



Episode 10: The Power of a Confident Ask

Welcome to In the Right Direction Podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone. It's Deb. Let me ask you a question. Do you sometimes end a conversation or meeting without being crystal clear about follow-up and next steps? If you were leading the conversation, do you feel 100% certain about accountability? Think about how confident you'd feel if you had a way to end important conversations with clarity and confidence around what everyone has agreed to do.

Today, I'm going to share a communication tool that you can use to ensure clear accountability and agreement around who's going to do what at the end of an important conversation or meeting. This communication tool can help you feel confident and take charge. In addition to being practical and goal oriented, it can also be powerfully life-changing.

I'll tell you more about that though, with a personal story in a few minutes. This tool we're discussing today is called making an ask. Making an ask might seem simple and obvious, and yet it's hard to do consistently and confidently. And when you're able to make an ask effectively, you'll immediately feel calmer because you were able to create clear agreement about next steps for whatever project or goal you are working toward.

What is making an ask you wonder? Making an ask is different than regular asking. In my mind, the word, ask in the phrase, making an ask starts with a capital A. Making an ask is powerful because it invites the other person to commit to their responsibility in an intentional way. When we make an ask at the close of a conversation, we create an agreement.

Making an ask is about being very clear about what's important to you, what you want, and then asking it in simple terms and waiting for an answer. The other day, I was speaking with one of my clients. She's a leader in health care and she's setting up big health initiatives right now. I asked her what she asks at the end of the meeting to ensure accountability and clarity about next steps.

She said that she often asks something like, is everyone clear about next steps? Here's the problem with a question like that. It's not as effective as it could be. Rarely is someone going to say in front of everyone else, nope. I am not clear about next steps. What happens is people usually just nod their heads.

They say yes. And they're relieved to end the meeting. We have no idea what people are clear about and unclear about. That's why making an ask is so important. So my client and I discussed it and I asked her what the specific ask she wanted to make was at the end of a meeting. She replied that she wasn't completely sure.

And most of us are the same way. Often we don't know what we want to specifically ask for. We do know that we want something. We do know that we feel uncertain and unsure, that we want help. And yet we don't take the time to pause and reflect and get clear in our head exactly what it is we're asking for.

When you're not clear in your head, you can't be clear out in the world. Making an ask has four key parts. First and foremost, it takes clarity. This takes pausing and reflecting about the information or accountability that's most important to you because asks can be vastly different based on a situation.

For example, you might want to ask someone to read something you've written and to comment on a piece of it. You might want to ask someone to reflect on a specific question and share their thoughts at a week. Or you might want to ask someone to make a warm introduction for networking.

Second, making an ask requires confidence and caring. We make an ask because we care, because we are committed, and because it matters. When you make an ask, you're stepping into your leadership and you're asking the other person to step up into theirs too. Third, making an ask requires simple, straightforward language. I suggest to my clients that they begin their ask with one of two phrases: will you, or can we.

For example, can we talk about how I will take on more direct reports this year? Or, will you share this specific message with your team? Fourth and last, making an ask requires self-restraint because after you make the ask, you have to be silent. You need to wait patiently for the other person to answer.

And this is often the hardest part because silence can feel so uncomfortable. We want to rush ahead to fill it in. Yet an ask is only effective after we've gotten a response from the other person. We ask, and then we wait for them to answer. They might say yes or no, or make a counter offer. Remember it's in our control to ask, it is not in our control how someone answers.

Those are the four key pieces of an ask. So I want to do something different and shift gears and talk about the power of an ask. I said at the beginning that an ask can be life-changing because you never know where the energy behind it will lead. I want to share personal story about the impact of one single ask.

This took place in 2013, when I was in coach training. As part of the training I was being coached in front of the class by one of our teachers. The focus of our conversation was helping me think through what I wanted to share with the world. I discussed a few things on my mind. And one of the ideas I mentioned was writing about a piece of our family history.

After I voiced this, the teacher looked me right in the eyes and asked, will you write this story tonight? That was his ask. Will you write this story tonight? He paused. I said, yes. So here's the story. During World War 2, my father-in-law was sent to a concentration camp. In April, 1945, at the end of the war, as the allies were approaching, the Nazis who ran that camp packed thousands of the camp prisoners onto trains to evacuate the camp.

My father-in-law was one of those prisoners. The train he was on then crisscrossed, Germany for seven days before finally stopping in a wooded area, near a place called Farsleben. Then a miracle happened. The survivors who were sick and tired and starving were happened upon by a division of American soldiers who were out on routine patrol.

These American soldiers made the decision to stop and to help the survivors find food and shelter and medical care. They saved many lives that day, among them, my father-in-law. So decades pass. Turns out this division of American soldiers have stayed in touch. They've had annual reunions. And then many, many years later with the power of the internet, they somehow connect with some of the concentration camp survivors whom they liberated from that train in 1945.

And then about 10 years ago, they start inviting the survivors and their families to the reunions. In 2013, my husband and my son traveled to one of those reunions to meet the American soldiers who liberated their father and grandfather. That's the story I wrote down that night in response to my leader's ask. The next day I read it out loud to my classmates.

It was powerful and purposeful and it didn't end there. A few months later, I shared this story at a Holocaust Remembrance Day Memorial service at our synagogue. Here's what happened next. Our rabbi heard it. He was intrigued. He decided to invite one of the remaining American soldiers to our synagogue to be honored for their division's life saving actions.

And so a few months later, on the holiday of Yom Kippur, in front of more than a thousand people, picture this: the American soldier and my father-in-law reunite. They shake hands and they hug. The American soldier's introduced to Charles' three sons and eight grandchildren. A community bears witness.

It was a moment of unmatched, awe, gratitude and synchronicity. And it all stemmed from one clear ask and one committed yes.

I want you to, to harness the power of making an ask. So let's bring this to your life. In the next week, I invite you to practice this leadership communication tool to build your confident communication and front of the room leadership by making an ask.

At the end of an important conversation or meeting, take the time to pause, get clear about what you really want, use simple language to ask it, and then patiently wait for the answer. It might be a small ask. Like, can we set up time to circle back on this? Or a big ask, like, will you write a blog post about this for our newsletter?

The key is to have clarity, commitment and intention. I want to end with an ask of my own. Here's my ask for all of you. Will you share this podcast with one other person? If you said yes, please know that I'm grateful. If you said no, I appreciate that you listened to my podcasts anyway. Enjoy using this confidence and leadership tool and see how it changes your conversations at work and at home.

Thank you again for being part of my community. And please email me anytime at deb@debelbaum.com with your thoughts, your questions, and if I can be helpful. Until next time.