



6 Steps to Asking For and Receiving Help for Public Safety Professionals

Asking for help is a critical success factor for public safety professionals. In particular, leaders who request assistance send a powerful message that it's okay to do so. One of the primary personal benefits of soliciting others' assistance is that your life becomes easier. For example, when you spend less time struggling to implement administrative plans or initiatives that you aren't good at, or don't know how to do, you increase the amount of time you have to focus on the things that you are really good at, and are equally important. As a result, your stress level drops and you can be confident that your community is much better served.

In my experience, people who recognize that they need assistance often don't ask for it because they don't know how. If that describes your situation, then you're in luck! Here are six steps that can help you improve the quality of your life by becoming an expert in getting the help you and/or your agency need.

1. Admit it when you don't know something or can't do it on your own

Asking for help means that you first have to admit that you don't know what the answer or solution is to a given question or situation, or that you know what to do, but you can't do it alone. Such an admission may feel threatening; you may believe that it makes you seem incompetent or unprepared – i.e., not up to performing the job you were hired to do. Such concerns usually are unfounded. Here are three sets of questions to help you put this point in perspective:

- A. Do you believe that any person in the world is capable of knowing everything? If not, why do you think you should?
- B. Do you believe that successful people know everything there is to know about their areas of

expertise? If not, why do you think you should?

- C. Do you believe that any one person should be able to complete a task that realistically requires more than one person? If not, why do you think you should?

In short, what makes you think the expectations for you are any different than those for any other human being on this planet? The fact is, no one person can know everything, nor can we always do things on our own. Those who refuse to accept this reality are setting themselves up for failure. So stop it! Instead, allow yourself to be human: acknowledge the times when you don't know something or cannot do it by yourself, and ask for help. Successful people in all walks of life have coaches and/or mentors. Why shouldn't you?

2. Realize that your request for help can benefit the other person

Most people are pre-disposed to help others. This is especially true of public safety professionals. By asking for help yourself, you are doing others a favor by providing opportunities for them to shine, to feel good because they have helped someone else, to validate their knowledge, and/or to show they are valued. In short, asking for help brighten someone else's day!

3. Recognize that by asking for help, you are giving others permission to do the same

One of the ways that human beings learn is by observing those around us. In the workplace, employees learn the norms and culture by watching how others behave, particularly the leaders. By asking others for assistance, you model the behavior that you want them (and those who are watching) to emulate. Importantly, when there is a

discrepancy between what leaders say and what they do, employees believe what they see. So if you are telling employees it's okay to ask for help yet no one ever sees you requesting assistance, the message being received is that it's really NOT okay.

4. Assess the risk of NOT asking for help

Just as charging into an incident without doing a size-up is unthinkable, forging ahead blindly in a situation instead of requesting assistance can have negative consequences. To realistically assess the downside of choosing NOT to ask for help, ask yourself two questions:

A. What's the worst thing that could happen if I do NOT ask for help?

B. Can I live with that outcome?

More often than not, you will discover that avoiding the undesirable outcome is well worth the "risk" of reaching out to others. Give it a try!

5. Provide a reason for your request

Research by Robert Cialdini demonstrates that adults who give a reason for their request are likely to get what they ask for nearly three times more often than those who do not provide a reason. So to increase the odds that the other person will want to help you, give him/her a reason to do so.

6. Receive whatever help is offered - graciously

In my experience, one of the hardest aspects of asking for help is actually receiving it and expressing one's gratitude. Once we've crossed the "hurdles" of recognizing the need for assistance and asking for it, we still need to move out of the way to allow others to do as we have requested. So take a deep breath, overcome whatever residual resistance that might come up, and let the other person to do as you have requested - even if he/she is doing the task differently than you would have done. Say "thank you" - and really mean it. Going a step further and telling the other person what impact his/her assistance had in

making your life easier or less stressful (e.g., "Your helping me with that task enabled me to get to my son's soccer game in time to see him score his first goal") helps him/her see the bigger picture, and thus the true value that he/she provided.

Asking for help often is a challenge. Following these six steps enables you to make your life easier, and your community safer, by showing you how to be more effective in reaching out to others. Why not give them a try?

More about Dr. Pat Lynch

Pat Lynch, Ph.D. enables first responders to elevate the level of public safety in their communities and to keep their personnel safe. She is the primary author of *Every Fire-Rescue Professional is a Leader: A Practical Guide to Individual, Team, and Organization Development*.