



Article

# When and how to give advice

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## When and how to give advice

One of the myths of coaching and mentoring is that coaches don't give advice, while mentors do. The reality is that there are many situations where both should and do give advice – for example, if the learner is at risk. However, effective developmental coaches and mentors are careful to choose the appropriate situations for advising and the appropriate timing within a learning conversation for advising.

Advising a mentee on what to do or how to approach an issue has a number of benefits. It focuses their mind on what is important (at least from the mentor's perspective). It is a lot quicker than helping them work it out for themselves. And it allows the mentee to tap into the mentor's experience with relatively high efficiency.

However, advising also has a number of significant disadvantages. When people work through an issue to develop their own solutions, they:

- Tend to be more committed to following them through
- Are more likely to sort similar issues out for themselves
- Take greater personal responsibility for the outcomes.

Keeping in mind the analogy of teaching someone to fish, rather than giving them a fish, mentoring has greatest impact when advising is kept to a minimum.

**Guiding** is a middle path, which the less experienced mentor can use safely in some circumstances. Guiding involves:

- Using your own experience and knowledge to ask questions, which help the mentee follow a similar path of reasoning to your own
- Only suggesting solutions with the mentee's permission - asking them first if that is what they need.

The danger with guiding, however, is that a solution that works for one particular mentor may not work for someone else. A critical question to keep in mind, therefore, is *How relevant is my experience and opinion in this situation?* If in any doubt, fall back to a non-directive, questioning style.

### When to advise and when not to advise

The decision on when to advise, guide or ask good questions depends on three factors:

#### 1. What is the situation?

There are times when immediate, directive advice giving is important. For example, if someone is about to make a serious or hazardous mistake, the mentor has a duty to warn them of outcomes they may not have foreseen. However, the conscientious mentor will always look for an early subsequent opportunity to revisit the issue, to review it and help the learner draw out lasting lessons from it.

Sponsorship mentoring relies on advising and guiding; developmental mentoring

makes very little use of these. Developmental mentors ensure that both they and the mentee fully understand the situation in its context, before they even consider advising or guiding. In most cases, through the process of dialogue and reflective space the solutions become obvious to the mentee without the need for advice. If they are still struggling, the mentor may eventually help by guiding, and, if necessary, by advising - but this is the last resort not the first!

An important guideline here is: *Don't expect the mentee always to find their solution within the expected timeframe of the mentor or within the timeframe of the mentoring session. As long as they have a better understanding of the problem, encourage them to reflect on it for a period (a few hours, days or even weeks); then to pick it up again once their own subconscious has had time to work on it.*

## 2. How can the mentor help?

Useful questions here are:

- *How will giving advice or guiding help the mentee now? And when they encounter similar situations in the future?*
- *What is my possible range of helpful responses in this situation?* (Responses include advising, guiding, questioning, simply listening, challenging and so on.)
- *What is my motive for advising or guiding? Is it to make myself look good, or to relieve the internal pressure of having good ideas and wanting to express them?*
- *If I were the mentee, what kind of response would I most value at this point?*

As a mentor it is important to practice pausing before responding to the mentee, for long enough to consider at least some of these questions. This slows down the pace of the dialogue (which will encourage the mentee to reflect) and helps the mentor to be more confident in responding appropriately to the mentee's needs.

## 3. Where does the ownership need to be?

The more the ownership of an issue needs to rest with the mentee, the more important it is that they develop and implement their own advice.

### **Conditions for giving advice**

This useful checklist comes from Jenny Rogers' *Coaching Skills* handbook.

- There are clear right/wrong answers to a question the learner is asking - e.g. on the legal, medical or financial position.
- It is a crisis and needs rapid action.
- The learner's physical, financial or mental well-being will be in danger without having the piece of advice.
- The learner is not in a position to make their own decisions.
- You are offering facts, not opinions.
- The learner has specifically asked for information and has made it clear that they will make up their own mind on how to use it.
- You offer your contribution as information, making it clear that the learner has

to make up their mind about using it to make a decision and positively inviting the learner to comment: "These are the facts as I see them, but what do you think?"

- You encourage the learner to check it out with other experts.
- The subject is genuinely bewildering and the learner needs expert guidance to be able to understand it. You have unquestionable expertise, rather than just another personal opinion, in the area on which the learner is seeking advice.
- Giving the advice is unlikely to create dependency, to humiliate or to encourage unwise optimism.
- Your own motivation does not include any of the following:
  - a wish to impress and show off
  - wanting to control
  - being too lazy to use coaching techniques
  - feeling a need to pay the learner back for some slight.

### **Ground rules for giving advice**

- Start with the assumption that the mentee needs to listen to their inner voice of advice first
- Ask permission to advise, if they clearly do need the benefit of your experience and judgement
- Consider *why* you want to advise. Is your intention to help the mentee find a solution or because you believe you know the answer?
- Be precise about what you are advising. Differentiate between the specific (eg "I wouldn't put that into the public domain") and the broad (eg "There can be real dangers in...")
- Listen to yourself as you give advice
- Keep it short and to the point
- Make it clear that your advice is offered as a means of initiating a deeper dialogue, rather than as a means of closing down the conversation
- Having given advice, spend time helping the mentee think how they will adapt and merge it with their own experience and judgement.

### **Structuring advice**

Explain *why* you are advising

Explain the *source* of your advice (e.g. personal experience, personal observation, instinctive reaction, third party data, research)

Succinctly give the advice

Check it has been understood in the way you intended

Check that the mentee is finding the advice relevant and useful

Review with the mentee how they will assimilate the advice in their own way; encourage them to do so