

Why Giving Advice Doesn't Work



One mistake many leaders make is delivering advice instead of constructive feedback. People often think it's nicer to phrase criticisms more gently by injecting words like: should, would, ought, and try. The problem is that by using these words, your constructive feedback becomes advice. And this only confuses the matter, raises the other party's defensiveness, and pushes them in the opposite direction of great performance.

Samples of advice include:

- Personally, I wouldn't bother the client before noon.
- If it were me, I'd get started on this right away.
- Have you tried talking to the client?
- You should probably make a few extra just in case.

There's no language in any of the above statements that indicates that the would, should, etc., is mandatory. Trying to trick employees into thinking they have a choice when they really don't doesn't make the work any more enjoyable. And if they interpret your feedback as optional, do it their way and it turns out wrong, everyone suffers. If it's not optional, then don't imply it is.

There are five core reasons why advice negates the effectiveness of constructive feedback and raises defensiveness. Let's take a look.

Why Advice Doesn't Work Reason #1: Judgmental

When you give unasked-for advice, it sends an underlying and very judgmental message: "You're obviously not as savvy as me because if you were, you'd have already figured out what I'm telling you." You may not consciously intend to promote this message, but it's usually what the person on the receiving end hears. And it won't inspire anyone to become a Hundred Percenter (aka a high performer).

What's more, if you continually offer unsolicited advice, there's a good chance people will retaliate and let you know, in no uncertain terms, about your own faults. You may think you're being helpful, or you may truly believe you know better, but you won't convince anyone who's stuck listening to your advice. The person on the other side of your endless stream of "You should..., you better..." is probably thinking, "Who the heck is this bozo to be giving me advice? He should clean up his own mess and then come talk to me."

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Why Advice Doesn't Work Reason #2: Directive

When you give advice, in essence, you're telling somebody else what to do. This implies you have all the answers about what works and what doesn't. But how could you? Chances are you don't have all the background information on the situation, nor do you understand the other person's emotions and what makes them tick.

There's absolutely no constructive value in statements like, "Well, if it were me, I would..." It's not you, and hearing this kind of advice only puts the other party on red alert that it may be time to check out of the conversation. You asked the employee to partner in dialog, so allow that person to provide additional facts about the situation. Or, if the employee has nothing to voluntarily offer, ask a few questions that prompt responses to fill in the blanks. But be careful. Sometimes the questions we ask are no more than a thinly disguised form of unsolicited advice.

I had a recent experience where my laptop froze while I was at a client site. The client called in his tech support department and the first thing one of the IT guys asked me was, "Did you try rebooting it?" Now, that may be the question everybody asks, but it's not a question that indicates that the person asking it sees the other person as intelligent. Instead, it's directive, a form of speaking down, and it comes off sounding strongly like advice.

Here's the internal reaction I had to his "advice" question: "Holy crap, you mean you can restart a laptop? Why didn't I think of that? I mean, every day I turn it ON, but I never thought about turning it OFF. They clearly don't pay you enough because that is absolute GENIUS!"

Of course, I bit my tongue and answered his question. But what if he'd instead asked me, "What actions have you taken so far?" There's a big difference between that question and, "Did you try rebooting it?" The former acknowledges that you consider the other person's input and intelligence as something valuable. It's also a legitimate attempt to gather information. The latter, as we have said, is unsolicited advice.

When It's Okay to Be Directive. I don't mean to imply you should never be directive. When you're a superior telling a subordinate what to do, it's perfectly acceptable. But even in that situation, you still need to be careful

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that you're giving directions—not advice. Because if you give advice, you're only setting the stage for a terrible dynamic.

Here's an example:

Scenario: Boss sees Employee writing a report and says to Employee:

BOSS: "I wouldn't use those colors for that report. I'd go with something brighter."

EMPLOYEE: "Sure, okay."

Later that day, the Employee has finished the report and presents it to Boss.

BOSS: "What the heck is this? I told you to use brighter colors."

EMPLOYEE: "No, you said YOU would use something brighter. I liked the colors I was already using just fine."

BOSS: "Listen, when I tell you to do something, I just want you to do it."

EMPLOYEE: "Then next time, tell me what you want."

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As a superior, you have the right (and obligation) to give directions and make corrections. However, when you phrase it as advice, it sounds more like a recommendation than a directive. And as we've seen, that creates a misunderstanding that wastes everyone's time.

If what you need to tell a subordinate is NOT optional, then be honest with them. Don't play coy and pretend they have a choice when they actually don't.

Why Advice Doesn't Work Reason #3: Gotchas

When you give advice, you offer the other party only two choices: take the advice or ignore the advice. And in either case, there's the possibility of a "gotcha." If your advice is taken, that means the other person must tacitly admit you're right and he or she is wrong. This automatically gives you credit for being smarter. That's Gotcha #1 and it's a dangerous scenario, one that's almost guaranteed to create defensiveness.

When advice is ignored, it invites the possibility of an "I told you so." That's Gotcha #2. And that can prompt our old friend, the wall of defensiveness, to spring into action and block out the feedback. Even if you don't outwardly acknowledge the failure to take your advice, the person who passed on taking it may fear you're insulted. This scenario can shut down the employee from attempting any future discussion on the topic (or any other topic for that matter). And then, there's always the chance that your constant advice and "gotchas" have you positioned as someone to be avoided.

Why Advice Doesn't Work Reason #4: Narcissism

Let's be honest. Sometimes we give advice to demonstrate how smart we are, or because we feel left out or need to be needed. There are even cases where constructive feedback is manipulated to vent anger or to purposely hurt someone. But it's always done under the thinly veiled guise of trying to be helpful.

Before you offer constructive feedback, consider your reasons. If your purpose is not to help someone achieve great performance, you probably want to rethink giving the feedback.

Why Advice Doesn't Work Reason #5: Unsolicited

Most advice is unsolicited. This means the other party didn't ask to be judged, corrected, or directed. When you catch someone off guard and hit them upside the head with advice; there's virtually no chance they'll be in an open emotional state to hear what you say.

Listen, there are many ways to give feedback. My latest book, *Hundred Percenters*, has an entire chapter devoted to the topic. Leadership IQ offers a teleconference on the subject as well. Giving advice, though, often makes people defensive, comes off as arrogance or can just seem like a suggestion rather than a command. Constructive feedback can push good employees toward Hundred Percenter performance, but advice generally just doesn't work all that well. And remember, while advice may be fun to give, it's generally not that much fun to get.

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