

# The Answer is Yes, But First You Have to Ask, Jim Charette

## *Your Success Is My Business*

Some years ago, I was sitting in a client's office. He was on the phone with someone and made it clear that he wanted me to listen to his side of the conversation. As his caller continued to talk, my client used hand signals to get my attention. He then waved his arms excitedly and pointed toward the phone. After a dramatic pause, he asked: "Why don't you appoint me as the trustee"? A moment later he smiled broadly, indicating a positive response from his caller.

That experience was a defining moment for me. It triggered the realization that we could ask for – and receive – opportunities, and it launched me on the path to developing "The Answer is Yes, But First You Have to Ask" workshop. Asking for what you need is about taking the initiative and steering things your way. Asking creates opportunities. You can ask for more vacation time, for greater clarification, for an extra scoop of ice cream. You can ask for a refund, another chance, a better table. You can ask what's the top priority? How can I improve? How can we work better together? Asking the right questions – of yourself and others -- will lead to a fuller, happier, and more prosperous life.

If these potential opportunities are just waiting around the corner, why aren't we doing more asking? What's holding us back? It's easy to say, "I can't be bothered." Or "I don't have the skills to negotiate." Or "It isn't worth the hassle." The core issue is that asking requires courage. Asking has been described as downright uncomfortable. We can feel inadequate, incompetent and embarrassed. Behavior experts tell us that one of the biggest reasons we don't ask is because we fear the rejection of being declined. We often assume that the answer will be "No."

In an article titled "If You Need Help, Just Ask"\*, Francis J. Flynn, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stanford University, writes, "No one likes being rejected. As a result, we avoid requesting assistance from those who we think will not agree to provide it." People are often mistaken in predicting the behavior of others. Research conducted by Flynn and co-author Vanessa K.B. Lake at Columbia University reveals that once we've "assigned that no" response to the person we're considering asking, we will be wrong in our assessment 50% of the time.

We wrongly assume we will be rejected more often than is actually the case—which means the answer will be "Yes" far more often than we ever dare imagine. A client who works for a large financial services firm doubled his previous year's referrals after working with me for less than two months. How? Simply by learning to ask.

Not everyone has a business consultant to personally guide them towards better asking, but there are plenty of questions you can use as a jumping-off point:

- Asking at work: Ask for help, meetings that start/end on time, more feedback. Ask employees and customers, "How are we doing?" "What's the most important issue we need to address?" "What needs to change most in the next 90 days?" "How can I add more value?" "Are our goals aligned?"

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- Asking at home and in relationships: “How are we doing on a scale of 1-10?” “What needs to be done to get to a 10?” “How can I better support you? Do you want me to just listen or offer suggestions?” “Are we having fun? If not, why?”
- Asking yourself: “Am I happy? Am I successful? What’s holding me back? How can I improve my situation?” “Who do I need to ask for help?” “What skills do I need to acquire?” “Am I setting the bar too low?” “Who do I need to forgive?” “How can we negotiate that price? What discount may I have?”

It's important to maintain the attitude that you will always receive a "Yes" or a positive response to your requests. But the reality is that some people are simply not in a position to grant our requests. Be prepared to hear a “No” and understand that, 1) it probably isn't personal, and 2) it may just be temporary then move on with determination. Rejection provides an experience you can learn from; it's not what happens to us that matters most, but how we respond to what happens.

There are numerous ways you can help stack the deck in your favor when asking.

- Imagine asking—and receiving. Visualize the opportunities and expect to get what you ask for. Remember the old sports adage: you’ll miss all the shots you don’t take.
- Make sure you’re asking the right person. Clearly you wouldn’t ask the receptionist for additional vacation time.
- Be cognizant of timing. 5:30 p.m. on a Friday is not ideal to ask for a raise.
- Consider injecting humor into your questions; allow people to see your human side. Smile when asking in person and let people on the telephone “hear” your smile.

As with most things in life, the best way to get better at asking is to practice. When we first begin working together, I challenge all of my clients to ask 10 different people every day for something they either want or need. The positive answers to their questions are astounding, and this practice allows them to become much more comfortable with the process of asking. Asking is not Sisyphean, but rather like a snowball rolling down hill picking up both mass and speed.

Make the challenge fun. Don’t forget to focus on the potential benefits. Start your day by asking yourself, “Where are the hidden opportunities?” Listen to the answers that come your way and focus on following through. So, take charge, ask and enjoy the results.

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***Jim Charette is a consultant who conducts workshops titled, "The Answer is Yes, But First You Have to Ask."***

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