

Some experts suggest that we should never give advice in coaching. In reality, there are useful times and places for advice. But, advice-giving does tend to be greatly over-used by coaches, leaders, and consultants.

### Why Be Careful With Advice?

1. We don't have to live the consequences of another's choices. Do we really want the responsibility of what befalls another's life based on our telling them what they should do?
2. Building commitment to implement our choices is often as important as making the decisions. Taking someone's advice may generate less commitment than struggling through the process of coming to one's own decision.
3. Remember the adage about giving people fish vs. teaching them to fish. Much of our job in coaching and leading is about developing people and building capacity, not just solving an immediate problem.
4. Giving advice creates dependency on the advice-giver, rather than empowering the advisee. We want to help those we coach develop their own judgment, wisdom and confidence.
5. Are we really wise enough to know what's best? Situations are unique moments in time. Our opinions, mostly based on our experience of past moments, may or may not be the best guide to this moment.
6. When advising others, we usually have limited information. Most of our data is coming through the filters of the person we're coaching. For example, when helping someone deal with an interpersonal challenge, the picture we get is typically very different from the perspective of the other party or a neutral observer.
7. Do we even know what the criteria for "best" is? Sometimes experiences that seem "bad" later turn out to have been for the best. If we think of life as a journey of learning and we understand that struggle, pain and disappointment may be important teachers – do we really know what's "best" for another?
8. People may not want your advice.  
This may be shocking news, but others may not always want your wise insights. When people come to you with a concern, very often what they are wanting is simply to be heard. Your advice may or may not be welcome.

## When To Offer Advice?

### 1. When requested

People will ask for your advice, and most of the time, advice is the appropriate response. However, in a coaching situation, sometimes even when asked, you may want to engage the other in further inquiry and dialogue, rather than simply offering your opinion. People are often all too eager to give away their power and responsibility.

### 2. When you've asked

Before freely offering advice, it is usually best to ask permission:

For example:

*"Would it be O.K. if I offered an opinion on this?"*

*"Would you like to hear my take on this?"*

With an invitation, your advice is more likely to be received well.

Of course it's useful to keep in mind:

*"Most people who ask for advice from others  
have already resolved to act as it pleases them."*

– Khalil Gibran

### 3. When you bear responsibility for their choices

When you are someone's manager, there are times to be a coach and other times to exercise your authority. There will undoubtedly be those occasions when you will need to give your employee unsolicited advice, as well as times you will simply need to tell them what to do.

### 4. When there is a real threat to a person's well-being

You may find yourself in situations where you believe someone's health, relationships, social capital, job, etc. is at risk. Unsolicited advice in these situations as a kind of mini-intervention may be warranted.

### 5. When you have specific knowledge or information that the other does not possess

There are often occasions where we have actual knowledge needed by the other (vs. "superior" experience or judgment). For example: technical expertise, information about a particular situation or person, etc.

When someone asks you, *"How do I use this new software?"* don't respond with, *"I hear you saying you want me to help you use the software."*

If you know how, show them.

## Advising Vs. Telling People What To Do

At the right moment, it can be skillful to use your own knowledge and experience to offer such things as:

- *possible* options your client might not have thought of
- opinions about a situation
- feedback about how the person is relating to their situation
- what you have seen in other situations like the one they are facing
- your wishes and your concerns for them

But in the end, the actual choices of what to do should always be theirs. You may advise, but be very wary of telling people what to do (except in a supervisory relationship, and even then, use this power sparingly). It's their life, and their commitment and energy that determines the success of a choice.

## When You Do Advise

### 1. Check the person's receptivity.

Do you either have their permission or have a good sense that your input will be welcome? Also consider the timing. For example, people typically want to be heard before they want to receive input.

### 2. Come from a sincere desire to be helpful.

Check your state of being and motivation. Be mindful that your impulse to advise is not coming from impatience, your own agendas or interests at play, lack of trust or respect, your own need to look smart or be helpful, or your being triggered by the person or their situation. Your energy and non-verbals will have more impact than your words of advice.

### 1. Be spacious.

Offer the gift of your reflections in ways that leave the other free to accept or reject. If you have positional power over this person, be clear whether you are actually advising or telling them what to do.

### 2. Be humble.

You don't really know. Make sure your opinions are communicated as simply your opinions, not The Truth.

Offering advice has a place in coaching others, but in moderation. We want to be judicious in its use and skillful in its delivery.