

Minding the Gap: Permission

People are automatic, habitual listeners. There is a routine way that you listen. You get used to listening a certain way over time and that becomes your go-to, without you ever choosing. It is like a potluck: someone says 'bring a dish to share' and you automatically go to your homemade salsa, fruit salad, dessert or whatever it is you always bring to share.



Because you often do not choose how you listen, each day you may feel like you are not being heard, or you notice you are not listening to others. We have only found two ways to counter that automatic listening. One way is to *listen to yourself listen*, and it is a profound act. It impacts the way that you listen to others. The other way we have found to help someone shift how they are listening to you, is to say something that has the listener move to another mode of listening. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to **Ask Permission**.

Have you ever given great advice to a friend or co-worker who has not followed it? Have you ever felt that what you say goes "in one ear and out the other"? Have you ever tried working with a group of people who do not include your perspective? Seen another way, do you sometimes want someone to really listen to you yet you feel like they are in problem-solving mode and want to fix you?

Asking permission can improve the way people listen to each other. It can help build relationships by demonstrating respect and appreciation for friends, co-workers and family members.

Getting Permission

Marco is talking with John, a friend he has known for a couple years. John is having a challenge at work and is complaining about it to Marco. The challenge involves a colleague that John is not getting along with. It has been frustrating and he has tried different things without much success. Marco has some thoughts about what to do in this situation (who wouldn't! We all want to feel right and smart about someone else's problems, right?). So at some point he starts telling John about some things he should do to fix the challenge. For some reason John either keeps on talking like he didn't hear Marco or gives some kind of perfunctory "that's a good idea", but Marco can tell John doesn't really mean it. Or maybe John starts arguing with Marco's idea as if to prove him wrong. Whatever happens, it is clear that Marco's ideas did not make a difference for John.

That's because Marco "**should on**" him – told him what to do without first asking for permission to share his ideas. John was venting or complaining and could not "hear" and consider what Marco said.

Maureen is a manager of five others at a small but fast growing tech firm. Her team has been at it for four days straight working creatively to solve a tough challenge, while she was on retreat with the firm's leadership team planning a new project. When she returns, she meets with her team, eager to hear what has been going on and get everyone ready for the new project. While the team is sharing their attempts at tackling the challenge, Maureen listens for a bit and then quickly starts telling them what to do. The gathering quickly moves into a space of task lists and action items. The team walks away from the meeting feeling like their work was not well understood or appreciated. Despite good intentions, Maureen walks away feeling disconnected.

Being 'should on' rarely works the way we hope, does it?! Despite our well-meaning intentions, our perceived genius or perfect problem-solving solution, we often end-up creating disconnection and resentment.

Try This:

Think back to a few recent moments in your own life where someone (friend, family member, co-worker) offered their perspective without asking for permission. What was your experience of that moment? How did you listen? In what way did it impact (or not) your relationship?

Now think back to a recent moment when you "Should on" someone else, i.e. offered your perspective without asking for permission. How well was the perspective received? Did the conversation continue? Did the 'advice' get integrated?

Most often, we assume we have permission to share our perspectives with another person. We believe we have "the answer". Whether this assumption is correct or not, asking permission is a great equalizer. It gives the listener the chance to take part, rather than have them feel like they are having something *done to them*. When you ask permission to share your perspective, you are *honoring* the other person by giving them a chance to have a say in the matter.

Asking permission is a unique question that rarely gets asked. Asking creates a sense of honor and respect. It is like the person is saying: "It would not be respectful of me to assume that you want this feedback, so let me check first". If the person answered with "yes", they are now more responsible for listening. They will likely get "ready" for the perspective. They will be engaged and participating at a level that may not have been present before. This supports and allows for consideration. Asking permission helps them consider the perspective and creates an opportunity for relationship with the speaker. They are now more likely to be working in tandem

with the speaker. Without permission, there is no specific opportunity for partnership. It is the speaker *doing to* the listener instead of *doing with*.

Asking for permission is a practice of “Minding the Gap”. When you ask permission, you are being attentive to the relationship between you and others. You are keeping in mind that your intention and theirs may not match up. Permission helps relationships align.

What to do if they say “No”?

If you get a “no” from someone when you ask permission, be grateful that you asked! You just avoided giving unwanted feedback AND you also had an experience of honoring the present moment for that person. Rather than perhaps feeling dominated or told what to do, the person instead had a choice in the matter. When you ask for permission and are met with a “No”, honor it. There may be a time to ask again later, but for now you are recognizing that the person has stated that he or she is not receptive. They would likely not have heard your feedback anyway.

Try This

In your next several conversations with friends, family members and/or co-workers where you have a perspective, coaching or instruction to share, **ask permission first**. If the person answers “Yes,” thank them and give your perspective - while noticing the impact the question had on you, the other person and your relationship, in that moment (i.e. “What happened?”). If the person answers “No”, thank them for letting you know.

Pay attention to any moments when someone else offers their perspective, coaching or instruction to you **without** asking for permission. What impact does that have on you, your listening and your relationship in that moment with the other person?

Giving Permission

Where have you allowed people in your life to assume they have permission to teach, coach or give you feedback, but you are not listening? For whatever reason you have withheld your mutual participation. They are talking at you with the assumption you are engaged with them, but that is not the case. This could happen at work with a manager, employee or colleague. It could happen with a sibling, parent, friend or spouse. Perhaps there is some resentment, or a sense that you know better, or a sense that it is not that person’s place to give you that feedback. Or maybe you have the thought “I have heard this all before”.

What might be the danger if you are withholding this permission without their knowledge? Every time they seek to make an impact with you, either through a perspective, training, or instruction, you appear to be considering externally but are not doing so internally.

Try This

Take the time to look at key relationships in your life: with parents, siblings, bosses and close friends. Where do people assume they have permission to work with you, offer feedback, etc. yet you are withholding that permission internally?

Permission in Groups

There is often an assumption of permission when working with people in a group. Whether it is a manager with a group of employees, a facilitator with a group, or a teacher with students, permission is often assumed. We are in the habit of believing that if people are present in the same room then they have given permission to do the "work", whatever that may be. When a group leader pays attention to permission, it can provide a vital opening and opportunity. Assuming it can cause problems!



We are so used to the assumption of permission that its effect has created a new normal about our notion of participation and ownership. When we think permission is implied or assumed, then we must also think that people are ready to own the experience and participate. *If you are in the room, then you must be taking part. If you signed up, you must be ready to work with me.* This is dangerous because it keeps the power dynamic in place and never provides the participant an opportunity to choose to take part. The group leader is thinking "We are in this together," and the others are thinking "This is being done to me. You are in charge of my experience. I am dependent on you." Think for moment about the mischief these different views could cause! It is a situation ripe for misinterpretation, resentment and upset – on all sides.

The act of asking for permission at some point can make a difference. It does not have to be complex. The leader can make a direct ask of the group: "Now that you know what we are doing here, do I have your permission to do this with you?" This is a profound question, because it acknowledges the mutuality of the experience – which may not have been present up until that moment. It provides an opportunity for the participants to claim and declare ownership. If they say "yes", then they are in charge of their own participation and likely have a

greater sense of mutuality. Asking for permission builds relationships: it honors the voice, participation and contribution of the participants, on individual and group levels.



A key benefit about permission is how it interacts with the power dynamic in ways that are humanizing:

Craig is a 22-year old challenge course facilitator. Craig was excellent when he worked with high school groups, yet would become quiet and withdrawn when working with corporate groups. He would only give the most basic of instructions and appeared intimidated by their age, knowledge and experience. What helped him the most was the act of *getting permission*. He learned to share with the group that while he had a lot of experience and passion for the job, he felt it was disrespectful to think he could lead these older professionals. After acknowledging this, he would ask the group for permission to facilitate the activity with them. In this way he acknowledged and honored the obvious age difference, and brought a human element to the session for both Craig and the group. The groups appreciated him asking, and he in turn got to share out loud a concern that kept him from being his best self.

Molly is a VP in a large educational institution. She works with a team of 12 others in a fast-paced, customer-service environment. Her ability to build relationships with her team is vital. She wants them to feel loyal to the organization, stay in their job and have high levels of participation and productivity. She uses the “Get Permission” tool and likes how it helps her relationships with her team. She knows they appreciate it because they talk about feeling a greater level of partnership in the office. In situations like this, most manager’s would give instructions, make demands and provide direction. Molly still

has to do this on occasion, yet she often will ask permission first. "It creates a more level playing field", she says, and her staff feels more competent.

Summary

Asking for permission slows down an interaction with another human being. It moves that interaction from one-sided talking to conversation, listening, dialogue and perspective-sharing. It supports the growing of relationships and lays groundwork that enables social energy. When you ask permission, you are removing habits of domination or doing-to, and you are providing an opportunity for the listener to link-up and partner with you to a greater degree than before.