
Art of the Effectual Ask

Entrepreneurs strive to solve problems and create value through partnerships. Studying how they do that led to the hypothesis that “asking” played a critical role in the success of an entrepreneur. In addition to studies of expert entrepreneurs (people who had 15 years or more of founding and running multiple companies, including successes and failures and at least one public company) and Inc 500 entrepreneurs who are on their way to becoming expert entrepreneurs, we conducted a study in two parts with hundreds of growth-aspiring entrepreneurs in the United States, Europe, and India. The first part of the study was a quantitative survey that sought to identify demographics, psychographics, measures of entrepreneurial expertise, and asking characteristics. The second component of the research was a daily voice log (DVL). Over 100 entrepreneurs from a range of industries called into a voicemail line five minutes a day for 60 days. They were instructed to talk about asks they had made or were going to make.

- What did/would they ask for?
- Who did/would they ask?
- How were/are they feeling about it?
- What did/would they say?
- What did/would the askee say?
- What was/is anticipated to be the outcome?

The results showed that expert entrepreneurs ask differently than novices. This difference is evident in type, method, and frequency of asking. It is also directly related to effectual reasoning. Effectual thinking consists of five principles:

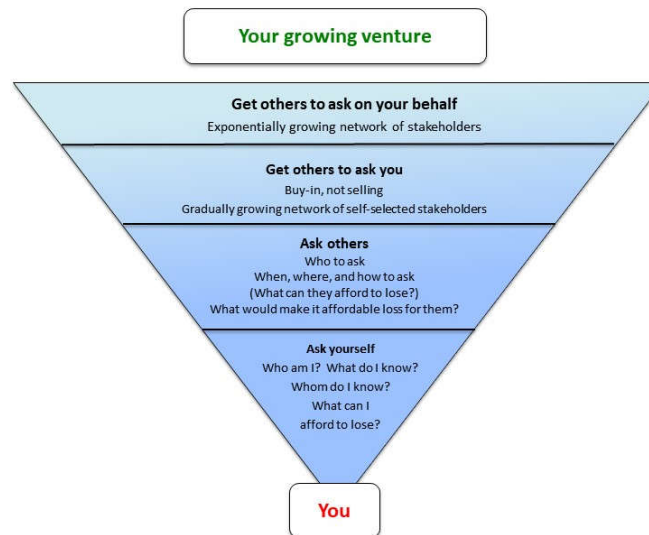
1. Bird in hand: Work with things already within your control. Be means-driven, rather than goal-driven.
2. Affordable loss: Invest no more than you can afford to lose. Keep the downside within your control, while working to push up the upside.
3. Crazy quilt: Work with those who are willing to make real commitments to your venture. Putting skin in the game drives goals, more than you targeting specific stakeholders for specific resources.
4. Lemonade: Embrace, rather than avoid surprises. Transform even negative contingencies into positive opportunities.
5. Pilot-in-the-plane: History does not run on autopilot. Cocreate new futures with people who can pilot their own destiny.

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Type

The types of asks that entrepreneurs make vary according to level of sophistication and desired outcome (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Ask pyramid.



Source: All figures and tables created by author.

The bottom of this pyramid starts with the individual. The first main set of asks expert entrepreneurs make is of themselves. For example, what are the assets I have at hand? Who do I know that could help me with this venture? How can I acquire the things I need to get started? These are examples of the early asks entrepreneurs make, and are aligned with the bird-in-hand principle of effectuation.

The second level up is the realm of asking others. Here, entrepreneurs begin to take their ideas outside of their heads and into the world. They ask for advice, feedback, and assistance. At this stage, they start bringing people into their idea and forming the boundaries of affordable loss.

The third level up is that of getting others to ask you. This is consistent with the crazy quilt principle of effectuation. At this stage, entrepreneurs start to pull their stakeholders together into a network to grow their business. A critical component of successful completion of this stage is that entrepreneurs approach asking in a very open way, allowing the stakeholders to shape their business outcomes and objectives so they too feel ownership of the results. The entrepreneur has positioned themselves as having something of value and being open to using it in a way that would benefit both parties.

The peak of the pyramid is getting others to ask on your behalf. Having successfully brought together numerous stakeholders, expert entrepreneurs, while continuing to make their own asks, also rely on others to ask for them. This increases the amount of influence an entrepreneur is able to have, and expands the reach of their business. Corresponding to the pilot-in-the-plane principle, entrepreneurs continue to shape their own environment and outcome, but bring on others to magnify the effect. Note that in order for someone to ask on their behalf, stakeholders must feel vested in the outcomes, hence the progression from successful completion of the previous levels.

Method

How an entrepreneur asks varies from a novice in that they make “effectual” or “open” asks. An open ask exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: it (1) is dialogue based, (2) has depth, and (3) is relationship focused.

Dialogue based

The dialogue basis of the ask means that the entrepreneur is looking for a conversation to ensue, not a one-way feedback session. The entrepreneur enters into these discussions with an open mind—they may have strong knowledge of their questions and perhaps some hypotheses as to the answers, but they allow for the askee to alter the course of the discussion, contribute new information, or propose alternatives. Novice entrepreneurs, on the other hand, tend to make “thrown over the fence” asks, where they put out a question and wait for a response. In its most polished form, these ad hoc asks are a standard pitch.

Using asks that are not dialogue based inherently limits the possibilities presented and also keeps the relationship between the asker and the askee at a very arms-length level. In contrast, by initiating a dialogue, both parties are able to get a better feel for each other and their fit as potential cocreators in an endeavor.

Depth

Next, because the entrepreneur enters into these discussions with an open mind, they are more likely to engage in-depth in the topic. They are confident in what they know and what they don't know. Supporting this confidence is knowledge of their ability to control what they can control, but not to worry about that which is outside of their influence. This enables them to probe areas of depth for potential opportunity and look beyond the surface of ideas.

Novice entrepreneurs do not exhibit the same level of confidence. They express concern with revealing what they don't know, and fear this will diminish or even potentially sever their relationship with the askee.

Expert entrepreneurs have found the opposite to be the case. In fact, by acknowledging what they don't know, they are able to bring in experts who feel ownership for more fully shaping outcomes vis-à-vis their expertise.

Relationship focused

Opening up and letting others contribute their ideas enables expert entrepreneurs to build a robust network of stakeholders who share a desire to cocreate a successful business outcome. The experts are able to weave together the individuals they make asks of, often connecting them to each other to benefit multiple parties' interests.

The novice entrepreneur is more likely to silo their asks, returning to the individual only when a question of a similar nature arises, or not at all. The expert entrepreneur goes beyond seeking resources to build relationships.

Frequency

Successful entrepreneurs are always asking. They've learned through experience that it pays to ask anything of anyone, anytime, anywhere. The research we referred to earlier comparing expert entrepreneurs with small

business owners and Inc founders showed that experts made twice as many asks overall, and were over three times more likely than novices to make open asks.

At first glance, this seems contradictory. One would expect that novices would be making more asks because they are new to the process and perhaps needing to seek more guidance. However, closer examination identified that there are several self-imposed fears that inhibit the ability of novices to make asks. Fears of inadequacy, incompetence, rejection, losing control, and success are all barriers that prevent people from moving up the ask pyramid into more open asks. A sense of learned optimism allows expert entrepreneurs to push past these fears.

Our research also showed that the more an entrepreneur asks, the more likely they are to get what they want, the better their asking skills become, and the more optimism they have about the fulfillment of future asks. This self-fulfilling cycle of frequency of asking and optimism propels entrepreneurs to put themselves out there more in terms of asking, gaining confidence and advancing their business ideas simultaneously.

Adding to this, while novices make fewer asks than experts, they also seem to struggle more with what to do with the answers they receive. If they take everyone's feedback and advice to heart, they find themselves mired in indecision about which way to turn. For example, if they start out wanting to open a pizza shop and someone tells them hamburgers will sell better in that area, they start considering opening a hamburger restaurant. If the next person they speak with tells them pizza would be good, but they should consider gourmet pizza, they might switch back again to pizza, but head in this new direction with it. This can lead to multiple pivots or analysis paralysis. The former prevents focus and the latter leads to inaction.

For the experts, making a decision to alter their course hinges on the intersection of their bird-in-hand, their affordable loss, and actual stakeholders making real commitments to the new direction of the venture. Using the previous example, if they start out wanting to open a pizza shop and someone tells them hamburgers will sell better in that area, the following questions emerge in the mind of the expert:

1. Do they have the skills/desires/assets to move in that direction?
2. What would be their affordable loss to make that change?
3. What is the askee willing to do to make this new course successful?

They might follow up by asking: "I knew a guy who was willing to sell me a pizza oven for a low cost. Would you be willing to find someone with a grill so I could give this idea a try?"

The askee's willingness to help (i.e., their actions contributing to the success of the venture in some capacity) is termed a commitment. Obtaining commitments is how expert entrepreneurs know when to act on all the advice they're hearing and information they're getting.

When unable to get a commitment, the expert entrepreneur does not view the dialogue as a total failure. Instead, they seek to build on the relationship established in the process of asking. They tend to maintain contact with the individual over time, keeping them apprised of milestones and successes in the development of their venture, and even acknowledging setbacks in a commiserative fashion. All of these are opportunities to keep the relationship going over time.

Effective

Mastering the art of the ask works—it gets results. Sometimes people do answer “yes,” and they say it much more often than expected.

Research from social psychology shows that people generally underestimate the likelihood that they will get a positive response to an ask.¹ Rejection plays a role in both sides of the ask transaction. The asker is often fearful of facing rejection and seeks to prevent this by avoiding the ask altogether, which self-inflicts a negative response because their request goes unanswered. On the other side of the transaction, those being asked will often do something to make the asker happy so they can avoid rejecting them. While they might have limitations as to their ability to fulfill the entire request, they will often either offer an alternative that they can provide or refer the asker to another who might be able to satisfy their need.

Evidence to support this has been replicated in studies that focus on simple requests for help to larger requests for charitable giving. The expert entrepreneur has learned this over time and recognizes that there is a benefit in a “yes,” a “yes, but...” or a “no, but...” response that far outweighs the risk of a flat out “no”. In fact, outright rejection can close a door which can serve the entrepreneur by narrowing options and allowing them to focus their time and energy on remaining possibilities that could yield more positive outcomes.

There are several directions that an ask can take (see **Table 1**). It's clear that in order to obtain a benefit, the asker needs to initiate an ask. If not, their position will inherently stagnate. Once an ask is made, there are three possible responses in addition to “yes”: “no,” “no, but...,” and “yes, but...” Underlying these are two primary factors: capability to help, and desire to help. Research has shown that if an individual is able to help, they most likely will. While it's difficult to risk rejection, it's also difficult to reject. Asking is a relational exercise, and face-saving concerns are prevalent on both sides of the transaction.

In addition, the askee also bears a social pressure to adhere to an “implicit norm of benevolence.”² Novice askers tend to overestimate the cost to the askee of saying “yes,” and underestimate the social cost of a “no” reply. Societal pressure to help those in need and a belief in “what goes around comes around” may propel people to acquiesce to a request as well, even more so than altruistic reasons.

There is also evidence of a cultural bias against asking in America. The value of self-reliance and a “by your own bootstraps” ethos has become a cornerstone of American business lore, especially in business creation and generation. Research is showing that some Americans are more open to helping foreigners than their fellow Americans because they don't apply the same standards of self-reliance to this population.

Table 1. Possible responses.

Asker	Response	Askee	Change to Asker Position
Doesn't ask: Wants to save face	Nothing happens	Assumes the asker doesn't need help. Surprising how often this is the case.	Asker gets no benefit
Asks but request is denied	No	Askee doesn't want to or cannot help and doesn't feel compelled to save face. This is rarer than askers believe it to be.	Asker gets no immediate benefit but could still build relationship over time
Asks and is referred to another	No, but...	Askee may or may not want to help, but feels compelled to save face. This works if asker can make it affordable loss for askee to make the referral.	Asker benefits by increasing network of relationships
Asks and request is granted but with conditions	Yes, but...	Askee may genuinely want to help or is trying to save face. This is twice as likely to happen than askers expect.	Asker benefits with an opportunity to cocreate and build emotional ownership
Asks and request is granted	Yes	Askee may genuinely want to help or is trying to save face, or this is affordable loss for them.	Asker benefits with an opportunity to cocreate

¹ Daniel A. Newark, Vanessa K. Bohns, and Francis J. Flynn, “A Helping Hand Is Hard at Work: Help-Seekers' Underestimation of Helpers' Effort,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 139 (March 2017): 18–29.

² Francis J. Flynn and Vanessa K. B. Lake, “If You Need Help, Just Ask: Underestimating Compliance with Direct Requests for Help,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 1 (2008): 128–43.

Help seekers may not recognize that requesting help can be a means of strengthening relationships, not straining them.³ The perceived vulnerability of the asker signifies a closeness that can form the basis for a relationship.

It also pays to persist in asking openly, not just asking in any way. Those who become proficient at asking recognize all opportunities as open to negotiation. They don't take situations as fixed, and they enter into most discussions openly assuming that the outcome can be shaped. They also exhibit a tendency to ask for bolder outcomes under the premise that if you ask for something less than desired, you get something less than desired.⁴

Askers also have a greater likelihood of success when they are asking about topics they are comfortable with. This allows them the confidence to stray from the script and open up to a more fluid discussion.

Experiments on asking show that in general, people overestimate by two times the amount of people they'll have to ask to help with a request. Researchers also found that when asked about their expectations prior to a fundraising campaign, people underestimated both the number of people who would donate as well as how much they would donate.

Teachable

People often attribute successes to ability and failures to bad luck. But improving one's asking outcomes is possible. People can learn to be better askers. Changing the mindset is critical. It is essential to address the fears, mitigate them, and then practice, practice, practice.

First, the fears related to asking dissipate as one gains entrepreneurial experience and thus moves up the asking pyramid. But one can't jump into the middle of the pyramid without making the climb, since the iterative nature of asking itself creates the frequency/optimism cycle that drives successful asking. It becomes necessary to acknowledge the fears upfront and then develop strategies to address them.

Preparing to ask

Consider the possibility of negotiating in all opportunities. This increases the asker's sense of control because they are either the initiators of the negotiation or they are prepared to open up to a negotiation and are not caught by surprise. Importantly, these daily negotiations don't have to be formal and structured—they can be loose and conversational. Weave it into your daily life.

Another fear of askers is that of likeability. Women especially tend to express concern that they might appear too forceful or aggressive if asking. Research has provided evidence to the contrary. Style definitely matters and must be adjusted to be appropriate to the situation, but asking in and of itself is unlikely to influence likeability. In fact, askees who agree to grant an ask request often view askers in a higher light after an ask. They convince themselves that the asker is likeable, attractive, and a deserving person because they have in effect opted to become a part of their network.⁵ Control anxiety by trusting the negotiator to take care of themselves. They'll respond the way they want to. It's not necessarily based on you and your likeability. Divorce yourself from your head. Present the venture's capabilities, not just your relationship.

³ Vanessa K. Bohns and Francis J. Flynn, "Why Didn't You Just Ask? Underestimating the Discomfort of Help-Seeking," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 2 (March 2010): 402–9.

⁴ Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁵ Jon Jecker and David Landy, "Liking a Person as a Function of Doing Him a Favour," *Human Relations* 22, no. 4 (1969): 371–8.

Preparation is key. The better prepared one is, the more likely they are to ask and to ask openly. Confidence leads to variation from the script and a more flexible, responsive dialogue that invites the askee in as a participation in cocreation. Think through what you are willing to offer up and what your boundaries are for affordable loss. Clearly understanding constraints and boundaries allows the entrepreneur to remain more open to collaboration, knowing they have acknowledged the downside in advance. This also diminishes the fear of losing control or making a mistake.

Be optimistic about the opportunity you're going after and the size of the pie. By thinking of broader opportunities, you'll imbue the askee with greater flexibility and increased resources that they might bring to the table. It also makes it more strategic and less personal.

Recognize what type of relationship you have with the askee; is it instrumental or friendship? An instrumental relationship is one that exists for business purposes—to exchange information, advice, resources, and so on. A friendship is one that is based on personal characteristics. Distinguish between the two when you are asking, and understand why both parties are entering into this dialogue.

Realize that fears of rejection are heightened because of the internal focus of the asker. Taking a step back to look at the facts and context of the discussion, as well as the capabilities and desires of the other party, diminishes the anxiety the asker assigns to the situation.

Try not to predict the precise outcome before you extend your ask. This allows you to keep it truly open, and allows the askee to find a path to a positive reply.

Asking

Since frequency is so critical to asking success, using all modes of interaction (e.g., face to face, email, or phone) are viable, but face to face can often lead to the most positive outcomes. This is due to the personal nature of the discussion as well as the increased investment of time and effort made to hold that type of discussion over other forms. The social costs of rejecting are heightened.

Develop your own voice. Find your own style of asking that's authentic and true to your personality. Don't say you're open to feedback if you're really not. This is honed through practice. Research shows that after reading literature promoting asking, people recognize the benefit and assure themselves they will make more asks in the future—but oftentimes, this behavior doesn't materialize.

Ask openly. The open ask is a powerful tool. It invites others into your process. It leaves the door open for partnerships and cocreation rather than a one-time transactional exchange of information. It is not about being the smartest person in the room. It is about being a good listener. With the open ask, you are baking surprise into your process. These surprises result in new products, new markets, and new opportunities.

Because these new ideas are outside of the original scope of possibilities, their inherent uniqueness provides a competitive advantage to the entrepreneur. This increases their chance of success even in markets dominated by players with deep pockets. At the same time, the open ask allows these surprising new possibilities to happen at lower costs and earlier in the lifecycle, so even if one possibility does not come to fruition, the entrepreneur is better positioned to capitalize on subsequent opportunities.

Ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions. This sets the groundwork for more of a discussion than a pitch. It allows both parties to become invested in the outcomes of the conversation, and to stake out and articulate the role they are willing to play in making that vision a reality.

Instead of asking “Would you...,” here are some of the ways you could make an open ask:

- What would it take for you to...?
- How could we work together to...?
- How can I make this a big win for you...?
- If you were me, how would you...?
- I’m just starting out, so...?
- Why not...?

At times, the person with whom the entrepreneur is conversing is reluctant to enter into this type of discussion. This could be because they are unaccustomed to thinking in this way, because they have limited autonomy or decision-making latitude, or because they are just not interested in pursuing a relationship with the entrepreneur.

In these cases, the entrepreneur has several options. They can patiently work with the individual to set the framework for an unconventional discussion and manage their expectations that this is not going to be a traditional pitch and instead is a chance to truly hear and understand their point of view.

Another option would be to find someone else who works with the individual and might be more comfortable or capable of entering into this type of a dialogue.

Lastly, the entrepreneur might decide that this channel presents too many obstacles, in which case they would revisit their opportunities and look for others who might be more willing to cocreate with them.

Expert entrepreneurs ask for commitments as quickly as possible in the creation of their venture. In contrast to novice entrepreneurs who are more comfortable keeping their ideas under wraps until they unveil a near finished product out of fear that others will steal their idea, the expert entrepreneur is confident in their abilities to execute and believes that what they bring to their venture is competitively differentiated due to their individual ability.

Expert entrepreneurs use the open ask to get stakeholders engaged as early as possible. Some examples of stakeholders are:

- Customers. They try to sell their product or service to customers before it is finalized, knowing that customer input and support will result in more success in the long term. This also gives customers emotional ownership in the product and venture, often leading them to recommend it to others. When possible, expert entrepreneurs also try to get customers to commit to funding some of the development.
- Employees. Expert entrepreneurs are able to get people to help them without promising compensation upfront. By approaching talent in this way, they are able to procure stronger talent than those who present potential employees with straight salary offers. Focusing on a salary number presents a budgetary cap for the entrepreneur and sets up a yes-or-no scenario for the employee. Instead, the expert opens the discussion to what motivates the potential hire. Is it passion for the product? A mission to serve in some capacity? Desire to be part of a team? Wanting to gain experience of some sort? Allowing the employee to contribute their motivations gives the expert entrepreneur a broader range of options for attracting this talent to the team.

- **Advisers.** Research has shown that when people begin to make asks, they start with asking for feedback or advice. Many novice entrepreneurs will spend a considerable amount of time asking for input and feedback in hopes of perfecting their product/service for launch. They lead with such questions as: “Do you like...?”; “Would you buy...?”; or “What do you think of...?”

While the information gained from these questions might be interesting, it often confuses entrepreneurs. Whose opinion matters most? What if everyone doesn't agree? These types of questions do not advance a business as much as the open ask. In this situation, an open ask that drives toward partnerships and cocreative relationships invites people's opinions, but allows these opinions to influence the business vision only if the other person is willing to put skin in the game as well. It is worth noting that this “skin in the game” does not have to be financial. It can be that someone feels strongly about the brand you should launch, and they're willing to design with you. Or they might affirm the value of your idea and agree to open doors to influential contacts who they think could be potential customers or stakeholders for you.

- **Influencers.** Consider having a strategic partner intervene on your behalf. Let other members of your network make the ask for you. Think about how you can get out of the way so that you make room for the other person to ask on your behalf.

At the same time, think about how you can make it affordable loss for others to ask on your behalf. Offer to take the work out of their having to call someone by you calling others directly on their behalf.

After the ask

Track your asks. Make a commitment to ask a certain number of times a day. Journal who you asked, how you made the ask, what the outcome was, and how you felt. Askers will soon develop a track record of successes that will encourage them to continue to make more and bolder asks.

If you have encountered a negative response from someone with whom you have had success in the past, try to view the situation as distinct. This becomes easier as more stakeholders are brought into the asker's network and they build up successes. Bringing in more vested stakeholders inherently spreads the risk more. Once the idea has left the safe confines of the entrepreneur's head and has been put into the world for others to influence, the entrepreneur is able to “depersonalize” the open ask. Instead of looking at rejections as personal failures, a much more objective view can be taken.

Compatible

You might be the sort of person who actively shies away from self and firm promotion, preferring instead that your work speak for itself. This personality or a company culture fostering this personality can seem diametrically opposed to the culture of entrepreneurs.

But in fact, what has become the lore of entrepreneurial behavior is just that—a myth. In actuality, encouraging people to act more like entrepreneurs is compatible with not being self-serving or blatantly promoting oneself and one's interests. Effectuation research shows us that many of the behaviors thought to be hallmarks of entrepreneurship are in fact myths.

- *Myth 1:* Entrepreneurship is about selling.

Reality: It's about buy-in and creating value with others. This creates a more balanced view of the relationships entrepreneurs cultivate. They are not one-sided exchanges but mutually beneficial partnerships.

- *Myth 2:* Entrepreneurship is innate.

Reality: Research shows that while some are naturally better at implementing the effectual principles than others, it does not require a genetic predisposition to be successful. Some entrepreneurs learn in the classroom. Others learn on the job, extracting lessons from an interaction and using these to advance their ideas.

- *Myth 3:* Entrepreneurs focus on the big vision.

Reality: They pay attention to the small. They look at seemingly trivial day-to-day interactions, assets, and activities as opportunities and act to convert them to value.

- *Myth 4:* Entrepreneurs fly solo.

Reality: They grow their ideas through partnerships. They seek to form relationships with individuals at all levels and with a diverse range of interests and connections. Diverse stakeholder networks are viewed as having a strong and wide reach.

- *Myth 5:* Entrepreneurs are risk takers.

Reality: They are risk minimizers. They believe there is strength in numbers, and they enlarge their stakeholder networks to both provide them with additional resources to grow the upside as well as to protect against individual losses. They are also continually assessing how best to move forward while protecting their downside.

Many equate entrepreneurial effectiveness with aggressive sales tactics, but that is not the case. Expert entrepreneurs have formed a competency in developing strong partnerships that advance their ideas in a way that is perceived as mutually beneficial. This is a critical part of the open ask.

While entrepreneurs have significant individual control and are intrinsically motivated, they choose to work with partners. At larger organizations, an individual's goals may be set extrinsically, but the individual consultants have more and more control over their existing and prospective client relationships as they move up the ranks. By mastering the art of the ask, they will be able to move up the asking pyramid to where their asks become more relationship oriented, long term, and mutually beneficial, removing them from the one-hit aggressive sales tactics they might feel are necessary to be entrepreneurial.

Despite the myth of the super-visionary, successful entrepreneurs don't start their ventures with a clearly defined roadmap. Instead, they start with a few small steps. They allow the outcomes of these steps, and the personal connections they make along the way, to shape the next step they take. It becomes about connecting and combining.

For expert entrepreneurs, relationship building is not traditional networking or schmoozing. They do not go about creating relationships through a hard sell or by pushing their vision on others. They speak passionately about what they want to build and allow the other party to engage in this broader vision. Eventually, the relationship that's created is broader than a single sale, but represents a long-term opportunity to build on possibilities therein.

In sum, expert entrepreneurs:

1. see opportunities in all kinds of ordinary things and all kinds of ordinary people;
2. work with what they already have to build things nobody predicted; and
3. build growing networks of people willing to invest real skin in the game.

Being good at anything takes practice. Children run at a very young age, and yet an entire industry exists around training adults to run. Asking is comparable to this. In its simplest form, it is something that is adopted at a very young age. However, most of us fail to advance our asking techniques to a mastery level as we mature.

If you want to be a better asker, you have to ask more often. This chicken-and-egg cycle can be frustrating, and might evoke a fear of failure. But if askers take that initial step and persevere, they will find themselves improving their techniques, building stronger partnerships with those they ask, and reaping the rewards of their requests.