



How To Get What You're Looking For

If you use Google search, you know how important it is to be specific in your search terms. Why? Because you know that the less clear your search terms, the more extraneous material you'll receive. Which means you have to either plow through stuff you don't want, or you run another search with more specifics.

How does this work for relationships? When we ask someone for something, it's equally important to be specific and clear. This way, they can respond with what you are seeking. When you're less clear, their mind starts wandering around, trying to figure out what you mean. Example: *"Where's that report I was reading?"* Response: *"Do you mean the report you had yesterday, or the one you were telling me about this morning?"* *"No, I mean the one I was using for the paper I'm writing."*

This might work better: *"I'm looking for the 2015 Economic Summary report that I was using. Have you seen it?"*



This approach not only clears communication; it also avoids misunderstanding. Example: Person A announces the outcome of his project, and person B says, *“What were you thinking?”* Response: *“Well, I thought it was a good idea at the time.”* This might work better: *“What were you thinking? The reason I ask is that I’ve wondered about this, too, and I’d like to understand how you came to this conclusion.”*

You can see how explaining what’s behind your question avoids putting someone in a position to defend themselves. In this example, the explanation opened up an opportunity to compare notes. Plainly, this helps build the relationship.

What’s cool is that this approach works very well even when we’re not seeking something. It really streamlines conversation when we state something, and follow with, *“What’s behind my statement is…”* Example: *“Come into my office.”* This might work better: *“Come into my office. (What’s behind my request is that) I want to tell you about our new sales campaign.”* Whew! That was close. I thought my boss was going to bawl me out.

To paraphrase Roger Schwarz, *“If you don’t explain your reasoning, people will make up their own explanation of your behavior.”* This generates fruitless conversations, misunderstandings, and confusion.

Harvard psychology professor Ellen Langer carried out a study that validates the “what’s behind” approach. Dan Ariely explains, “She asked her research assistants to look for lines for photocopiers, approach

someone waiting to make copies and say, *“Excuse me, can I get in line in front of you?”* Unsurprisingly, this request was usually refused. Prof. Langer then had her research assistants change their phrasing and instead ask, *“Excuse me, can I get in line in front of you—I need to make a photocopy.”* With this new version, they were frequently allowed to cut in. Obviously, the second phrase held no new information—why would anyone join this line if not to make a photocopy? But the longer phrasing had the structure of a reason-based-request: Excuse me, may I do X, I need Y. Prof. Langer showed that because people often don’t pay attention to what we say, it is sometimes enough to say something that sounds reasonable—and people will often agree.”¹ The positive responses went from 60% to 93% when people were given a reason behind a request.”

I recently tried this when we were having breakfast before leaving on a 7 hour drive. I had some extra breakfast biscuits on my plate, and I asked the waitress, *“Could I please have a to-go box for these?”* She replied, *“No, to-go boxes are only when you’re not eating here.”* Then I remembered Langer’s research. Next time she passed by, I said, *“I know it’s against the rules, but could I please have a to-go box to put these in? We’re leaving on a long drive, and I want these for travel food.”* Her response? *“Sure, I’ll get you one.”*

Cool, eh? Simply stating what’s behind our questions increases our chance of a positive response. And it also saves time, avoids confusion, and avoids defensiveness, the anathema to relationships. “What’s behind” enables you to have more clarity in your communication — people will

¹ Dan Ariely on LinkedIn February 28, 2015

immediately understand you. It's such a simple tool — the trick is to remember to use it.

And, you can flip it around: When someone makes a statement that leads your mind to multiple conclusions, simply ask something like, “*What's behind your thinking?*” or, “*How are you thinking about that?*” We all like to explain our thinking because we like our own ideas, so people usually respond readily. You will be surprised at what you learn about the other person, how they're thinking and feeling. If you want to build relationships, it just makes good sense to get to know someone — how they think and feel about things.

What's behind also works well when someone asks you a question. Here's the tip: Instead of trying to figure out what they need to know, or why they need to know it, simply respond, “*What's behind your question?*”

If being specific and clear gets better Google results, it'll work for you.

Side Note: If you have children, you might want to carefully consider sharing this tool with them, especially if they're the kind of kids who ask for a lot of things! :-)