

Making the Ask

A Playbook for Senior Leaders

For most senior leaders, most doors that lead to? are already unlocked, or can be. What really determines access is how clearly you're able to articulate what you need once you're inside.

Many accomplished executives hesitate when it comes time to make the ask. An introduction, perspective, capital, sponsorship, a sounding board, or simply someone else's time. The irony is that the higher you rise, the less explicit guidance there is on how an ask will get results.

This guide is designed for C-suite leaders, experienced executives, and board members who want to ask for help with care and credibility, without feeling transactional or exposed.

Why Asking Gets Hard at the Top

Senior leaders are conditioned to be decisive and self-sufficient. Over time, that conditioning can quietly turn into friction around asking for help.

Common dynamics we see:

- You are used to being the one who provides answers versus the one who asks for support
- You worry about burdening others or appearing unprepared
- You assume people will infer what you need from context or past conversations
- You feel...exposed. Shouldn't you already know?
- You have learned to minimize uncertainty rather than surface it

These tendencies tend to develop over time, shaped by environments that consistently reward competence and independence. Over time, they can limit progress in ways that are easy to miss.

Reframing the Ask

For senior leaders, the act of asking carries meaning. It signals discernment and an understanding of where leverage truly sits.

A clear, well-placed ask does four things at once:

- It gives others permission to be useful
- It tells them how to be useful (the more direct the better)
- It demonstrates self-awareness and direction
- It helps prevent unnecessary delay

Peers and counterparts at this level generally welcome direct conversations. Progress slows when the request itself is unclear, even in otherwise candid conversations.

The Anatomy of an Effective Ask

Strong asks share a consistent structure.

1. Context Without Over-Explaining

Set the context briefly. The goal is to orient the listener, not to defend the request or narrate the full backstory.

Example: "I'm spending time exploring a board role in retail where my operating background would be most relevant."

2. Calibrate the Person You're Asking

A strong ask reflects an understanding of who you're asking, not just what you need. Different people have different leverage, attention, and ways of being helpful. The ask should be shaped accordingly.

The more senior or visible the person, the more important it is that the ask is:

- Specific
- Bounded
- Easy to act on

A well-calibrated ask respects the other person's context and makes clear how they can help, without asking them to figure it out for you.

3. Specificity Over Generality

When a request lacks definition, even well-intentioned people hesitate. Clear parameters give others something concrete to work with.

Avoid: "Let me know if you hear of anything."

Instead: "I'm looking to meet two or three investors who have backed payments platforms at the growth stage."

4. A Clear Role for the Other Person

Make it obvious how they can help and why they are the right person to ask.

Example: "You have a strong view of this space and a network I respect. I would value your perspective on where I might be most useful."

5. An Exit Ramp

Remove pressure by giving permission for a no.

Example: "If this isn't the right moment or fit, no worries at all."

Being comfortable with a no is part of asking well, and giving someone room to decline keeps the exchange balanced.

What Senior Leaders Often Miss

Even highly seasoned executives underestimate a few things:

- Most people like being asked for help when the request is thoughtful and bounded
- Silence is more often about lack of clarity than lack of interest
- A declined ask is rarely personal and often situational

In practice, thoughtful asking rarely erodes credibility. More often, the absence of an ask leaves potential support untapped.

Common Asks and How to Approach Them

Introductions

Be explicit about who, why, and what success looks like.

"I'd appreciate an introduction to one or two board chairs who have built audit committees in complex environments."

Perspective

Position the request as a desire for perspective grounded in experience, not reassurance or endorsement.

"I'm pressure-testing a decision and would value your candid take based on what you've seen."

Capital or Sponsorship

Ground the request in shared interests and long-term fit rather than immediacy or pressure.

"I'm exploring funding conversations with partners who think long-term. If anyone comes to mind, I'd welcome a connection."

The Long Game

The most effective asks rarely happen in isolation. They are built on:

- Ongoing relationship investment
- A clear and current narrative about what you are doing and where you are headed
- Consistent signals that you operate intentionally and aren't looking for a transactional relationship.

When those elements are in place, asking feels less abrupt and more natural.

The TL;DR

Many senior leaders underestimate how much opportunity is lost through silence rather than rejection.

When your direction is clear but unspoken, others can't support it. When your needs are implicit rather than explicit, even strong relationships will fail to meet your needs.

At this stage of a career, progress depends far more on clearly expressed intent than on additional effort or access.

How Banff Can Support You

Banff works with clients to:

- Clarify what is worth asking for and when
- Pressure-test language so requests land with precision and confidence
- Shape and rehearse high-stakes asks before they are made
- Help structure and facilitate introductions when the moment is right
- Support relationship building in rooms where dynamics are complex and stakes are high

Our role is to be a trusted partner in moments where judgment, timing, and phrasing matter as much as access itself. When you need a sounding board or a steady presence behind the scenes, Banff is there.