got back and remind them of their promise.

But when I arrived at Starbucks, I got an idea: “Buy your property manager a cup of coffee.”

When I got back home, I stopped by the office and gave the second cup to my property manager. I said absolutely nothing about the maintenance issue. I told him “Good morning, I was at Starbucks and figured you could use a cup of coffee too.” He was totally surprised and he thanked me. Twenty minutes later, the maintenance guy knocked at my door and fixed the problem. More importantly, he’s been really nice and helpful ever since that event. I rarely need anything from him, but I usually get great service when I do.

5 Observations From A Coffee Cup

1. It wasn’t necessary for me to buy that cup of coffee. It wasn’t even necessary to be nice about the issue. I had the leverage in this situation and I could have easily walked into the office confidently and demanded some respect.
2. Even if I didn’t have the time, money, or willingness to buy an extra cup of coffee, I would have likely been just as effective had I smilingly said “Hey Joe, I just wanted to follow up on that maintenance request to see what I should expect.”
3. I didn’t take the positive approach because of my sense of spirituality. I took the positive approach because I’m selfish and I like to get my way. And I’m much better at getting my way when I can get people to feel like we’re playing for the same team. Starting a fight, argument, or a war takes a lot of energy. It feels good to the ego, but it’s also draining.

Moreover, the best kind of help is the kind that people are happy to give. When people are happy to help, they usually do a little more than what’s requested. When people are silently resentful or embarrassed to help, they usually do exactly what was required and then they try to figure out a way to never be in a position where they are in debt to you again.

4. Even though I could have been very effective by flexing my muscles and raising my voice, I would have lost something that’s very important to me: the intangible advantages that come with having lots of social capital. If my property manager felt compelled to help me as a response to a threat, this would have changed the dynamic of our relationship. While he would definitely be on the ball when it comes to doing the things demanded by our contract, I would never be able to expect him to go beyond what he’s forced to do. What if I’m vulnerable in the future? What if I really need his help and he’s not obligated to help me? What if the tables turn and I find myself at his mercy? In these types of situations, I will gain far more cooperation out of my property manager by being one of his favorite tenants than by being the guy who’s known for calling him out.

Again, this isn’t about me being Zen or doing the “right” thing. I’m a strategist. And while

I'm not afraid to have enemies, I like to create as many advantages as possible for myself. Why make a guy afraid of me when I can just as easily make him like me? If you live by the sword, you will eventually die by the sword. That is, if you rely on your ability to threaten, intimidate, or guilt-trip people to get your needs met, those very same people will turn a blind eye or finish you off at your first sign of vulnerability.

5. My decision to do things nicely didn't cost me any respect or opportunity. I still had the right to get really assertive if I needed to. In fact, my right to get really assertive probably increased because of the patience and kindness that I exercised early on. My choice to play it smooth came with great rewards and it had no risks.

Take The Easy Way Out and Be Charitable

The principle of charitable interpretation says we should evaluate other people's claims and arguments in their strongest possible light. When a person seems to contradict themselves, we should try to make sense of their words in a way that doesn't cause them to look silly, stupid, or sinister. What's true of words is also true of behavior.

If someone forgets to email you, call you, or help you, assume it was for a pardonable reason and send a gentle reminder instead of making an accusation. If you need something from someone, assume they will be glad to help you and simply ask for what you need without being dramatic. Keep your ace in the hole until or unless you need it.

Take a chance on the power of your asking. Give your relationships an opportunity to work on the basis of sincerity and sympathy. You'll have a lot more fun that way.

Don't pull out a fire extinguisher if all you need to do is ask someone to blow out a candle.