What I Need from You

Idea In Short

When teams depend on one another but rarely state those dependencies directly, run What I Need from You (WINFY). Ask each function to identify its most important needs, make specific requests to colleagues, and answer each request clearly. Before the session, define a shared challenge and invite the functions that can affect it. Explain that a useful request names an action, a recipient, a reason, and a time frame. Participants can respond that they will do it, will not do it, need to discuss it, or need a more specific request. Treat every answer as information for planning. Close by assigning owners to accepted commitments and recording unresolved dependencies for follow-up.

A product launch can stall because marketing is waiting for legal review, legal is missing final specifications, and engineering has not been told which release date matters. Each group may be busy and acting reasonably, yet the dependencies remain implicit. What I Need from You (WINFY) creates a direct exchange between functions: each team states what it needs, listens to requests from others, then gives a clear response. The structure is designed to simplify collaboration and make interdependence visible. It also helps teams test whether their local priorities support a shared outcome. The practice reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Amplify Freedom and Responsibility”: groups retain room to make decisions, while taking responsibility for how those decisions affect their colleagues.

Convert frustration into a request

Cross-functional complaints often describe a condition without specifying an action. “We need engineering to be more responsive” offers little guidance. “Please confirm the API fields for the pilot by Thursday so we can complete the customer test plan” gives the receiving group something it can assess. WINFY asks teams to prepare requests that are specific, concrete, actionable, relevant, and timely. A request may include a due date, but it should not disguise a demand as a question or presume capacity the other team has not confirmed.

The host begins by naming one shared goal or challenge and ensuring participants interpret it similarly. Three to seven functional groups work in parallel. Each group identifies what it needs from the others, often using a short 1-2-4-All conversation to develop and prioritize ideas. The group then selects one or two requests for each relevant function and writes them in a consistent form: “What I need from you is…” This constraint helps teams focus on their most consequential dependencies rather than submitting every frustration they have accumulated.

Listen before answering

Spokespeople gather in a central circle and state requests one at a time. The other spokespeople write each request down without responding. This pause matters: a request can be heard in full before the receiving group explains, defends, or negotiates. Once requests are listed, participants return to their functional groups to decide how they will answer. The structure offers four response types: agree to do it, decline, ask for a conversation, or request a more specific formulation. Each answer carries useful information for planning.

A commitment should be explicit about who will do what and by when. “We will look into it” is not a dependable commitment unless the group defines what “look into” means and when it will report back. A decline also deserves clarity. It can expose a capacity limit, a policy constraint, or a mismatch in priorities while there is still time to adjust the plan. Asking for a conversation signals that a request may be feasible but needs negotiation. Asking for specificity identifies a request that the receiving team cannot yet act on. None of these responses should be treated as a failure; ambiguity is more costly when teams proceed as if agreement exists.

Design the room for equal exchange

WINFY uses functional clusters around the room and a central circle for spokespeople. The arrangement lets people confer with their own colleagues and then listen to peers across the organization. Give each function the same opportunity to make requests and answer them. If one group has much more authority, the facilitator should set the expectation that every function can speak plainly and that responses will be recorded without penalty. A host should also distinguish between a genuine commitment and a response made to satisfy a senior person in the moment.

For a remote session, prepare breakout rooms for each function and a visible shared space where requests and responses can be captured. Ask the spokespeople to read each request exactly as written. The full sequence generally includes framing the challenge, clarifying context, explaining the response options, developing requests, making them in plenary, deciding responses in groups, sharing answers, and debriefing. Plan around 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the number and complexity of the dependencies. The official design gives the request-development and exchange stages the most time because precision and listening determine the quality of the outcome.

Move from answers to coordination

After the responses, the host should capture the commitments in an operational form: request, responding function, named owner, due date, and status. A function that declines a request should state what the requesting team can do next, if that is known. A request for discussion should get a meeting owner and time. If the receiving group needs more detail, the requesting group should revise the statement instead of leaving the issue in an indefinite “clarify later” state. The facilitator can debrief with What, So What, Now What to explore what the exchange revealed and what coordination changes are needed.

WINFY works best when it addresses a real shared objective, such as a customer delivery, a service transition, or a cross-team process redesign. It is less useful when participants do not have authority to speak for their functions or when leaders have already decided that every request must receive a yes. In those situations, the session can stage an apparent dialogue while leaving the underlying constraints untouched. Invite people who know the work and can make or secure commitments, and be transparent about what decisions remain outside the room.

Research on organizational silos and team effectiveness suggests that teams need shared goals and clear coordination to work across boundaries. The Harvard Business Review describes how to improve collaboration by making dependencies and contributions more visible; Google’s team effectiveness work emphasizes clarity of roles and goals; and the Project Management Institute discusses stakeholder engagement as an ongoing practice. 1 , 2, 3

Keep the commitments alive

The session should end with a small number of observable next steps. Ask each function to confirm its commitments and identify any unresolved dependencies that could block the shared goal. Set a review date before the group disperses. At that checkpoint, participants can report what was completed, what changed, and which requests need revision. This follow-through prevents WINFY from becoming a one-time airing of needs with no effect on day-to-day work.

A good result is not a room full of yeses. It is a more accurate map of what teams need from one another, what each group can promise, and where negotiation remains. Clear responses allow leaders to adjust resources or scope before a missed dependency becomes a late delivery. They also help colleagues distinguish a refusal from neglect and a real commitment from vague goodwill. When repeated across important work, the structure can improve coordination because teams learn to ask directly, answer honestly, and revisit their agreements together.

- 1The secrets of great teamwork
- 2Google re:Work: Understand team effectiveness
- 3Stakeholder engagement

Summary

WINFY converts invisible dependencies into explicit commitments. Its value comes from letting functions hear one another’s requests and respond without a prolonged negotiation in the room. A clear no can be more useful than a polite yes that no one intends to honor, while a request for clarification can reveal that the need was not yet actionable. The facilitator should keep the common goal visible, make sure quieter functions have equal room, and record what happens next. The session is complete only when accepted requests have owners and dates, and unanswered needs have a path to resolution. Cross-functional trust grows when teams reliably do what they agreed to do.