2.5 Forget the Advice, Why Not Give Some Real Help?

George A. Ford

The temptation to give advice is irresistible; the capacity to ignore it is universal.
Gwyneth Bohr

It's so easy to give advice. Perhaps that is because we have been bombarded with it all of our lives. Our first word was coached out of us using the “advice model” of helping (i.e., “say DaDa”). Everyone who would like to sell us something has good advice for us. Also, counselors, lawyers, pastors, doctors, engineers, accountants, etc., etc., operate mostly on the “helping is giving advice” model.

It's no wonder that it's so easy for us to ignore advice given to us. The more we get, the less we can use. After all, advice is information from another suggesting what we should do. The other person doesn't have to live with the consequences of what we do. We are responsible for our own actions. Thus, we do not have to accept anyone else's advice. Neither do subordinates, friends, co-workers, etc. The consequences of ignoring your advice might be dire, but you cannot make them do anything. And, giving advice that is not accepted diminishes your influence. Your goal should be to establish strong mutual influence so you can problem solve together and learn from each other, not to lose influence when you try to help.

Advice, when it is used, is information the recipient sees as relevant to their needs at that time. It is extremely unlikely that anyone can put out that kind of information without listening long and hard to how the situation looks from the receiver’s point of view. And, even then, it’s more likely to be accepted if it is offered in a tentative way, “Have you considered starting over from scratch?” rather than, “You should stop here and start over from scratch.”

Advice is so seldom helpful or used by the recipient that I suggest we put advice giving at the bottom of our kit of “helper,” “teacher” or “coach” tools and try practicing and using all of the other tools first.

It's unlikely that anyone reading this “advice” will actually stop giving advice. It's too ingrained a habit in most of us. However, following are some other, more impactful ways of helping another person.

HOW TO GIVE HELP WITHOUT GIVING ADVICE

Listen! Really Listen!
Develop the capacity of empathy—the ability to walk in another’s shoes and see the world as they see it. Many times people just need to talk out a situation to clarify it in their own minds. Talking out helps sort and weigh possible solutions. Often the best help you can give is to be an attentive and interested listener. Effective listening requires putting aside your own agenda, putting energy into focusing on the other person and clarifying what you understand.

Clarify for Yourself
Learn to ask, in a supportive way, for a person to explain something in more depth. When people are telling you something, you can usually pick out points that you do not understand. That’s frequently because the talker is not clear on the issue. You will be in a better position to understand the problem and possible solutions and the other person will have learned to make a clearer statement of the situation and also to think more clearly about it if you ask for clarification. That is helpful to them.

Ask Timely Questions
Questions are a powerful tool of the helper. Questions can help a person expand their thinking, “What other possible causes are there?” or help them move toward action, “What’s the first step you have to take?” The helper’s skill is in asking the right kind of question at the right time. Learn to sense when the other needs to open up their thinking, when they need to just clarify
and when they need to move to action. Then, ask questions that enable them to move in those directions. That will almost certainly be seen as helpful.

**Paraphrase a Lot**
Paraphrasing is saying in your own words what you understand the other person to have said. If you really listen, you should be able to state the “essence” of what the other person said. By asking questions like, “What I understand you saying is that you are very confused about who is responsible for the report. Am I understanding correctly?” assures that you remain in touch with the other person’s situation and it clarifies for them the issue at hand. Once a problem is clear, most people can see a reasonable solution. When you reflect back the essence of their dilemma, it clarifies for them, and it makes you look brilliant to be able to state so succinctly what they struggled to describe.

**Describe Without Valuing**
In an effort to be supportive, we often say something is “good” when we don’t really think it is. Try to develop the art of describing things and situations without casting a good or bad connotation on them. What is advocated here is developing the ability to suspend judgment during a coaching or problem-solving session. “You have talked about how angry you are with Tom and how you think he is not very cooperative.” versus “You have talked about how angry you are with Tom for his uncooperative style.” Describing also involves being as specific as you can. Specificity is the essence of professionalism in any profession. Describing, without valuing, aids in problem-solving because it helps keep defenses low.

**Learn to Give Legitimate Strokes**
Recognizing and acknowledging people’s strengths and accomplishments is a great confidence builder and motivator. Often we are dealing with a lack of confidence not incompetence. If you can promote more confidence, people can figure out more on their own. You can help by a specific statement of thanks, “I appreciate your helping Joe on that job.” or “You certainly have already made some progress.”

**Support by Sharing**
When you are the recipient of help, it gets awfully lonely. The recipient can feel like the only one with the problem. One has to be careful not to bore people with “war stories,” but an occasional sharing of a similar problem that you have faced is a way to build trust, get closer to the person and increase mutual influence. A problem is merely the difference between what you want and what you have. We all have that situation frequently.

**Be Prepared to Learn**
When you move away from the advice giving “expert” role of helping, you allow yourself to learn more. There is no way to really engage in helping another without coming away a wiser person yourself. If you view the transaction as two-way, you also build the confidence of the other person. And, the more you can help their confidence, the more they can do for you.

In summary, try holding back on the advice and see what listening, clarifying, questioning, paraphrasing, describing, stroking and sharing can do for you. You may be pleasantly surprised.

That’s my advice!