

2.2 Prefer Requests Over Demands

Be aware of your demands and, when appropriate, convert them into requests

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When we ask other people to do something, we often come with a demanding energy, which sends a message that the other person must do as we ask—or else. This can happen even when the language we use seemingly contains only a request. For a request to be pure, we must be willing to accept a refusal. When we make hidden demands, the person who hears them may sense that there will be negative repercussions unless they agree.

This may create an awkward or even hostile atmosphere. Most people tend to rebel against demands and prefer to make free choices. Even if they agree to a request, they may not do so willingly; as a result, they may develop a sense of resentment, which may come back and hurt you or the relationship.

In situations where you feel compelled to make a demand but want to transform it into a request, you should process your emotions before communicating it. This can lead to a softer approach, which will probably be better received.

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- By allowing others to say “no,” you can trust that when they say “yes,” they mean it.
- If you do make a demand, being explicit can be quite effective.
- Receiving a request feels more pleasant than receiving a demand.

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- Allowing the possibility of refusal is often scary, painful, and difficult.
- Converting demands to requests can take a lot of time, energy, and attention.

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Before converting requests to demands, the first step is becoming aware of circumstances in which you tend to make demands. Sometimes, these can be easy to identify (e.g., when your language or tone is clearly demanding). At other times, distinguishing between requests and demands can be more subtle. A good rule of thumb is to imagine beforehand what would happen if the other party refused your requests. If you can see yourself responding with anger or withdrawal, there’s a good chance you are about to make a demand, not a request. Genuine requests honor the other person’s autonomy and right to decline.

If you realize that you’re bringing a demanding energy, you now have a choice. You can proceed, which might be suitable in certain situations. As a parent, you may need to demand that your child stays off a dangerous road. As a branch manager at McDonald’s, you demand that your employees work for the duration of their shift and dress in the company uniform. Cases where your boundaries are threatened might also be good candidates for demands. In general, however, you will probably find that leaving room for creativity and personal expression leads to better relationships with your kids, your employees, and people overall.

In case you decide you want to do the internal work of distilling a request out of a demand, here's a deeper form of the exercise above. Take some time for yourself and imagine a prospective encounter. Visualize yourself stating what you want and need and imagine the potential responses. Start by envisioning a "yes" and sit with how that feels inside your body. This should be a warm, pleasant feeling, which connects you to the reason you're making this request.

Next, imagine what might happen if you get a "no." Again, feel whatever emotions this stirs in you. Give yourself room to experience whatever needs aren't met by the other person's refusal and try to empathize with their needs as well. Understanding the reasons behind their potential refusal can help you accept it, and mourning what you won't receive in this scenario is key to truly accepting it. This can involve grieving how the specific ways you want your needs to be met don't work for the other person. Sometimes, it may include grieving the fact that some of your needs will only be met partially, or not at all, either in the moment or over a longer period of time.

Agreeing to feel the pain of the world not being the way you want it to be has a curative aspect. If you do it deeply, it can be a key to accepting whatever exists, including the other person's lack of will or ability to oblige your requests.
