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# How To Be More Assertive At Work When That's Just Not Your Personality

It's your job to ask for things. Here's how to be more comfortable with getting what you want.



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BY ART MARKMAN

5 MINUTE READ

Find it hard to advocate for yourself? You're not alone. The personality trait that psychologists call "agreeableness" describes how motivated you are to get along with other people. If you're highly agreeable, that motivation can sometimes prevent you from sticking up for your own interests. Anytime you ask for something at work, you run the risk that you'll be told "no"—and possibly aggravate the person you're asking. As a result, agreeable people may be put off from asking in the first place.

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This can be a problem, because [research suggests](#) that agreeable people tend to make less money than disagreeable people (even accounting for the fact that disagreeable people lose their jobs more often). And in leadership roles, agreeable people may not be as good at getting their teams all the resources they need. So what can you do to be more assertive even when it just isn't in your personality to do so? Here are a few tips.

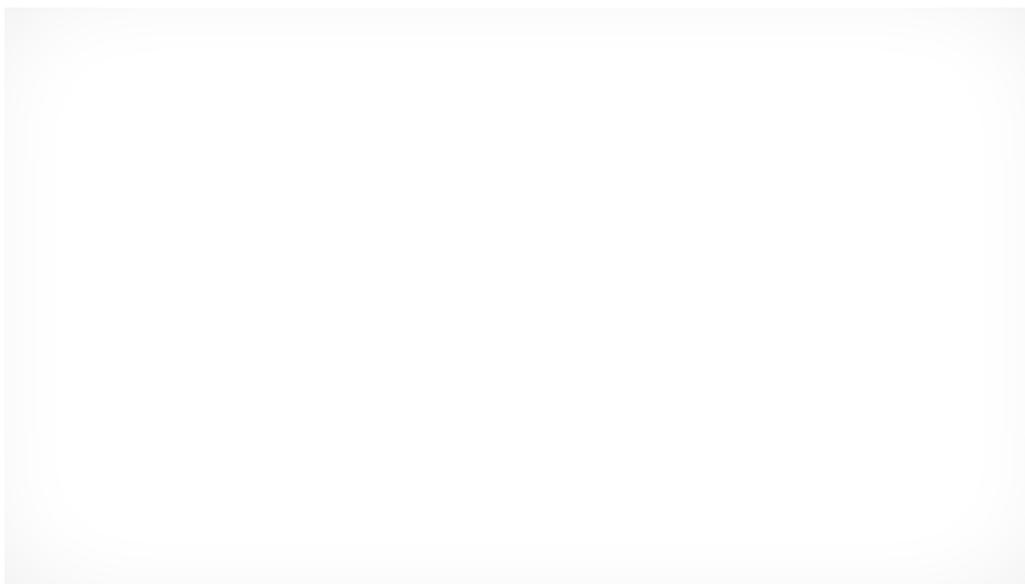
## STOP HEDGING

When you're feeling concerned about making a certain request, there are a few different ways you might show it. One of them is with the way you phrase the request itself. [Hedging phrases and expressions](#) like "sort of," "kind of," or "technically," can water down what you're trying to say—and make you sound less confident than you need to be in order to get what you want.

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For example, when you say to someone that you're "kind of done" with a project, you're not really stating that you *are* finished with it, just somewhere in the vicinity of done.

These linguistic habits can creep into your questions just as easily as they can water down your statements. Maybe you preface a request by saying, "I was sort of hoping that you would . . ." hoping that this phrasing will come off more polite. Agreeable person that you are, you think your chances of getting what you want will be higher when you aren't seen as imposing on anybody. But you might be wrong; This language makes it sound like your request isn't all that important, or even that you're not certain it deserves to be granted.

Just state your requests more directly. "I need . . ." or "I want . . ." will typically get you much further. Decision makers in your organization can't help you unless you state clearly what you need to be successful, and explain why it's so important. Even if they can't grant what you want that very moment, they may be able to help you out in the future.

## **TREAT YOUR REQUEST LIKE A FIRST IMPRESSION**

People are influenced not just by the content of certain statements, but also by the confidence with which they're put forward, and the same is true with requests.

All the lessons you've learned about [how to meet new people](#) also apply when you're asking for something. You know you have to look people in the eye, stand tall, and give a firm handshake in order to make a first impression. You'll want to be just as emotionally intelligent when you're asking people for things—including people you already know well and work with every day. Speak clearly and audibly, make eye contact, and act as though you expect cooperation from them.

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Your agreeableness may prod you to take a more casual approach, but you need to resist that urge the same way you'd have to if you were meeting new people while networking. It's important to project the expectation that your request will be taken seriously, and that display of confidence can boost the chances that it actually will be.

## **ALWAYS GIVE A REASON**

You'd be surprised how many people forget this one, but it's always crucial to justify your request. You don't need to give a long, drawn-out explanation of why the thing you're asking for matters, but a clear statement of the underlying need or purpose is key to sounding assertive. The reason helps because it shifts people from making an up-or-down decision to having to argue with the reason. Sometimes, just the effort of having to grapple with the reason is enough to get people to agree.

A [classic 1978 study](#) by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and her colleagues looked at this issue when people would line up to use the office photocopier. They found that whenever somebody just asked if they could cut the line (a "yes" or "no" question), they were generally told "no," and had to take their place at the back of the line. But if they gave a reason—"Can I cut in? I need to make some copies?"—people were much more likely to let them through. The reason itself couldn't have been more obvious, but it was enough—people just didn't want to have to argue with it.

Of course, a *good* reason (not just any reason) also helps bolster the case for your request. It's always useful for people to understand not just what you want, but why you want it. The trick, though, is to keep your request short.

When you can give a crisp statement of why your request matters, people assume you have really thought it through. If you ramble in your reasons, then the request is likely to seem half-baked, too.

This is potentially good news for agreeable people whose personalities tend to make them less keen on asking for things; even being able to muster a short explanation can go a long way.

## REMEMBER THERE'S NO HARM IN ASKING

Finally, don't forget that people who act as gatekeepers for resources know that people are going to ask them for things. Part of the job of managing a team is determining how to allocate those resources. Managers in those roles *expect* to have to manage those requests.

That means that you're not doing something socially inappropriate when you approach someone with a request. It also means that they aren't usually going to be angry with you if they have to tell you "no." Typically, they're just doing their best to manage the organization's resources in the best way they think they can. In other words, it isn't personal.

If it helps you become more assertive, just remind yourself that your managers and supervisors don't feel bad about asking *you* to do things. So you shouldn't feel bad about reciprocating. Every organization has goals that its team members are charged with carrying out. *Not* asking for what you need hinders those goals. In that sense, withholding your request is probably the most disagreeable thing you can do.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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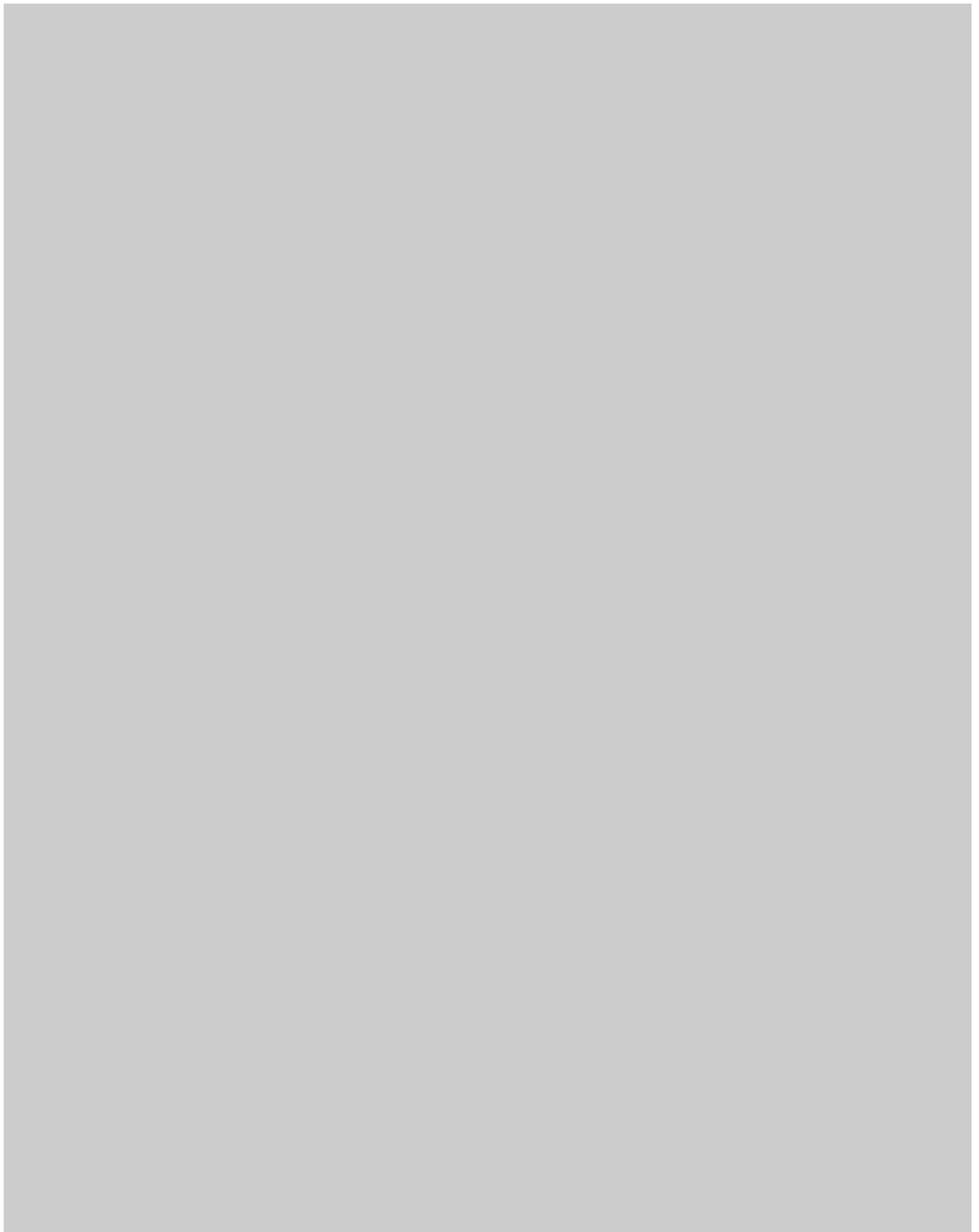
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