

Making Valid Requests

This material is the work of three people, Patricia, Luther, and Jeanne-Marie Moore. The concept of being a *powerful and effective speaker* is ridiculous if one is not at the same time a *powerful and effective listener*.

The material presented here is not necessarily "right" nor all inclusive. The intent is to begin a journey of exploring the realm of communication where the journey is as important if not more important than the destination. It is very important that you consider the material that is being discussed and weigh it against your own experience to test its validity.

Elements Of A Valid Request

A valid request requires a **speaker** who makes a request.

A valid request requires a **listener** of whom the request is being made.

A valid request assumes a shared background so that the request is clearly understood by both parties i.e. a **common language**.

A valid request assumes that some **future action** is necessary on the part of the person of whom the request is being made.

A valid request presumes that the listener has the **ability to perform** the task.

A valid request requires **sincerity**.

A valid request has a **time frame** for completion.

A valid request must be **specific** enough so that it is clear that it has or has not been completed, i.e. the conditions of satisfaction must be clear.

A valid request must be **communicated**.

Discussion Of Elements Of A Valid Request

When we speak we are doing so to communicate to someone else that we want something. This seems to be true across the board no matter what form we are using. There is always a purpose behind what we are saying if only we take time to examine it. This is most obvious with a request. Therefore, I am going to go through and discuss what I call "The Elements of a Valid Request" in some detail. Some of the "Elements" are quite simple and obvious once they are brought consciously to the forefront. Others are more involved and quite complicated. All of them are important. If one or more of the elements is missing or unclear the chances of being misunderstood and not getting what one wants increase dramatically. Please note a very, very important distinction here; Just because I make a very complete and very clear request does not mean that I will necessarily get exactly what I want. The person of whom I am requesting something may not be willing to produce the result I want or may be willing to produce it in a different form. These responses, a "no" or a "decline" or a "counter-offer" are a whole separate conversation from this discussion. The important point here is that if I am not clear with my request and it is not clearly understood on the other end, the person of whom I am making the request will not know what I *want* and I will have a *much* smaller chance of getting what I *want*.

To illustrate the different elements I am going to use the following example, "Please bring the paper home." Now I will go through the elements one at a time.

Element 1: A Speaker

Clearly, if I am saying something there is a speaker. Note, however, this element can be satisfied also by more than one person. A request can be made by an individual, a couple, a group etc. and these all satisfy the first element.

Element 2: A Listener

Unless I am talking to myself it would seem that the second element, a Listener, is present. But is this really the case? Suppose there are 5 people in the room when I make the request. Of whom is the request being made? If I am engaged in a one on one conversation then that person probably satisfies the second element. If I establish eye contact with some one in the room, or say someone's name, prior to making the request, that person probably satisfies the listener role.

If I broadcast my request as "Would someone please bring home the paper?" has the second element really been satisfied? The answer is probably "Maybe," and the results are probably in jeopardy. Some requests are perfectly valid when presented to a group, for example, a parent saying to 2 or more children, "Please be home for dinner." Others, like the example involving the newspaper introduce levels of uncertainty with regard to whom is being asked to perform this task that it becomes unclear if the second element (listener) has been satisfied. The point here is that it is very important that the request *be heard* by someone and that, preferably, some agreement be reached. If I ask Tom, "will you bring the paper home?" and Tom says, "Yes, I'll bring the paper home," I have an infinitely better chance of seeing the paper than if I just broadcast my request to a group.

Element 3: a common language

"Please bring the paper home." This seems like a very simple request. We both speak English. We know what a paper is. We know where home is. Etc.

However, let's examine the assumptions regarding simply the issue of a common language involved in this seemingly simple request. What do I mean by "paper?"

- a) *The Chronicle?*
- b) *The Racing Sheet?*
- c) *The Rental Guide?*
- d) The term paper you're working on?
- e) A ream of paper for the computer?

All of these questions are answered by the context in which the request is made including the parties of whom the request is being made. In other circumstances there is even less certainty that requests will be understood. "Biceps" and "risers" may mean nothing or different things to different people. "Biceps" mean something to a biology student, a doctor, a massage therapist or a body worker. They may not mean anything to the man on the street. To a carpenter framing stairs, "risers" means the distance from the top of one stair tread to the top of the next stair tread. To a plumber, "risers" means the pipes connecting the shut off valves to a faucet. To someone in the theater, "risers" are the stepped platforms on which chairs are placed. Again, the important thing is that there be a shared background with a common language so that what is being requested is understood by a listener on the other end.

Element 4: Future Action

"Bring the paper home." Clearly, this implies that I do not have the paper, that I want the paper and that something needs to happen if I am going to have a paper. There is some unmet condition that requires someone to take some action to fulfill my request. If I am looking for a place to move, particularly if I am looking with someone with whom I am currently living, there is a reasonable chance that he or she might bring home *The Rental Guide*. My chances of getting it are much, much greater if I specifically request "Bring home the paper."

Element 5: The Ability to Perform

"Bring home the paper yesterday" is not a valid request unless you are making the request of someone with a time machine. No one I know has a time machine and therefore this is impossible.

Element 6: Sincerity

This is closely related to Element 5. Asking for something that is either impossible, patently absurd or so far removed from the norm denies or at least questions the validity of the request. When someone ask the impossible, the absurd or when someone who is known to never, never, ever read a newspaper asks, "Please bring me a paper," their sincerity needs to be established with some overriding consideration or their request is not likely to get serious consideration.

Element 7: A Time Frame

If someone is going to the store and asks "Do you want anything?" or if a housemate or spouse says, "I'll be home from work at 7," and I ask, "Please bring home a paper" then the context has probably satisfied the time frame element. It is reasonable to assume that "when I come back from the store" or "when I come home from work". On the other hand, an open ended request, "Let's do lunch" has the time frame element missing. Tomorrow? Next week? Next month?

Element 8: Specific

This element, like many of the others, can be satisfied by simply being clear on exactly what the context is. If I am talking to a housemate with whom I am currently looking for a new place to live and we have already establish that we are looking in southern Marin County and we have been using the *Independent Journal* (newspaper) as our main starting point then it is reasonably clear and not necessary to further specify which paper I am requesting when I ask for a paper. On the other hand, when I call a rental agent whose name and phone number I have just found in the paper, I need to let him know that what we are looking for is a beautiful 3 or 4 bedroom, 2 or 3 bath house with parking in Marin County south of San Anselmo with rent not to exceed \$3,200 by July 1.

Element 9: Communicated

By communicated I mean the request must be heard and understood as a request. This implies considerably more than just speaking the request. Not only must it be communicated, it must be understood as a request by the listener, that is he or she must understand that they are being asked to do something, and it must be complete and

accurate enough that a third party observer looking back could objectively make a determination as to whether or not the request had been fulfilled.

I would suggest that always coming from a conscious choice of responsibility whether making or listening to requests will produce better results. When I am making a request it is much more powerful to make a complete and valid request. "Patricia, please will you pick up today's *Independent Journal* on your way home from work?" is much more powerful than "Please bring home a paper" in a room with 5 people. Why is it more powerful? Because now Patricia knows exactly what I need and want and there is a great chance for a win-win!

Conversely, if Patricia asks "Please bring home a paper," as a responsible listener I would establish by asking if necessary, "Do you mean me? Are you serious (She never, never, ever reads the newspaper)!? Which paper? And when do you want it?" This responsible and powerful listening again establishes exactly what is needed and wanted and has the wonderful possibility of a win-win!

It is not always necessary to be very formal about how a request is made but being extremely conscious about which elements are present and which are missing when either making or listening to requests and then presenting what ever elements might have been missing will greatly increase the odds of life working smoothly. If I do not know what you want it will be only random luck if I happen across what it is you want. To depend on luck is very difficult, almost to the point of being impossible, for either of us to win.

Elements Of A Valid Request: Summary Sheet

1. A valid request requires a **speaker** who makes a request.
2. A valid request requires a **listener** of whom the request is being made.
3. A valid request assumes a shared background so that the request is clearly understood by both parties i.e. **a common language**.
4. A valid request assumes that some **future action** is necessary on the part of the person of whom the request is being made.
5. A valid request presumes that the listener has the **ability to perform** the task.
6. A valid request requires **sincerity**.
7. A valid request has a **time frame** for completion.
8. A valid request must be **specific** enough so that it is clear that it has or has not been completed, i.e. the conditions of satisfaction must be clear.
9. A valid request must be **communicated**.

Definitions and Examples of some different forms of speaking and some of their possible intended purposes:

Accept: create agreement

Accuse: blame

Apologize: acknowledge a broken agreement

Argue: 1) explore different view points; 2) make wrong

Baby talk: 1) mock; 2) pillow talk

Coach: instruct

Complain: 1) voice dissatisfaction with intent to have something change; 2) make wrong

Criticize: 1) analyze; 2) make wrong

Curse: 1) express something passionately; 2) embarrass

Declare: state a strong conviction

Demand: state a non-negotiable position

Deny: communicate a negative response

Discuss: consider 2 or more points of view

Enroll: get agreement

Lecture: teach

Chastise: correct undesirable behavior

Mock: ridicule

Tease: 1) get attention; 2) make fun of some one

Question: 1) inquire; 2) challenge one's authority

Report: inform

Reprimand: correct

Criticize: 1) coach; 2) make wrong

Request: ask

Respond: answer

Share: create a common bond or experience

Small talk: create rapport

Gossip: slander somebody

Story telling: share experiences

Threaten: to exert power or control