

The Power of Asking Permission



Is this a good time to talk?

How many times have you decided to begin a conversation with this sentence? Perhaps you felt it showed deference to the busy schedule of the listener; or maybe you wanted to enlist the listener's buy-in before you brought up a difficult or complicated topic. In either case, just asking this small question probably created a slight pause or buffer that helped engage the focus and openness of the person on the other end of the conversation. It turns out that there is a research basis to support this idea of asking if it's a good time to talk to increase voluntary compliance.

In a post about tips for making stronger connections, this notion was enlarged and labeled **The Crazy Question That Shows You Care**. The blogger described how Alison Brooks of Harvard had an assistant approach people at a train station on a rainy day. Half the time she asked people, "Can I borrow your phone? I need to make an important call."

Only 9 percent of those people agreed to help.

But with the other people the assistant said, "I'm sorry about the rain! Can I borrow your phone? I need to make an important call."

Yes, she apologized for *the rain*. Something she did not cause and had zero control over. The result? 47 percent of people helped her out. That's a 400% increase. Similar results were achieved in many different situations.

Regardless of how superfluous the apology was, as long as it conveyed care and concern, it boosted perceptions of warmth and increased trust.

Sometimes the crazy idea of an adult asking a child for permission can yield the same benefits. Giving unrequested advice runs the risk of short-circuiting a learning process and causing a listener to feel less than competent. When you find yourself wanting to give advice, use just enough restraint to ask your mentee if she wants to hear what you have to say. You can empower your mentee with questions like

- Would you mind if we talked about...?
- Are you interested to know my thoughts about...?
- Would you like to hear what some other people have done in this situation?
- You've mentioned that you feel your teacher may not like you. Do you think it would be helpful if we talk some about how people's body language can affect how others see them?
- I have some thoughts that might help with this problem. Would it be a good idea to spend some time talking about it the next time we get together?

Adapted from *Five Tips to Make Stronger Connections with Mentees, Backed by Research*, chronicle.umbmentoring.org, October 26, 2015.