

To Give or Not to Give Advice? That is the Question!

Mr Fix-It is a well known male stereotype, the one who hears a problem and instantly gives a solution. Males are not the only gender that likes to give advice. In the context of communication, males are known for seizing a problem and wanting to rescue the situation with a fix whereas women like to voice their issues and concerns, be heard, and know there is connection rather than a solution (another stereotype). They may still enjoy a solution but after they have connection.

There is something really satisfying about giving a juicy piece of advice, a solution to someone else's dilemma. 'Irrespective of the chaos and issues in my own life, I feel in control and satisfied when I can solve someone else's problems, ... and I don't carry any of the responsibility for the repercussions.' It seems easier to address someone else's issues than to take a cold, hard look at one's own situation, and apply energy to personal challenges and barriers.

Believe it or not, this thought process was reignited a little while ago as I walked along a rocky shoreline behind my wife. It can be very easy to say "Follow my lead across these rocks", something I saw being modelled by another couple. I was naturally following my wife yet found



Great advice! Do you receive it entirely positively?

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Abstract

While often given with the best of intentions, advice dis-empowers the recipient, gets in the way of real learning, and can lead to other problems. Ways to develop insight are explored with some benefits identified.

Keywords

Coaching, insight, self-responsibility

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myself stymied and frustrated. I could not see my own path because I was too close to her. Her path was not working for me because she takes smaller strides than me. I quickly ventured out on my own route. I felt freer and had more fun rock hopping as soon as I did that.

Our brains are similar to this path exploring process. Each person has a unique brain with its very own set of neural pathways. We have different experiences and approach situations differently. While a similar approach may often work, insight, the basis of learning and personal illumination, has to be individually earned. When we experience insight our brain literally creates new neural pathways. In the moment of insight the thing we realise becomes ours, hard-wired into our brain circuitry. The more significant the process of discovery that led to the insight, the stronger the experience of insight. Insight also carries benefits of personal ownership of the learning, and a marked increase in the motivation and capacity to implement what has been learned.

Spoon-feeding information and solutions does not create insight without an independent cognitive process that deepens awareness and understanding. Advice giving has poor results in idea uptake. It is an improvement over mandate, yet it is not a benign act. It carries a message of "I know better." While that may be true sometimes, it does not strengthen or develop the capabilities of the person receiving the advice. It undervalues the autonomy of the recipient, indicating a lack of belief in them to take responsibility and action to create their own results. Advice is often given out of impatience, an unwillingness or personal inability to nurture and support the other person, believing that giving advice will get the end result quicker. If the end result is purely about finishing a task to specification, then it may be the way to go. If developing the recipients' capabilities matter, then advice is counter-productive.

There are certain situations advice, in the professional sense, is necessary. Then, someone credible provides feedback on a planned approach before investing in something that might be doomed to fail. I have spent much of my career in this space, giving and receiving professional advice. However, advice is often received as a "thou shalt..." which carries a sense of coercion that most independent, autonomous beings resist. Even when asked for, advice can be difficult to receive and does not map into personal insights or ownership for the recipient. Regardless of intent, advice is often received as a coercive or aggressive instruction, even if below the level of consciousness. I have seen many excellent ideas not implemented. I am not advising you to never give

advice. My intent is to open the door to an alternative way of engaging with others when the situation allows.

Engaging with others in a more meaningful manner has been a primary motivation for me moving into coaching, an area in which advice is a complete no-no. An agenda held by the coach is also a big no-no. Coaching relies on establishing a relationship of trust, and the coach asking sound questions, without agenda, and meeting the client where the client wants to be met. Coaching supports them to develop their own insights. There are a lot of professed coaches who revel in the opportunity to give advice. This is not coaching as defined by the [International Coach Federation \(ICF\)](#), the professional body I associate with. The ICF defines a set of core competencies that they assess their coaches against. Advice giving, even with the permission of the client, is counter to the best practice of coaching. I continue to learn to deepen this capacity within my own being.

The following are some questions I use to develop my awareness of my advice-giving tendencies. Perhaps you will find them useful:

- How often and when do I offer advice to others?
- When I do give advice, what do I notice happens to the receiver of my advice? To the connection between us? Do they expand or diminish in their role?
- What would I need to change within myself to engage with this other being without giving advice?

Coaching can support you create the best outcome when working with areas covered by this article.

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