



Dealing with Unreasonable Requests

One of the many challenges managers encounter in the workplace is denying workers' requests, whether the requests are unreasonable or simply infeasible, in a way that minimizes negative outcomes. It can take courage for a worker to make a request, and many workers don't do so unless they are firmly convinced their request is necessary and reasonable. Denying their request can be a blow to their ego, make them feel undervalued, and lead to a range of negative emotions.

And yet, it would be next to impossible to say "yes" to every worker request, especially since some of their requests are bound to contradict each other (e.g., two workers want the same office). A better solution may be to find a way to meet the fundamental need or needs upon which the request was based (you may also find the exercise **Understanding Basic Human Needs** helpful). This can be accomplished by asking *why* a certain request is being made, rather than jumping to the answer 'no'.

The following two examples of how to ask why (rather than simply saying no) are adapted from *Preventing Workplace Meltdown: An Employer's Guide to Maintaining a Psychologically Safe Workplace* (Shain & Baynton, 2011).

When an individual asks for something like the corner office with the window, rather than just telling them that those offices are reserved for workers with more status and seniority, try asking why they want the corner office. You may find that they have seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and require as much sunlight as possible to feel healthy and productive. By exploring the request instead of simply refusing it, you are now able to find another way to help meet their underlying need. You could, perhaps, approve the purchase of a small full-spectrum light box for the worker. You may have turned a potentially negative situation into a great chance to prove that you care about the worker's welfare.

Another common example occurs when a worker asks to be transferred to another unit. If the transfer is not possible or prudent (or even if it is) you may want to ask their reason for wanting to leave, and inquire what they find unsatisfactory about their current unit. Again, this is a great opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to the worker's well-being. Managers often note the lack of value of moving people from unit to unit in an attempt to "solve" problems. If the problem is an individual's coping strategies, for example, their problems are highly likely to resurface after a brief honeymoon period in the new unit. If the problem happens to be the way the unit operates or interacts, it is very likely that the same problem will reappear for another worker when the first one is gone. In either case, the problem is not "solved" by a transfer; it is just delayed or relocated. By denying the transfer and addressing the reason underlying the request, on the other hand, a manager may not only enhance the worker's job experience and loyalty, but also resolve a problem that may have been bothering others, also.

Always keep in mind that it's best not just to say "no," but rather to explore the request with the worker and try to find an alternative solution that will help meet his or her needs. Remember also that meeting the need can be much better than fulfilling the request. It may be easier for a worker to request a corner office than to express an unsatisfied need for recognition in the workplace. The office may be just a stand-in for a need the worker does not want to express, or possibly can't even properly express. When a truly talented manager is able to discern workers' unmet needs and respond to them, workers may be more content and there may be far fewer negative emotions in the workplace.



Denying a request can be especially challenging in cases where a manager solicits a worker's opinion or input, but then must disagree or tell them "no." From the worker's perspective, this can make the manager's initial request for input seem disingenuous, and the worker may doubt whether the manager was ever truly interested in receiving feedback.

It is important to understand that **all requests (and behaviours) are actually an attempt to meet a need**. Satisfying the need underlying a request can be just as effective as satisfying the request.

Some needs are universal, such as:

- Security
- Belonging
- Acceptance
- Recognition
- Autonomy

Although needs are universal, **there are many different ways to satisfy each person's needs**.

Consider the need for autonomy. One worker may have a strong need for autonomy and may want you to give them a description of the outcomes you are seeking and then leave them to determine how to reach the objectives. Other workers may find that this much latitude makes them feel insecure, and they would rather have very specific, step-by-step instructions on how each task should be carried out. These workers also value their autonomy, but balance it in a different way with their need to feel secure that they are doing their tasks correctly. Only by paying careful attention to the needs of each worker can managers hope to satisfy those needs.

When a worker makes an unreasonable request, or simply a request that cannot be fulfilled, it is important to explore what needs they were hoping to meet through the request. If you can fulfill their need, a worker may be very satisfied even if their request is denied.

Reference

Shain, M., & Baynton, M. A. (2011). Preventing Workplace Meltdown: An Employer's Guide to Maintaining a Psychologically Safe Workplace (A Carswell Implementation Guide). Carswell: Toronto, ON.