5 Simple Phrases That Will Get You Whatever You Want (Within Reason)

Would you like to be better at getting what you want from your employees, co-workers, customers, bosses, kids, and partner or spouse? Sometimes a change in wording is all you need.

That advice comes from best-selling author and executive coach Wendy Capland. Over the years, she’s learned that certain words and phrases minimize what you have to say, making your requests ineffective. Others have surprising power to influence your listeners. “They increase our effectiveness in communicating clearly and up our ability to get what we want,” she says.

Here are some phrases Capland says are particularly helpful at getting the desired response. Next time you want something from someone, try one of them out, and see if it doesn’t make a difference:

1. “What I Heard You Say Is...”

This powerful little phrase is one of the first that counselors learn, Capland says. “It’s clarifying,” she explains. “It’s a technique for how you listen to people as they’re describing a problem or situation. You’re repeating it back to them.”

This has two purposes. First, you’re checking for accuracy, making sure that you properly understood what the other person was trying to tell you. If you’ve never done this, you’ll be surprised at how often what you heard is actually not what the person intended to say. I know—because when I’ve neglected to do this, I’ve gotten into stupid arguments time and again when I misunderstood what someone was trying to tell me, or vice versa.

The second purpose is to validate what others have said, and let them know that you have heard them, and value their feelings and thoughts. People are dramatically more likely to listen to what you say if they feel they themselves have been listened to.

2. “Help Me Understand...”

“I love this phrase, because it takes the edge off a ‘You idiot!’ statement,” Capland says. “You’re accusing someone of doing something wrong, and everybody knows it. If you use a ‘You idiot!’ statement, the person will become defensive or upset.”

That’s not a good interaction to get into, but you can largely defuse it by saying something like, “Help me understand how you made that decision.” First, this reinforces the idea that you and the listener are collaborators, working together to solve a problem. Second, there may indeed be circumstances or considerations you don’t know about or haven’t thought of that made the seemingly wrong decision not so wrong after all. Rather than jumping to the conclusion that someone screwed up, you’re wisely pausing to get all the facts.

3. “Would You Be Open to the Possibility...”

This is a powerful phrase to use when making a pitch. “I just sent an email to an executive because I want him to send five of his top or emerging female leaders to my women’s leadership retreat,” Capland says. “Instead of saying it quite that way, I wrote, ‘Would you be open to the possibility of learning more about this event and sending some of your female executives to it?’”

This is powerful because it softens the request and allows the listener to take the next step or learn more about what you’re offering without making a decision yet, she explains. Most of us
are open to learning more about something most of the time, so long as we don’t have to commit
to more than that. So your odds of getting a yes answer are good—and now the person has
invited you to send along your most compelling information about whatever it is you’re pitching.

4. “My Request Is...”

“Most of us do not know how to ask for what we want,” Capland says. Making an effective
request is a skill you need to develop, and this simple phrase is a good place to start because it
offers multiple advantages. First off, it makes it crystal clear that you’re making a request,
something a person doesn’t always manage to convey very well.

Second, it can take the sting out of something that could be an order or even a complaint: “My
request is that you clean up your room this afternoon” or “My request is that you turn in your
report by 5 PM,” for example. Most important, it encourages you to be specific when making
requests, and the more specific you are about what you want and when, the likelier you are to
get it. One of Capland’s clients was affected by a corporate reorganization that added a boss
above her. Top brass sat down with her to discuss her options: She could stay where she was,
move to a different department, or leave and receive a severance package. She responded, “My
request is a year’s severance,” and she got it.

5. “I’m Not Sure, But Let Me Get Back to You In...”

What do you do when someone asks you a question and you don’t know the answer, either
because you need more information or because it involves a decision that you haven’t made yet?
Just saying, “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” makes you appear weak, Capland says. “Let me get
back to you” is better, but still vague and open-ended. Saying specifically what you will do and
when you will answer makes you seem authoritative and, more important, gives people an
answer they can rely on. “I’ll check my figures over the weekend and give you a definite answer
on Monday” is much better than “I don’t know. Let me think about it.”

You’ve made a commitment, which you will follow up on. And being clear about both your
commitments and your desires is a big step toward getting those desires fulfilled.

From an article by Minda Zetlin of Inc.