

Forbes

How to Give Advice That's Valued



Illustration by Pablo E. Fabisch

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When Odysseus went off to fight the Trojan War, as reported by Homer in *The Odyssey*, he left behind his wet-behind-the-ears son, destined to be heir to his throne. Concerned about who would give his son “kinging skills,” he chose an old family friend, Mentor, to be Telemachus’ teacher. Mentor was known for his wisdom and trust-building sensitivity. It is the origin of our word for a master teacher and trusted [advisor](#).

Conveying wise words in a manner that they are heard, internalized, and put into practice is a challenge for all mentors. Mentors provide feedback, give encouragement, ask great questions, and engage in thought-provoking discussions. And sometimes they attempt the most anxiety-inducing activity: advice-giving. Recall the last time someone said to

you, “Let me give you a little advice!” Was your mental response, “bring it on,” or was it a bit more defensive?

Psychologists remind us that we all have authority hang-ups of varying severity. The protégé’s built-in resistance to advice can create a challenge in teaching lessons that increase competence and/or improve performance. And for advice-giving to work, you must be ready for your protégé to choose *not* to take it. It is what makes advice-giving different than simply giving a directive. Pay attention to the sequence of the following four steps; it is crucial to your success.

Step 1: Start with the “Why” of Advice Giving



Begin your advice-giving by letting your protégé know the focus or intent of your wisdom. Suppose you’re offering advice about improving the performance of a skill. You might say, “Jane, I wanted to talk with you about the fact that, although your call rate is up, your sales are down twenty percent.” For advice-giving to work, you must be clear in your rationale. Ambiguity clouds the conversation and risks leaving your protégé more confused than enlightened. Being clear up front about the purpose of your advice can help focus your thoughts into laser-like counsel.

Step 2: Get Agreement on the Focus

If what seems to you a performance challenge is seen by your protégé as something completely different, your advice will be viewed as overcontrolling or smothering. Make sure your protégé is as eager to improve as you are to see improvement. You may learn your protégé has already determined what to do and has little need for your advice. Your goal is to hear your protégé respond with something like, “Yes, I’ve been concerned about that as well.” What do you do if you think there is something the protégé needs to learn but the protégé is unwilling? Many lessons get “taught” (but not learned) under this exact scenario. As Abraham Lincoln said, “A person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” Have patience and find a more fruitful teachable moment.

Step 3: Ask Permission to Give Advice

This is the most important step. Your goal at this point is twofold: (1) to communicate advice without causing protégé resistance, and (2) to keep [ownership](#) of the challenge with your protégé. This does not mean asking, “May I have your permission to...?” Rather, you might say something like, “I have some ideas on how you might improve if that would be helpful to you.” You might be thinking at this point, “What fool tells their mentor they are uninterested?” The essence of resistance is [control](#). Few of us are thrilled at being told what to do. By keeping ownership with the protégé, you eliminate the perception of being controlled.



Step 4: State Advice in First Person Singular

Phrases like “you ought to” quickly foster resistance. By keeping your advice in the first-person singular — “What *I* have found helpful” or “What has worked for *me*” — helps eliminate the shoulds and ought-tos. First person singular helps your protégé hear your advice unencumbered by defensiveness or resistance. Remember, the goal is not to convey your wisdom; it is the valuable outcome of your protégé’s improved performance or increased competence.

Giving advice is a bit like playing a pinball machine: you must push and pull the machine to get the ball to go in the preferred direction if you want to raise your score. However, if you push and pull too much, the pinball machine flashes “tilt,” and the game is over. Effective mentors recognize the challenge of “teaching to create change” and meet that challenge by coupling wisdom with encouraging sensitivity. They keep the ball in play as long as they can by the judicious application of pushes and pulls, nudges and bumps, increasing the ultimate score — their protégé’s competence.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. His international bestselling book, *Managers as Mentors* won an Athena Award and has been translated into numerous languages. He is also a senior advisor with On3.ai, a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field-based learning programs, as well as an instructor with MyFuel.io. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.