

## Challenge Four: From Criticisms to Requests

### TRANSLATING YOUR COMPLAINTS AND CRITICISMS INTO REQUESTS FOR ACTION

**SUMMARY**(repeated from Introduction):

Translate your (and other people's) complaints and criticisms into specific requests, and explain your requests. In order to get more cooperation from others, whenever possible ask for what you want by using specific, action-oriented, positive language rather than by using generalizations, "why's," "don'ts" or "somebody should's." Help your listeners comply by explaining your requests with a "so that...", "it would help me to... if you would..." or "in order to..." Also, when you are receiving criticism and complaints from others, translate and restate the complaints as action requests.

(I introduced these two topics -- making requests and sharing our positive expectations -- in Chapter 3, but they are so important they deserve a chapter all their own.)



**Why many people have a hard time making requests.** It often feels easier to say, "You're wrong." than it is to say "I need your help." Making requests leaves us much more vulnerable in relation to our conversation partners than making criticisms or complaints. So people have a tendency to complain rather than to request. If we make a request, the other person could turn us down or make fun of us, and the *risk* of disappointment and loss of face is hard to bear. If we complain, on the other hand, we stand on the emotional high ground and our listener is usually on the defensive. However, to improve our chances of getting cooperation from another

person, we need to ask for what we want and risk being turned down. With practice we can each learn to bear those risks more skillfully and gracefully.

**Why criticisms usually don't get the positive result we want:** Whenever we place people on the defensive, their capacity to listen goes down. Their attention and energy will often go into some combination of defending their position, saving face and counter-attacking. Only when they feel safe are they likely to listen and consider how they might meet our needs. The truth of the complaint is not the issue. Because mutual imitation or emotional "echoing" is so much a part of ordinary conversation, a criticism from one partner, no matter how justified, tends to evoke a criticism from the other, bogging the pair down in a spiral of accusations. To avoid this trap, try to approach the other person not as an adversary in a debate but as a problem-solving partner.

**Specific action requests help to focus your listener's attention on the present situation.** Focus on the actions you want to take and the actions you want others to take in the present and future. (For example, use verbs and adverbs, such as "meet our deadlines regularly.") Avoid proposing changes in a person's supposed character traits (nouns and adjectives, such as "slow worker" or "bad team player"). "How can we solve this problem quickly?" will generally produce much better results than, "Why are you such an awful slow-poke?" In the latter kind of statement, I am actually suggesting to my conversation partner that the behavior I want changed is a fixed and perhaps unchangeable part of their personality, thus undermining my own goals and needs.

Talking about specifics will help to keep the current conversation from becoming one more episode in whatever unresolved conflicts might be

in the background of your conversations. Your listener, like all of us, may sometimes be in the grip of feelings of embarrassment, resentment or self-doubt unrelated to the present situation. The more vague and open-ended a criticism is, the easier it is for your listener to hear it as part of those other conflicts. Instead of saying something like “Why does it always take you so long to get things done?”, try saying things like “I would like you to fix the faucet in Apartment #4 by five o’clock, so the tenants can use the kitchen sink when they get home tonight?” Of course, your tone of voice is important here. It’s important that you your-self are not carrying forward old complaints. Life is lived best one day at a time.

*“We criticize people  
for not giving us  
what we ourselves  
are afraid to ask for.”*

*Marshall Rosenberg*

**Explanatory clauses can move people to cooperate.** Research in social psychology has revealed that many people respond more positively to explained requests than to unexplained requests, even when the supposed explanation is obvious or doesn’t actually explain much of anything. Notice the difference between the following two ways of expressing requests:

**“Will you please open the window?”**

**“May I please have a glass of water?”**

AND...

**“Will you please open the window so that we can get more fresh air in here?”**

**“May I please have a glass of water?  
I’m really thirsty!”**

For many people the second form of the requests is much more inspiring. Why this is so is not certain. My hunches include that by explaining the reason, the speaker is treating the listener as a social equal, worthy of being persuaded and informed as to why a request is being made. The listener is invited to comply with a request to accomplish the stated goal rather than simply to submit to the will of the speaker. Another possibility is that since many requests are linguistically ambiguous and could easily be taken as orders, the explanation emphasizes that the statement is a real request. Whatever the reason, explaining your request makes it more likely that your listener will cooperate.

**Explanatory clauses allow your conversation partners to imagine new solutions.** While any sort of explanatory clause seems to help, a real explanation of your goal allows your conversation partners to understand the context and purpose of your request. When for some reason they cannot meet your needs in the way you have asked, they may be able to meet your needs in some way that you had not thought of. (For an inspiring discussion of this topic, see *Getting to Yes*, by Fisher, Ury and Patton. They suggest that if you explain your overall goals rather than sticking to a very specific bargaining position, your negotiating adversaries may be able to propose mutually beneficial solutions that satisfy more of the needs of all parties. One main idea of their book is to turn your adversaries into problem-solving partners.)

**Exercise 4-1: Working on your life situations.** Think of some complaints that are current in your life at home, at work or in your community and translate them into specific action requests that include an explanation. (I have included a few “warm up” examples.)

“Don’t be so inconsiderate!” could be restated as:  
“Please close the door quietly so Aunt Mary can sleep.”

“Somebody ought to order some copy paper.” could be restated as:  
“Would you order two reams of copy paper today so that we don’t run out.”

“Turn down that music!” could be restated as:  
“Hi. I live upstairs and your music is really booming through the walls up there. Would you please turn it down so we can hear our TV”

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## Reading + Exercise 4-2: Letting Go of Fear -- by David Richo, PhD

*Editor's Introduction: Communicating more successfully involves taking all sorts of risks. When we listen we risk being changed by what we hear. But only by listening to others can we build relationships in which people will listen to us. When we express ourselves more clearly and ask for what we want we risk being turned down, rejected or even ridiculed about our needs and requests. But only by expressing more of what we really feel and want can we build relationships of mutual respect, care and fulfillment. (You can't respect the real me if I never show you the real me.) As we explore new possibilities in interpersonal communication, we are challenged to live more courageously, to push beyond our fears, which are really the congealed memories of all our past disappointments. How willing are we to let today be a genuinely new day? The following exercise from psychotherapist David Richo's book, When Love Meets Fear, invites us to work more consciously and creatively with whatever fears may be holding us back from greater interpersonal skill and overall life success. (The Cooperative Communication Skills extended community thanks Dr. Richo for contributing this exercise to the Workbook and the Communication-Skills.NET online library. See [davericho.com](http://davericho.com) for information on tapes and books by Dr. David Richo)*

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### FREEDOM FROM FEAR -- AN EXPLORATORY EXERCISE by David Richo, PhD

You may find this worksheet helpful in taking a personal inventory of your fears and in designing affirmations to clear them. It combines the three elements of freedom from fear: admitting it, feeling it fully, and acting as if we were fearless. Read it onto a tape to hear it daily in your own voice or recite or read it regularly. Form an image of yourself acting out each affirmation. This list is meant for a wide audience so add or delete entries to fit your unique situation:

I trust my true fears to give me signals of danger.

I admit that I also have false fears and worries.

I feel compassion toward myself for all the years I have been afraid.

I forgive those who hypnotized me into unreal fears.

I suggest now to myself, over and over, that I am freeing myself from fear.

I have fearlessness to match my fear.

I trust my powers and resourcefulness as a man (woman).

I trust my abundant creativity.

I trust the strength that opens and blooms in me when I have to face something.

I believe in myself as a man/woman who handles what comes his/her way today.

I have it in me to rise to a challenge.

I am more and more aware of how I hold fear in my body.

I stop storing fear in my body.

Now I relax those holding places.

I open my body to joy and serenity.

I release my body from the clench of fear.

I relax the part of me that holds fear the most (jaw, shoulders, neck, etc.).

I let go of the stress and tension that come from fear.

I let go of fear-based thoughts.

I let go of basing my decisions on fear.

I stop listening to those who want to import their fears into me.

I let go of finding something to fear in everything.

I let go of fear and fearing and of believing that everything is fearsome.

I am more and more aware of my instant reflex fear reactions.

I am aware that I have habituated myself to a certain level of adrenaline.

I forego this stressful excitement and choose sane and serene liveliness.

I let go of my obsessive thoughts about how the worst may happen.

I trust myself always to find an alternative.

I see the humor in my fears.

I see the humor in my exaggerated reactions to unreal dangers.

I find a humorous dimension in every fear.

I find a humorous response for every fear.

I play with the pain of fear.

I smile at my scared ego with tough love.

I am confident in my ability to deal with situations or people that scare me.

I have self-healing powers -and- I seek and find support outside myself.

I have an enormous capacity for re-building, restoring, transcending.

I am more and more sure of my abilities.

I am less and less scared by what happens, by what has happened, by what will happen.

I trust an uncanny timing that I keep noticing within myself: I love how I  
awake or change or resolve or complete at just the right moment.

Nothing forces me; nothing stops me.

I let go of any fear I have of nature.

I let go of my fears of natural disasters.

I let go of my fears of sickness, accident, old age, and death.

I cease being afraid of knowing, having or showing my feelings.

I let go of my fear of failure or of success.

I let go of the fear behind my guilt and shame.

I let go of my fear of aloneness or of time on my hands.

I let go of my fear of abandonment.

I let go of my fear of engulfment.

I let go of my fear of closeness.

I let go of my fear of commitment.

I let go of my fear of being betrayed.

I let go of my fear of being cheated or robbed.

I let go of my fear of any person.

I let go of my fear of loving.

I let go of my fear of being loved.

I let go of the fear that I will lose, lose money, lose face, lose freedom,  
lose friends, lose family members, lose respect, lose status, lose my job, lose out.

I let go of my fear of having to grieve.

I keep letting go and I keep going on.

I let go of my paranoia.

I give up my phobic rituals.

I let go of my performance fears.

I let go of my sexual fears.

I let go of fears about my adequacy as a parent or child, as a worker, as a partner, or friend.

I let go of the need to be in control.

I acknowledge control as a mask for my fear.

I let go of my need to be right, to be first, to be perfect.

I let go of my belief that I am entitled to be taken care of.

I let go of my fear of the conditions of existence:

I accept that I may sometimes lose;

I accept that things change and end;

I accept that pain is part of human growth;

I accept that things are not always fair;

I accept that people may lie to me, betray me, or not be loyal to me.

I am flexible enough to accept life as it is, forgiving enough to accept it  
as it has been.

I drop the need for or belief in a personal exemption from the conditions  
of my existence.

I acknowledge my present predicament as a path.

I trust a design in spite of the display.

I let go of more than any fate can take.

I appreciate all the ways that things work out for me.

I appreciate the graces that everywhere surround and enrich my life.

I find the alternatives that always exist behind the apparent dead-end of fear.

I open myself to the flow of life and people and events.

I am grateful for the love that awaits me everywhere.

I feel deeply loved by many people near and far, living and dead.

I feel loved and watched over by a higher power (God, Universe, etc.).

I believe that I have an important destiny,  
that I am living in accord with it,  
and that I will survive to fulfill it.

I let myself have the full measure of:  
the joy I was meant to feel,  
the joy of living without fear.

I let fear go and let joy in.

I let fear go and let love in.

I let go of fears and enlarge my sympathies.

I am more and more aware of others' fears, more and more sensitive to  
them, more and more compassionate toward them.

I am more and more acceptant of all kinds of people.

I enlarge my circle of love to include every living being: I show my love.

I am more and more courageous as I live my program for dealing with fear:

I let go of control;

I let the chips fall where they may;

I admit my fear;

I feel my fear by letting it pass through me;

I act as if I were free of fear;

I enjoy the humor in my fears;

I expand my compassion toward myself and everyone.

I have pluck and wit.

I let go of being on the defensive.

I protect myself.

I am non-violent.

I am intrepid under fire.

I am a hero: I live through pain and am transformed by it.

I am undaunted by people or circumstances that may threaten me.

I let people's attempts to menace me fall flat.

I give up running from threats.

I give up shrinking from a fight.

I show grace under pressure.

I stop running; I stop hiding.

More and more of my fear is becoming healthy excitement.

I meet danger face to face.

I stand up to a fight.

I take the bull by the horns.  
I run the gauntlet.  
I put my head in the lion's mouth.  
I stick to my guns and hold my fire.  
An automatic courage arises in me when I face a threat.  
I dare to show myself as I am: afraid and courageous.  
I hereby release the courage that has lain hidden within me.  
I am thankful for the gift of fortitude.  
I let go of hesitation and self-doubt.  
I am hardy in the face of fear.  
I have grit, stamina, and toughness.  
I take risks and always act with responsibility and grace.  
I let go of the fear of being different.  
I let go of the need to meet others' expectations.  
I cease being intimidated by others' anger.  
I let go of my fear of what may happen if people do not like me.  
I let go of my fear of false accusations.  
I let go of having to do it his/her/their way.  
I acknowledge that behind my exaggerated sense of obligation  
is a fear of my own freedom.  
I let go of my terror about disapproval, ridicule, or rejection.  
I dare to stop auditioning for people's approval.  
I dare to give up my act.  
I give up all my poses, pretenses, and posturings.  
I dare to be myself.  
I acknowledge that behind my fear of self-disclosure is a fear of freedom.  
I dare to show my hand, to show my inclinations, to show my enthusiasms.  
I let my every word, feeling, and deed reveal me as I truly am.  
I love being found out, i.e., caught in the act of being my authentic self.  
I explore the farthest reaches of my identity.  
I dare to live the life that truly reflects my deepest needs and wishes.  
I give up the need to correct people's impressions of me.  
I give up being afraid of my own power.  
I am irrepressible.  
I draw upon ever-renewing sources of lively energy within me.  
I am great-hearted and bold-spirited.



I dare to give of myself unconditionally -and-  
I dare to be unconditionally committed to maintaining my own boundaries.  
I am open to the grace that shows me the difference.  
I fling open the gates of my soul.  
I set free my love, till now imprisoned by fear.  
I set free my joy, till now imprisoned by fear.  
I honor and evoke my animal powers, my human powers, my divine  
powers.  
I let true love cast out my fear.  
As I let go of my fear, I free the world from fear.  
May I and all beings be free of fear and full of love.

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For all that has been: Thanks!  
For all that will be: Yes!  
--Dag Hammarskjold

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From: *When Love Meets Fear* by David Richo, Ph.D.

See [www.davericho.com](http://www.davericho.com) for information on tapes  
and books by Dr. David Richo.



**Reading + Exercise 4-3: Trying Out The Cooperative Communication Skills EMERGENCY KIT**

*A pocket guide to conflict resolution by Dennis Rivers, MA, and Paloma Pavel, PhD*

Many conflicts get worse than they actually need to be because the participants lose control of themselves and retreat into self-reinforcing patterns of attack and counterattack. Here are seven suggestions, drawn from the literature of conflict resolution and psychotherapy, that can help you navigate your way through everyday collisions of needs and come out still liking yourself and able to live and work with your "partners-in-conflict."

**when a conflict starts, try these suggestions:**

1. **Calm yourself down** by breathing very slowly and deeply. While breathing, think of a moment of great happiness and peace in your life. Doing this will help you from feeling totally swallowed up by the current situation. It is not all of your life. Imagine you are looking down on the conflict scene from a peaceful balcony or mountain top.
2. **Think about what you really need.** What is best in the long run for your mind, your body, your spirit, your workplace, your family, your community? Focus on these positive goals. Don't allow yourself to get distracted from your own goals/needs by what you may see as someone else's misdeeds, mistakes, blunders and/or bad moves. Think about what **your** long-term interests are in the situation, and rank them by priority, so that you stay focused on negotiating the issues that really matter to you.
3. **Imagine your partner-in-conflict as a potential ally.** Imagine that you are marooned on a desert island with your partner-in-conflict, and that the long-term survival of both of you depends on the two of you cooperating in new and creative ways that will meet more of both your needs.
4. **Begin by listening to the other person and affirming anything that you can agree on.** Look carefully for, and say out loud to your partner-in-conflict, any and all the areas where your interests and needs might overlap with their interests and needs.
5. **Acknowledge and apologize for any mistakes** you may have made in the course of the conflict. Others may do the same if you get the ball rolling. Make an accepting space for your partners-in-conflict to start over. Letting go of defending past mistakes, on all sides, can allow participants in a conflict to see their situation from fresh angles.
6. **Summarize the other person's needs, feelings and position as fairly as you can,** and do this first, before you present your own needs or requests. When people feel heard, they are more likely to listen. Summarize to let people know that you have understood them, not to argue with their view.
7. **Focus on positive goals for the present and the future,** no matter what you and/or your partner-in-conflict may have said or done in the past. Punishing or shaming someone for past actions will not put that person in a frame of mind to meet your needs in the present. The present and future are all you can change.
8. **When positions collide, focus on principles and potential referees.** For example, if you can't agree on a price for something, see if you can agree on a fair rule to set the price. If you can't agree on a fair rule, focus on finding a referee who could help you and your partner-in-conflict define a fair rule.
9. **Make requests for specific actions** that another person could actually do, rather than for overall feelings or attitudes. Explain how the requested actions will help you, so that the other person feels powerful and respected in complying with your request.
10. **Use this conflict** as a wakeup call to get yourself started studying more effective and compassionate ways of resolving conflicts. Explore the topics introduced by the free *Seven Challenges Workbook* (PDF) at [communication-skills.net](http://communication-skills.net). Then continue your quest for better conflict resolution skills with these three great books: *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton (Penguin Books, 1991); *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation*, by William Ury (Bantam, 1991); and *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution* by Dudley Weeks.

