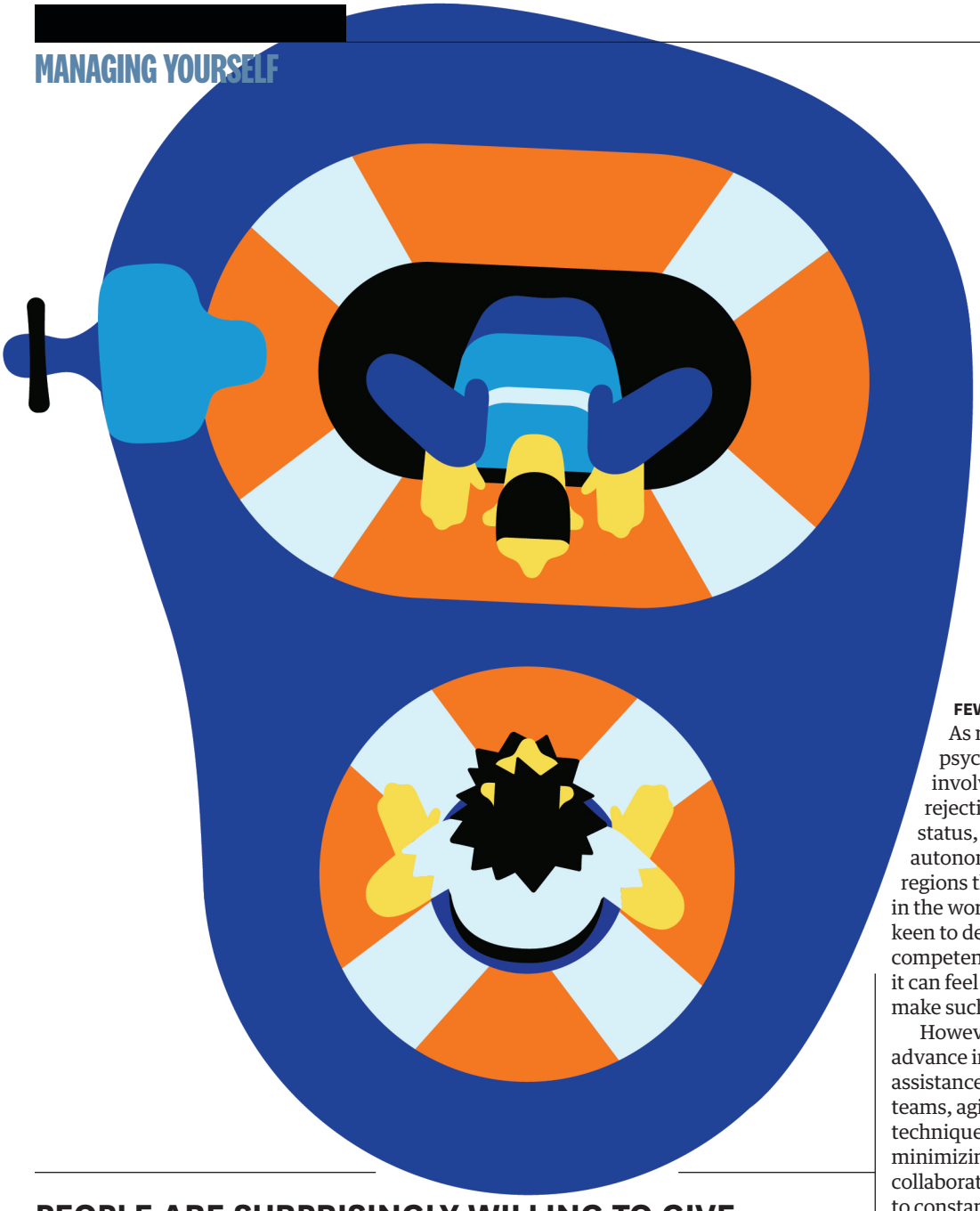

PEOPLE ARE SURPRISINGLY WILLING TO GIVE SUPPORT—IF YOU ASK FOR IT IN THE RIGHT WAY.

BY HEIDI GRANT

HOW TO GET THE HELP YOU NEED

FEW OF US enjoy asking for help. As research in neuroscience and psychology shows, the social threats involved—the uncertainty, risk of rejection, potential for diminished status, and inherent relinquishing of autonomy—activate the same brain regions that physical pain does. And in the workplace, where we're typically keen to demonstrate as much expertise, competence, and confidence as possible, it can feel particularly uncomfortable to make such requests.

However, it's virtually impossible to advance in modern organizations without assistance from others. Cross-functional teams, agile project management techniques, matrixed or hierarchy-minimizing structures, and increasingly collaborative office cultures require you to constantly push for the cooperation and support of your managers, peers, and employees. Your performance, development, and career progression depend more than ever on your seeking out the advice, referrals, and resources you need. In fact, estimates suggest that as much as 75% to 90% of the help coworkers give one another is in response to direct appeals.

So how can you effectively ask for help? How can you impose upon people without making them feel imposed upon?

The first step is getting over your reluctance to ask for assistance. Next, you

need to understand that some common and perhaps intuitive ways of asking for help are ultimately unproductive, because they make people less likely to want to give it. Finally, you must learn the subtle cues that motivate people to support you and how to deliver them in the right way.

COSTS AND BENEFITS

Perhaps the easiest way to overcome the pain of asking for help is to realize that most people are surprisingly willing to lend a hand. When Vanessa Bohns, a professor at Cornell University and a leading researcher in this area, recently reviewed a group of experiments that she and her coauthors had done, she found that compliance—the rate at which people provided assistance to strangers who asked for it—was an average of 48% higher than the help seekers had expected. Clearly, people are much more likely to be helpful than we think they are. Studies also suggest that we underestimate how much effort those who do agree to help will put in.

That's in part because saying no or helping only halfheartedly carries a psychological cost that we tend to discount. But it's also because most helpers know—even if only subconsciously—that giving freely and effectively of themselves has emotional benefits. A Swiss study published in 2017 found that people who simply pledge to spend even a small amount of money on someone else feel happier than those who plan to indulge only themselves.

The key to a successful request for help is to shift the focus to these benefits. You want people to feel that they would be helping because they want to, not because they must, and that they're in control of the decision. That means avoiding any language suggesting that you or someone else is instructing them to help, that they should help, or that they have no choice but to do so. This includes prefaces such as "May I ask you a favor?," which make people feel trapped, and profuse apologies such as "I feel terrible asking you for this," which make the experience seem less positive. Emphasizing reciprocity—"I'll help you if you help me"—can also backfire, because people don't like to be indebted to anyone or to engage in a purely transactional exchange. And minimizing your need—"I don't normally ask for help" or "It's just a tiny thing"—is equally unproductive, because it suggests the assistance is trivial or even unnecessary.

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But you can ask for help in a way that avoids these pitfalls and instead gives people agency over their responses, allowing them to experience the natural highs associated with helping. That's by using what I call reinforcements, or cues, which you can incorporate in specific requests. Perhaps more important, you can also use them in day-to-day interactions to prime the people around you for greater helpfulness.

THREE REINFORCEMENTS

In-group. One reinforcement you'll want to give a potential helper is assurance that you're on his or her team and that the team is important. This taps into the innate human need to belong to—and ensure the well-being of—supportive social circles. There are several ways to do this. For example, research by Priyanka Carr and Greg Walton (a graduate student at the time), of Stanford University, shows that simply saying the word "together" can have an effect. When participants working on puzzles alone were told that they were doing so in tandem with people performing similar tasks in other rooms and could later exchange tips, they worked 48% longer, solved more problems correctly, and said they were less depleted by the task than those allowed to believe they were working fully independently.

You might also cite a common goal, enemy, or trait, such as the desire to exceed your team's sales targets, rivalry with a competitor in your industry, or a love of superhero movies. But the best way to create a strong sense of in-group is to highlight shared experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. For example, if a senior management team includes only two women, don't just say, "We're the only two women on the team" (emphasizing the trait). Say, "Have you noticed that we get interrupted all the time?" (shared experience).

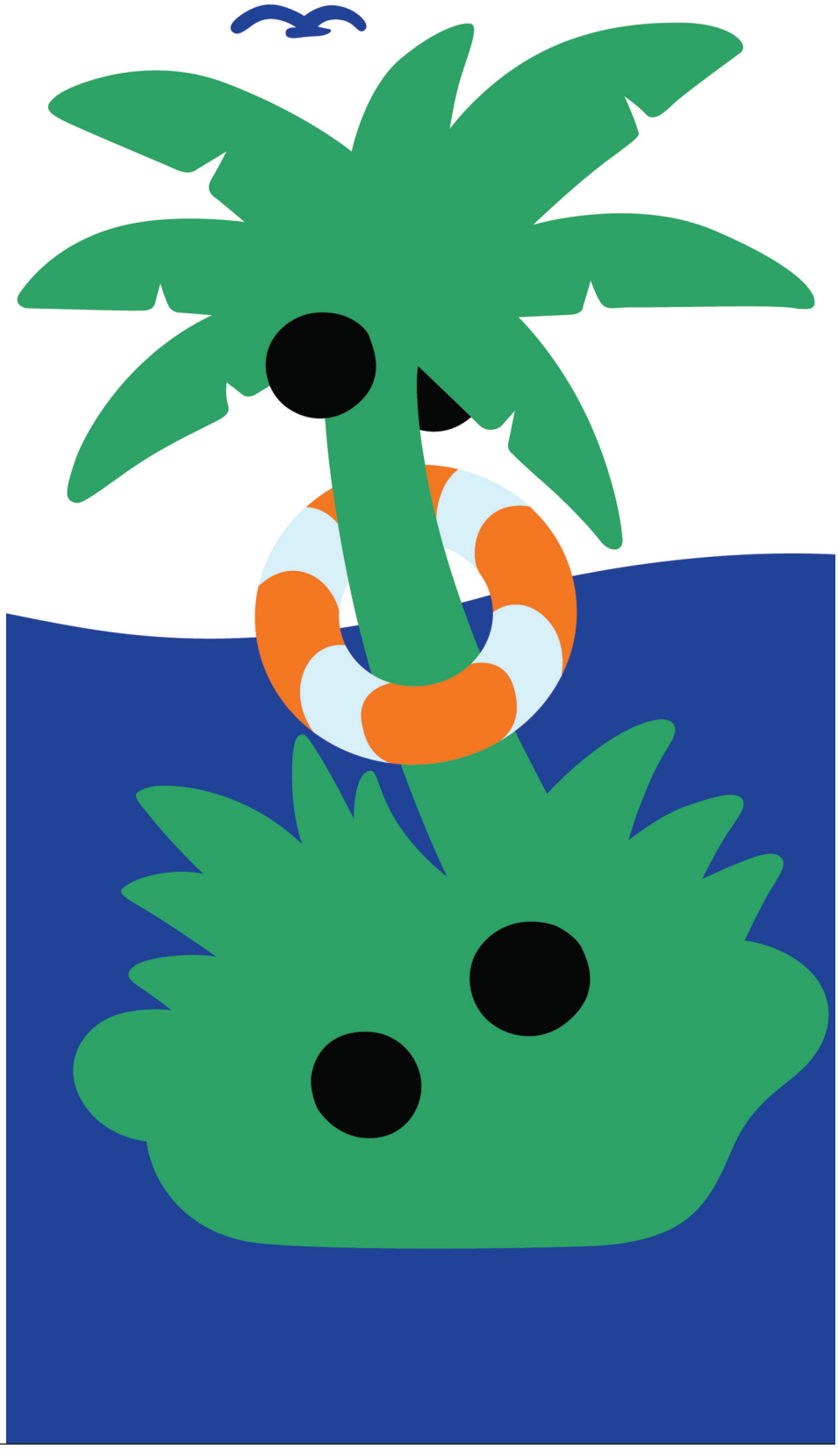
Positive identity. A second cue for potential helpers involves creating or enhancing their recognition that they are uniquely placed (by virtue of their attributes or role) to provide assistance and that they are not merely people who might help you but helpful people who routinely come to others' aid. For example, studies have shown that people contribute more to charity when asked if they would like to "be a generous donor" (versus "to donate") and that children as young as three are more motivated to complete tasks such as cleaning up blocks when told they can "be a helper" (versus "can help"). Remember, however, that people don't all have the same vision of positive identity, so tailor your message. Research on pro-environment appeals suggests, for instance, that liberals prefer phrases such as "care for the natural world" and "prevent the suffering of all life forms,"

whereas conservatives respond better to "show your love for your country" and "take responsibility for yourself and the land you call home."

Gratitude is another powerful way to boost helpers' positive identity. A recent study by the productivity software company Boomerang of 350,000 e-mail exchanges found that "Thanks in advance" and "Thanks" yielded average response rates from 63% to 66%, compared with 51% to 54% for other popular options including "Best," "Regards," and "Cheers." Even expressed preemptively, gratitude can keep people interested and invested in helping you, as long as you focus more on their generosity and selflessness—and what that says about them as people—than on how you'll benefit from the help.

PEOPLE WANT TO SEE OR KNOW THE IMPACT OF THE AID THEY WILL GIVE. THIS ISN'T AN EGO THING.

Effectiveness. People want to see or know the impact of the aid they will give. This isn't an ego thing. Many psychologists believe that feeling effective—knowing that your actions created the results you intended—is the fundamental human motivation; it's what truly engages people and gives their lives meaning. Consider a study that Wharton's Adam Grant conducted at an outbound call center in an educational and marketing software company. Employees knew that the revenue they generated supported jobs in another department, with which they'd previously had no contact. After one of the beneficiaries of their work visited and spoke to them about their impact on his and others' jobs, the call center's sales and revenue doubled. To ensure that your potential helpers know that their assistance



will matter, be very clear about what you need and its projected impact. For example, when asking a colleague to review a client proposal, you might say, "Would you please review this before I send it to XYZ? Your input really helped my previous pitch to ABC succeed."

Promise to follow up afterward, and do so. If possible, also allow people to choose how they help you, and be willing to accept alternatives to your original request. You want helpers to give what they can—and what will make them feel most effective.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

When I explain to people how these strategies work in practice, I often give an example from my personal life, involving an IKEA bookshelf. About a year ago, a friend from graduate school asked me to help her assemble a particularly complicated one, and—this might surprise you—I eagerly agreed. That same morning, I'd turned down a request to review a submission to a scientific journal, ignored an e-mail from my daughter's school asking for parent volunteers to help with an ice cream party, and grudgingly said I would do our family's laundry but refused to fold it. So why was the DIY request an easy yes?

One reason is that the person asking was a long-standing friend with whom I enjoy spending time (*in-group* reinforcement). Another is that I'm weirdly good at such projects (owing less to my construction prowess than to my ability to interpret poorly written directions), and for years I'd been her go-to gal for help with them (*effectiveness*). And finally, whenever we work together in this way, my friend always wraps up by saying something like "Heidi, thank you. You are always so helpful and generous" (*positive identity*).

I've seen situations play out the same way in professional settings. Consider the head of product development at a learning software company who wanted more input with the sales department, which was making his team's work difficult by agreeing that highly customized orders would be delivered according to near-impossible schedules. He pleaded to be included in discussions with clients but was often ignored; the people in sales believed that he would slow them down and be an obstacle to their success. Of course, all parties felt they were doing what was best for the company, but in their own ways.

Eventually, the frustrated executive decided to take a fresh approach to getting the cooperation he needed from his colleagues. He set up a meeting with sales leaders to talk through the product development process, realizing that most of the team had no idea what work was involved. In other words, they didn't understand why their help was needed. He began to emphasize in every interaction that they all shared the goal of pleasing the customer to ensure repeat business, creating a strong sense of *in-group* with the sales team. Suddenly it was clear that everyone was on the same side. He also started describing sales leaders as the protectors of customer experience and talked about the power they wielded in determining the future of the company's brand, which gave them a strong *positive identity* and motivated them to see and approach their work in a slightly different way.

Finally, whenever salespeople did what he asked and included him in the work proposal process, he made a point of following up with them to say how important it had been to the ultimate success of the delivery. They saw their help land and felt its *effectiveness*.

Over time, these strategies dramatically improved relations between the two teams, and the company saw increases in both client satisfaction and profitability.

When you next find yourself in need of help, remember that people are willing to give it much more often than not. Few will think less of you for needing assistance. And there is no better way to make someone feel good about himself or herself than to ask for it. It brings out the best—and the best feelings—in all of us.

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WHAT HELPERS NEED

1 *The helper must realize that you need help.* Human beings are, as a rule, preoccupied with their own affairs. This is particularly true for people in negative moods or positions of relative power over others. So the first step is making people aware of your problem.

2 *The helper must believe that you want help.* Sometimes people fail to offer help not because they don't see the need but because they're worried that they've misconstrued the situation or that you prefer to go it alone. They expect you to come to them, forgetting how reluctant most of us are to ask for help.

3 *The helper must take responsibility for helping.* One of the biggest obstacles to helping is diffusion of responsibility. A classic error is asking for help via group e-mail. Instead take the time to ask potential helpers directly and with unique appeals.

4 *The helper must be able to provide what you need.* People are busy, and not all of them have the skills or the resources to help you. But you can make any request seem more manageable by being explicit and detailed about what you are asking for, keeping the request reasonable, and staying open to receiving help that is different from what you asked for.

HEIDI GRANT, a psychologist who studies motivation and communication, is the author of several books, including *No One Understands You and What to Do About It* and *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*. Her new book is *Reinforcements: How to Get People to Help You* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2018).