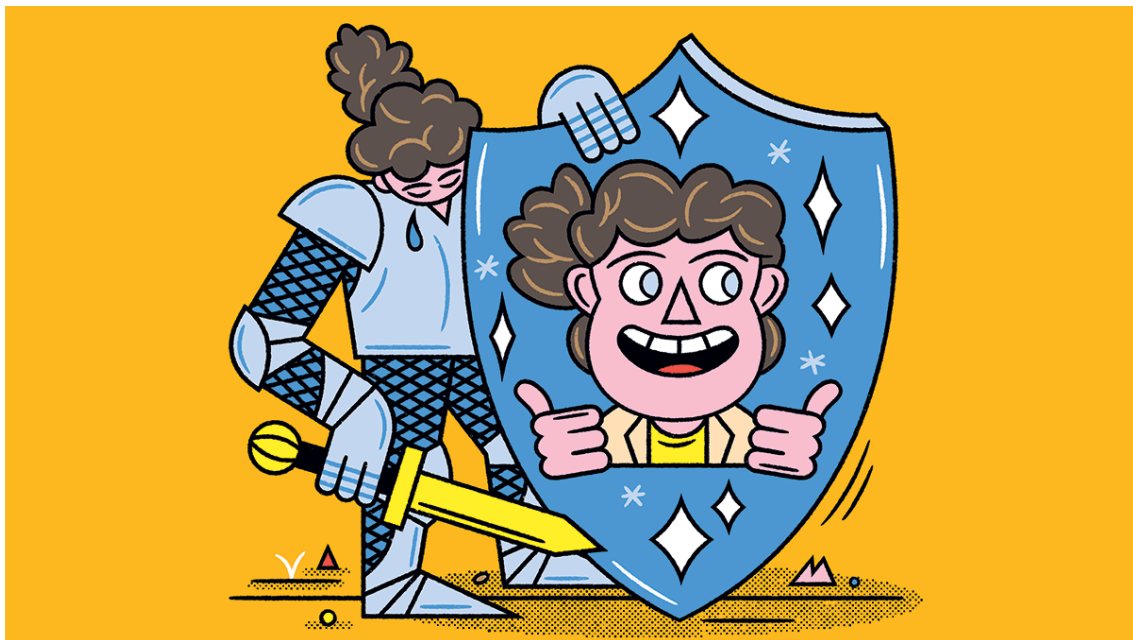


# Why It's So Hard to Ask for Help

by Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries

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Larissa Hoff

**Summary.** Although human beings are naturally social creatures, ready to both give and accept help, many of us struggle to actually ask for it, which over time can make us miserable and bitter. And because remote work is on the rise, leaving many of us isolated from colleagues,... [more](#)

Martha was under a lot of stress. Her company's supply chain was experiencing major disruptions, requiring her team to put in extra time. Even though her people were highly qualified, she was very reluctant to ask any of them to do more. They already had enough

on their plates, she believed, and it was her responsibility to step up. She had the same attitude toward her boss. Martha didn't want to approach him for help, figuring that if she did, he wouldn't be pleased.



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Then there were the pressures in her personal life: Her children were still very young, needing a lot of attention, but she knew that getting her husband to pitch in more would be an uphill battle. His job was demanding and took a lot out of him. He also was deeply involved in sports—something she felt he needed to do to relax. So it just seemed easier to manage the family and household responsibilities herself.

Does this sound familiar? Although humans are social creatures, ready to both give and accept help, many of us struggle to actually ask for it. Over time that can make us miserable and bitter. And with the shift toward remote work now leaving many of us isolated from our colleagues, the challenges of asking for help have only intensified.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with being self-reliant. It's a much-admired trait in our society. But if you want to be fulfilled and successful at work, it's important to acknowledge when you're working beyond your individual capacity and be open to seeking assistance.

How can we learn to do this? Let's begin by looking at where the reluctance comes from.

## **What Gets in the Way**

As a psychoanalyst, executive coach, and professor of leadership development, I work to understand the psychological processes underlying people's reactions and behaviors. I've identified a number of common patterns driving the "go it alone" mentality.

**The fear of being vulnerable.** For people who are insecure and preoccupied with others' perceptions of them, asking for help feels like a sign of weakness. They're afraid that it will make them look incompetent and inferior. Some might also suffer from (a usually unjustified) impostor syndrome and worry that others will see through their carefully constructed facades. So they keep people at arm's length and try to manage everything on their own.

**The need to be independent.** When you prioritize self-reliance and self-sufficiency, asking for help feels uncomfortable. Perhaps because of their family and cultural backgrounds, many people believe they should be capable of handling everything solo. Programmed to play lone ranger, they tend to struggle in situations where the emphasis is on teamwork. Independence is critical to their self-image.

**The fear of losing control.** Some people won't ask for help because they don't want to be beholden to anyone. They may have trust issues and dislike putting themselves in the hands of other people. The power shift that a help request might generate makes them uneasy. Consequently, they would rather carry the burden of their problems alone.

**The fear of rejection.** Many of us overestimate the likelihood that the people we're asking for help will say no. For those who associate rejection with an attack on their self-worth, that's a big obstacle. They don't seem to realize that there could be many reasons why a person who was being asked for help wouldn't be available.

**Overempathizing with others.** Some people are so attuned to the

emotions of others that they anticipate reactions, such as feeling burdened, that might not materialize. They won't request help because they don't want to be seen as entitled, selfish, or bothersome. They feel they must win love by taking care of and protecting others while hiding or ignoring their own needs.

**A sense of victimhood.** People who go through life thinking *I don't deserve to be helped; I'm not worthy* rarely seek support. Constantly hearing this inner voice, they develop a "poor me" attitude and believe it's their fate to sacrifice and struggle on their own.

Clearly, many of the people caught up in these behaviors have self-esteem issues. They are highly self-critical and often don't believe they've earned the privilege of asking for others' time and energy. Sometimes they don't even understand what they really need or how others can help them. Adverse childhood experiences like neglect and abuse may have contributed to their reluctance. People who have endured abuse often try to be invisible by making very few demands.

But history isn't destiny. Once you've figured out why you avoid asking for help, it's possible to change your behavior.

### **Rewriting the Inner Script**

Drawing on my work with many high-performing executives who struggle to ask for help, I've identified a number of ways that people can get better at it. Here's how I used them in Martha's case.

**Seek counsel.** Martha came to me after one of her friends suggested that she see a coach or a therapist. He noted that such people are in the profession of helping others—they get paid for it—so asking for their assistance might feel more comfortable to her. After some hesitation she made an appointment with me, and during our first few sessions she got a taste for how good it felt to be supported and championed. We talked about what was preventing her from seeking help and discovered that it was a

pattern she'd picked up in childhood. With an absentee father and a depressed mother, she'd fallen into playing the caretaker role, always giving support but never expecting to get it from others. We worked to build her self-confidence and self-awareness and got her to accept that she would burn out if she didn't ask for help.



Larissa Hoff

It's my hope that those of you who struggle to seek help can explore your blockages yourself and recognize on your own the importance of getting over them. Reading this article could be a great first step. But if you find you need further encouragement, digital technology has made it easier than ever to find the right coach or therapist.

**Reframe.** Martha also needed to reframe the problems she was

facing. I wanted her to see asking for assistance not as burdening her husband or colleagues but as giving them an opportunity to step up and contribute to the success of the family or the team: a win-win proposition. Martha found that when she did ask a few of her direct reports to research potential new suppliers, they were excited to do so. When you place trust in others, you show that you value them, which deepens the relationship. In turn they'll trust you enough to ask for help when they're in need themselves. Indeed, after reaching out to a few people for advice and assistance on minor matters, Martha discovered that those people now viewed her as more approachable and would often seek her opinion.

I also encouraged Martha to consider the consequences for everyone if she continued going it alone. Inevitably, something would fall through the cracks, which would negatively affect not only her but also others. From that perspective, asking for help can be seen as a service to the greater good.

We also worked on reframing rejection. Yes, people might be unable or unwilling to honor her requests. But they might point to alternative solutions or teach her how to formulate requests better in the future.

**Take a SMART approach.** SMART is an acronym for *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound*. A SMART request will detail the help you need, explain why you need it, suggest steps the people you're asking could take, ensure that it's within their ability to do so, and spell out when you need things done by. Part of Martha's problem was that she often didn't know whom to ask for help or how to start those conversations. I explained that when she was feeling overextended, she should first think about who might have the skills, ability, and knowledge to help her and who would be most likely to say yes to an entreaty. She would then need to use the SMART guidelines and clearly communicate her request.

We also discussed the importance of timing and tone. You don't want to ask people for help when they're stressed-out or in a bad mood, and you have to give them ample time to consider whether they can meet your needs. You should also position the request as a conversation to explore possibilities rather than a transaction.

During one of my talks with Martha, I had a lucky break that helped me teach her what the SMART approach was all about. She mentioned to me that she had received an urgent request from the CEO to provide a list of suppliers that were manufacturing the high-grade specialty components needed for the company's factories (including an estimate of possible quotas and timelines). He had given her a deadline of a week. Obviously at her wit's end, Martha complained to me that the request concerned an area of the business she was only superficially familiar with. After some prompting, however, she noted that there was a senior executive in manufacturing who knew it well. She also commented that given his responsibilities, it would be in his best interests to have access to the information the CEO wanted; it was highly relevant to his work. I suggested that enlisting his help would be a win-win for both of them.

Not long after that, Martha contacted this executive and asked for his assistance. Not surprisingly, he didn't take much persuading. His knowledge about the manufacturing area made fulfilling her request quite achievable, and with his contributions she was able to get the information to the CEO in time.

**Communicate.** Martha's stoicism was making it hard for others to get to know her and precluding the possibility that colleagues, friends, or family members would recognize that she needed help and volunteer it without her even asking. I encouraged her to communicate more openly and authentically—for example, by disclosing when she was feeling too much pressure. When she showed vulnerability to her husband, admitting that she couldn't do it all at work and at home, he was much more prepared to lend a hand.



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I also recommended that Martha spend more casual time with her coworkers. For example, instead of always bringing her lunch to work and eating at her desk, she could go to the cafeteria regularly, which would give her opportunities to talk with her colleagues about the challenges she was up against. Those conversations might pave the way for a mutual problem-solving session or for a peer to become more actively involved on her behalf. Martha quickly discovered the value of this new habit when it enabled her to get help with an unreliable supplier from a colleague who had faced similar issues with that supplier in the past.

**Practice.** As with any other skill, asking for help gets much easier with practice. I proposed that Martha start by reaching out to someone she was comfortable with, perhaps a family member or a trusted coworker.

She decided to approach one of the parents at her children's school with a SMART request, asking if he'd be open to the idea of carpooling a few days a week for the rest of the term. Previously, she had driven the kids to school by herself (with the occasional help of her husband). Martha was surprised by the enthusiasm of the response she got. It encouraged her to progress to someone she knew less well: an old classmate from her university who worked in a similar role at another company. Martha reached out to her to see if she'd be willing to meet once a month to discuss any knotty issues they might be dealing with.



The monthly brainstorming sessions, during which Martha presented some of her key challenges, were great practice for her. Her classmate turned out to be a fantastic sounding board and very solution oriented. Furthermore, those conversations weren't one-sided: Martha realized she was also being very helpful to her former classmate. During their sessions they both found solutions to problems they were dealing with.

I suggested to Martha that when someone did agree to give her assistance, she should try to receive it gratefully. She could even let that person take ownership of the task. Interestingly, as Martha started reaching out to people, she was initially surprised by their eagerness and ability to give her the help she needed. She soon realized that nearly everyone was more keen to say yes than to say no, and she began to enjoy the companionship that arises when people rely on one another to work toward a common goal. Although asking for help would never be an instant, natural reaction for her, she was now able to do it much more regularly.

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Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. To the contrary, it can be one of the more courageous things you can do. It can also improve your relationships and free up time for you to focus on your most mission-critical tasks at work and at home. So don't make the mistake of always trying to go it alone. Be smart enough to know when you need help and to ask for it effectively.

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