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Don’t Ask, Don’t Get

By Steven Huff

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The Two Choices

Think about those two choices for a minute: asking or settling. Which do you prefer?

Where are you choosing no control? Where are you settling for what you can get? Where do you need to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get?

Let’s explore some different areas—

I. Sales

One of the best salespeople I’ve met taught me the wisdom of having critical conversations right up front with potential customers. These conversations include asking at least (2) critical Don’t Ask, Don’t Get questions:

- What are your current problems?
- How can I help you grow your business?

We want to help the customer and by so doing, get their business. These questions address our wanting to help directly and openly, right up front. These questions also challenge us since they put us in the customer’s shoes and require us to think about and to provide solutions. How can we add value? This is a direct Don’t Ask, Don’t Get approach. What does our customer need and want? Can we provide it?

The indirect (opposite) approach is initially presenting our product or service without first getting any understanding of what our customer needs, wants, and values.

First, we demonstrate solutions and present value for the customer. Secondly, we want to get their business. Accordingly, if we’ve done our first job, then secondly, we ask for the sale. Don’t Ask, Don’t Get requires us to do Job #1 and Job #2.

Remember: Life is Sales. We have to present our ideas and value all the time. We need to “sell ourselves” to others even if our job isn’t in the Sales Department. Don’t Ask, Don’t Get works in this regard as well.

What opportunities do you have to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get in the sales area?
II. Negotiations

You’ve all heard the phrase that applies in negotiations, namely “If you want an 8, then ask for a 10”. Again, I’ve found that this is largely TRUE. *Don’t Ask, Don’t Get* means:

Really and truly ask for the “10” up front. But do your homework on why you should get it and communicate the reasons. If you present your case well, you might end up with a 9 (or better)! Stick with it, but always know what a solid “9 or 8” looks like and the right timing to agree to this.

In a recent negotiation to buy a company, my client (the buyer) presented their “10” and stuck to it for valid reasons, despite repeated counteroffers by the seller. In the end, there was no deal and the seller walked. Had the buyer agreed to a “9 or 8”, it would still have been an excellent acquisition and value for the buyer.

A company significantly raised their prices when it became apparent they were losing money on that piece of business. It was a significant price increase. They did their homework and “opened their books” while presenting a detailed financial case directly to the customer showing why they were losing money. They got the price increase, and the business became profitable.

When practicing *Don’t Ask, Don’t Get* in the negotiations area, consider –

- Defining what a “10” is (doing your homework with details and specifics)
- Asking for the “10”
- Knowing what a WIN looks like (“9 or 8”)
- Picking the timing to execute a 9 or 8 if needed

III. People—Expectations and Performance

If you want performance from people, ask for it up front, directly and openly. Define the performance target. People want to succeed.

Be straightforward, honest, and truthful. Do it at the beginning, not at the end. If you do, you’ll be amazed at the results you’ll get and with the record time in which you’ll get them. And if you don’t ask for it, instead you’ll settle for whatever it is you DO get. But you’ll settle for it by default.

As a manager, when you practice *Don’t Ask, Don’t Get*, people will typically surprise you with superior performance.

About the worst thing you can do is to make an *implied request*—one that has dangling action items or open-ended directives. Implied requests just don’t work, and result in miscommunication and wasted resources—ultimately, your time and your money.
Let's look at (2) different people, Ann and John, and how they fail to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get.

John is in charge of a lot of people. He likes this and works hard to get things done quickly. John is a doer, and often does something himself rather than give it to others even if delegation would have been more appropriate. John likes accomplishment and moving forward. When John is forced to delegate and give up control, he is often indirect with his assignments. He will say things like ‘why don’t you guys figure out who will do this’. Or ‘we’ll have to figure out how to get this done later’. By avoiding direct assignment, John believes he has a chance to get involved later himself if needed. Secretly, others do not respect John or think he doesn’t trust them because he gets involved in everything. So typically, others don’t do much until John gets involved. As a result, things take much longer to get done, if at all.

Ann is very articulate and people oriented. She is excellent at follow-up and communication. Being liked by others is also very important to her. Ann looks to see what types of behaviors please others, then makes sure she does them. This would include taking people to lunch, fussing over their clothes and appearance, and giving them a report she promised them a day early. When asking others for something she needs from them for her to do her job, Ann’s need to be liked causes her to be super polite with her request, to tell others the request is ‘when they can get to it’, and she makes sure that she does a good behavior for them at the same time. She prides herself in being very popular with others. When others fail to deliver, Ann doesn’t meet her job goals (which happens often), and she is under great time pressure due to all the ‘favors’ she has promised to execute.

These examples help clarify what happens when we fail to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get with people. Both Ann and John are settling for “what they will get” because they aren’t defining their performance expectations clearly and up front. (John may think he has control but doesn’t get things done).

A senior manager had a reputation of “doing it all” – jumping in when others couldn’t deliver. She worked hard on Don’t Ask, Don’t Get – defining performance expectations up front. Soon, her employees began performing on their own.

An employee worked hard but his work just wasn’t visible to upper management and he became frustrated. A new manager came in over him who set performance expectations in the Don’t Ask, Don’t Get style. The employee flourished, met, and exceeded expectations, and accordingly received a promotion to became part of the trusted management team.

Where are you choosing no control? Where are you settling for what you can get? Where do you need to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get with people?

IV. Suppliers

One of my favorite axioms regarding improving company performance is “You’re only as good as your suppliers”. Suppliers are like employees. Great performance will enable your company to soar to new heights – poor performance causes significant setbacks that negatively impact your customer’s perceptions.

The Don’t Ask, Don’t Get philosophy is a critical element of supplier management. Since your suppliers serve many other companies, not just yours, it is critical to tell them right up front the performance you expect in an open and honest manner. Otherwise, you will get lost in the shuffle.
We seek to create supplier partnerships having strong communication and understanding pertaining to performance goals and continuous improvement opportunities. Suppliers want their customers to be successful – so ask them for their help.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Get requires being clear to suppliers concerning the problems your company might be having with their products or services. There’s nothing like a plant visit by your suppliers to experience the real situation in your facility. In the process, it’s important for suppliers to interact with various departments within your company, not just your Purchasing Department.

Do your suppliers understand your manufacturing and/or service processes enough to see how they might serve your company better? Do their products cause scrap and extra labor? Customer returns? Unnecessary quality inspections? Delays in shipping to your customers?

When suppliers perform well, it makes sense to offer them consolidation opportunities which give them more of your business.

A company wanted to increase its market share and accordingly pumped out a significant number of new products over a 2-year period. This required utilizing alternate materials, designs, and manufacturing processes—all working together to meet customer needs. To accomplish this, the company made a few suppliers literally part of its product development department – openly sharing new product goals and results. This led to unprecedented innovation, strong revenue growth, and profitable new product introductions.

The Power of Competitive Bidding

Another aspect of supplier management with the Don’t Ask, Don’t Get philosophy utilizes “The Power of Competitive Bidding”. Providing your company’s requirements to alternative suppliers in a bidding process answers the question: “Is my current supplier really the best choice for the future as my company grows?” I recommend bidding every (3) years or so where your company is spending a lot of money and/or where supplier performance is most critical.

In my experience regarding competitive bidding, over 50% of the time your company will end up staying with your current supplier—however you will get improved quality, better service, and lower costs.

A company was experiencing rising outbound freight costs. After completing competitive bidding, it changed freight suppliers to receive lower costs and better service. The previous supplier fought hard to stay in the picture, however – two years later that supplier won the company’s business back with another round of lower costs and increased service. The company won twice in the process!

Where are the opportunities to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get with your current suppliers?

Don’t Ask, Don’t Get is a winning approach.
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<th>Thinking Things Thru Focus Questions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>1. Where you think you need to practice Don’t Ask, Don’t Get? Consider the (4) areas: Sales, Negotiations, People Performance, and Supplier Performance. Be specific in describing the situation.</td>
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<td>2. In this particular area, where and how is the performance or results you’re currently achieving now falling below your expectations? Be specific in explaining the shortfall.</td>
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<td>3. What results do you expect to get in the future?</td>
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<td>4. What specifically do you need to ask for and to communicate to achieve the results you seek?</td>
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<td>5. How can your request involve collaboration and partnering with others? Include honesty, support, sharing of tasks, considering their point of view, and being communicative.</td>
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