

How to Share Your Knowledge without Giving Advice

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"Advice is seldom welcome, and those who need it the most, like it the least."

-- Lord Chesterfield



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What does it feel like to receive advice? Have you heard the words “I think you should...” and felt yourself turn off or become defensive? Likewise perhaps you’ve noticed negative reactions when you give advice to others. Do people look away, sigh, roll their eyes or even start arguing with you when you give them advice? Do people actually heed your advice or do they just agree with you and then carry on doing things their own way?

Sharing your knowledge effectively is a very valuable skill that can be learned and used to increase your ability to influence others. It also has some important side-benefits including:

- Providing overall support rather than just informational advice
- Building strong trusting relationships
- Empowering others to think for themselves
- Providing solutions that are more relevant and specific to the needs
- Discovering new solutions that you hadn’t thought of before

Here are 4 ways coaches make sure their knowledge, experience and wisdom are heard, appreciated and used.

1) Let go of the need to give your solution

Do you enjoy problem-solving? Offering solutions to problems can be very satisfying. As well as potentially getting rid of problems, it lets us feel smart. It seems to prove our value as consultants and managers. Giving advice even gives us a little feeling of superiority over the recipients of our wise words.

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The same things that make giving advice enjoyable sometimes make receiving it irritating. The over-enthusiastic giver of advice often jumps to conclusions about what is really needed and what has been tried already. Advice that comes too quickly can feel quite insulting. Those feelings may lead a person to resist advice, even though it may actually be quite helpful.

So what I'm saying is that if your sense of self-worth (your ego) is gaining from your advice-giving (you may need to look very closely to notice this), then there will be two negative impacts:

- a) The way you give the advice will cause resistance in the recipient.
- b) The advice may not be the best, most integrated solution to the actual problem that the other person is facing.

A lot of advice is given for the sake of making the adviser feel smart and valuable rather than with the purpose of finding the best possible answer to the problem.

So the first and fundamental step in improving your ability to share your expertise is to drop your attachment to 1) your solutions and 2) your need to feel smart or valuable. Instead, focus on what is needed by the recipient of the information while humbly offering yourself as a resource. Paradoxically, you'll find that being humble and open actually proves your value much more readily than sharing too urgently your solutions.

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2) Listen first and listen thoroughly

Once you've dropped the need to give your solution, you'll find it much easier to sit back and listen to the full story of the problem case. I find it helpful to have a rule that I give advice only as a last resort. You may need to extend the length of your conversations to allow for a full exploration of the problem, potential solutions and objections. But the resulting conversation will be have much more value in terms of finding the best possible solution while empowering and honouring the advice-seeker.

If you are in the habit of giving lots of advice to juniors who are eager to learn from you, you might consider listening more to them to encourage them to think for themselves rather than relying on you. You may need to explain to them what you're doing so that they don't wonder why you've stopped giving them answers so easily.

3) Ask open questions that include your answer

My favourite way to share my knowledge is to ask a question that points the recipient to discover the solution for himself. As we know, people are more committed to solutions that they think of themselves. And those solutions are more likely to thoroughly address their unique concerns, limitations and priorities about the problem.

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Here are some examples of handy questions that can elicit all kinds of solutions.

- “What have you tried so far?”
- “What have you thought of doing about it?”
- “What else?”
- “Have you thought of anything related to X (the broad area of your potential solution)?”

Please note that these questions are all very open and can lead the conversation in a wide range of directions. You may quickly discover that the solution you had in mind was completely inappropriate!

Very often people will continue to explain the intricacies of their thinking about the problem and you’ll gain much more insight into where they are really stuck and what they can do about it.

4) Use diplomatic phrasing

Apart from these more round-about ways of helping someone realize what you want to tell them, it’s possible to phrase a piece of advice in ways that are more easily accepted. But please be warned that even the most elegant phrasing will not work if you have not completely heard the essence of the problem. Once you’ve listened thoroughly, you might try some of the following phrases:

- “Would you like me to share some of my ideas on this?”
- “One way I’ve seen this done before...”

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Some phrases to avoid include the dreaded “You should...” and also “Have you tried... (your solution)?” because this phrasing can so easily sound condescending.

These four ways to improve your ability to share your knowledge are also the essence of effective coaching. Coaches drop their egos and use listening, questioning and diplomatic phrasing to help people think better and in-the-end to influence positive changes.



Angela Spaxman of Spaxman Ltd . works with business people, professionals and managers who want to be at their best and be completely themselves at work. Her clients could be accelerating their learning about management and leadership skills; inspiring, empowering and developing their team members or creating careers or businesses that suit them perfectly.

Angela has been coaching full time since 2000 and has 12 years of experience in the people-development field as a coach, corporate trainer and consultant. She is a graduate of Coach U, a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming, the Founding President of the Hong Kong Coaching Community and a Board Member of the International Association of Coaches.

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