How to Give Advice

By David H. Maister

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Many professionals approach the task of giving advice as if it were an objective, rational exercise based on their technical knowledge and expertise. Alas, giving advice is almost never an exclusively logical process. Rather, it is almost always an emotional "duet" played out between the advice giver and the client.

If you can't learn to recognize, deal with and respond to client emotions, you will never be an effective advisor.

Early in my career, the management team of a large professional firm asked my opinion about how they were conducting their affairs. I responded with a very direct and candid answer. "Here are the things you are messing up," I said, "and this is what you should have been doing!"

To my surprise, I was fired for being a disruptive influence. This was hard for me to understand because I knew (and they knew) that I was correct in my diagnosis and prescriptions.

Eventually I learned the obvious lesson. It is not enough for a professional to be *right*: An advisor's job is to be *helpful*.

Among other things, I had to develop the skill of telling clients they were wrong in such a way that they would thank me for giving helpful advice! I had to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable.

Proving to someone that they are wrong may be intellectually correct (and let's be honest, occasionally fun), but it is not particularly productive for either the client or the advisor.

Criticizing one's clients is, by definition, a part of *every* professional's job. However, suggestions for improvement always carry the implied critique that all is not being done well at the moment, and it is usually the person hiring you who is responsible for the current state of affairs.

Lawyers are usually retained by the in-house general counsel, accountants by the chief financial officer, marketing and communications consultants by the vice president of marketing and actuaries by the head of human resources or the pensions officer. More often than not, the person hiring you is a key player in the issues you are being asked to address. The advisor therefore needs to tread carefully!

Because of this, the diagnosis and solution of a client's problem can never be performed without considering the sensitivities, emotions and politics of the client situation. No matter how technical one's field or discipline, the act of giving advice is crucially dependent on a deep understanding of the personalities involved and on the ability to adapt the advice-giving process to the specific individuals involved.

The Client's Perspective

To understand some of the emotions surrounding the client's use of professionals, think of the personal risks (reputation, promotion opportunities, bonuses, perhaps even one's career) that go along with the responsibility for choosing (and working with) any outside provider for a risky or expensive corporate matter. How would you like to be known by the board as the person to blame if the corporate headquarters designed by the architect you chose doesn't work out? If the major lawsuit is lost? If the new marketing campaign fails to deliver the goods?

Viewed in this light, the client has every right to enter the process of using an outsider in a high state of anxiety. What's worse, the client's inevitable caution and trepidation are reinforced by the fact that outside professionals often see complications in a project that the client doesn't see.

In fact, it is an essential part of the professional's craft to reveal nuances, problems, barriers and issues that the client is unaware of. If these are not conveyed with tact and skill, the client could easily believe (however unfairly) that, rather than relieving fears and being helpful, the professional is creating complications.

There are other emotional issues usually present. In the normal course of their business lives, client executives are people of accomplishment, authority and respect within their organization. When hiring an advisor, they are forced to place their affairs for an uncertain period of time (and cost) into the hands of a practitioner of an impenetrable art, who often uses indecipherable jargon and engages in mysterious and unexplained (but probably expensive) activities. It is predictable that the average client experiences unwelcome feelings of dependency or loss of control.

What clients really want is someone who will take away their worries and absorb all their hassles. Yet all too often, they encounter professionals who add to their worries and create extra headaches, forcing them to confront things they would prefer to ignore. ("Doctor, I came to you about my sore feet, and you are giving me grief about my weight. Can't you just treat my feet and leave me alone about my weight?") Since clients are so anxious and uncertain, inevitably they are looking for someone who will provide reassurance, calm their fears and inspire confidence.

It can take some time for many professionals to realize that it is a central part of their profession to develop these skills. Certainly no one ever teaches us these skills in our professional training, neither in school nor inside the typical professional firm.

A Chat with Mom or Dad

Essential to being an effective advisor is having a good understanding of one's role. This is illustrated by something a lawyer once told me: "Sometimes I feel like I'm explaining things to a child. My client can't seem to grasp even the basic logic of what I'm trying to convey. I feel like saying, 'Shut up and just accept what I'm telling you—I'm the expert here!'"

What makes this lawyer's comment so understandable is that in almost every advisory relationship, the client is usually untrained in the professional's specialty, while the professional may have seen the client's problem (or variants of it) many times before. There is thus an almost natural tendency to come across to the client as patronizing, pompous and arrogant.

While it is understandable why advisors can feel this way, it is equally clear why clients resent it. After all, when I'm the client, I'm the one in charge. If I don't understand what you are saying, then maybe the problem is you, not me.

Maybe you don't know how to convey what you know and understand to a lay person. Of course I don't know your field; that's why I hired you! Explain it to me in language I can understand. Help me get it! Your job is not just to pitch solutions at me, but to help me understand why your recommended course of action makes sense. Give me reasons, not just instructions!

Although advising clients sometimes feels like explaining things to a child, the secret to becoming a good advisor is to do exactly the opposite: Act as if you were trying to advise your mother or father.

If you are going to convince Mom or Dad to do something, you are more likely to find the right words to convey your point so that it comes across with immense amounts of respect, so that the implied critique is softened as much as possible.

This doesn't mean avoiding the issue or rolling over and playing dead to whatever they say. It may be that what they are doing is disrupting the rest of the family or that it goes against their own interests. You need to get your point across. Nevertheless, you must enter the encounter with the right attitude and with careful attention to phrasing.

When talking to a family member or a client, a primary task is to diffuse defensiveness (which, it should be noted, is always present). If you are to influence a parent, you must find a way to prove that you are trying to help and that you are not just being critical.

As one thinks about advising a parent, it should be readily apparent that you don't just tell Mom or Dad what to do (even if they ask you directly). Instead, you focus less on the advice (or conclusion) itself and more on creating a dialogue or conversation that would help them see the issue from a new perspective. "You've every right to do that, Dad, but sister has a few extra burdens because of what's happening. Can you help ease the pressure on her? Is there anything we can do to help her?"

A corporate equivalent to this might be, "That's a sensible decision, but if we take that path the dealers would probably be very unhappy—and we need their cooperation in order to succeed. Is there some way to modify the plan so that we can keep them enthusiastically supporting the new plan?"

Finding the Right Words

Excellence in giving advice requires not only the right attitude but a careful attention to language. There are always a number of ways of expressing the same thought, each of which differs in how it is received by the listener. Saying, "You've got to do X," even when you're correct, is very likely to evoke emotional resistance—no one likes to be told that they've got to do anything (even when they must).

It is usually better to say something like this: "Let's go through the options together. These are the ones I see. Can you think of anything else we should consider? Now let's go through the pros and cons of each course of action. Based on these pros and cons, action X seems the most likely to work, doesn't it? Or can you think of a better solution?"

If the client doesn't want to do X, the conversation is still alive. If you've said "You've got to do X," and the client says, "No, I don't," you've nowhere to go. Your effectiveness as an advisor has just been lost, and you have placed yourself and the client on opposite sides. The odds are that what will follow will be an argument, not a discussion.

Numerous other examples of "hard" and "soft" phrasing can be given. For example, take something as simple as "What are your problems?" Seemingly a simple question, this can easily be taken as challenging. A good substitute might be, "What is most in need of improvement?"

As a quick rule of thumb, it is usually better to try to turn one's assertions into questions. Instead of saying, "This is the best solution," try the following: "My other clients usually do X for the following reasons. Do you think that reasoning applies here?"

Many years ago, when I taught mathematical statistics, I would stand at the front of the class writing the mathematics on the blackboard. Pausing from time to time, I would ask my students, "Did everyone understand that?"

There would usually be silence in the room. I therefore assumed I was doing just fine as a teacher. However, at examination time everybody failed the exam. I had failed as a teacher! I was frustrated because (in language I would use today) I thought I had created many opportunities to check for my clients' (my students') understanding.

A colleague pointed out that my attitude was fine but my skills were weak. By asking, "Did you understand that?" I was creating an atmosphere where a student would have to confess weakness if they said, "No." My friend recommended that I change my language to, "Have I made myself clear here?"

Phrased that way, it was easier for someone to say, "No, you haven't." Even if this was more challenging to my ego, it helped me to ensure that my points were being understood. Another way to deal with this situation would be to ask, "Would you like to stay on this point or move on to the next topic?" This is a neutral way of letting the student/ client express confusion about a topic (or lack of acceptance) without threatening their ego or embarrassing them.

What all this shows is that we aren't always aware of how we are coming across in our conversations with clients. We know what we intend to convey, but we do not always know how we are being received.

One device to help in this skill-building process is to rehearse a client conversation on videotape, with a friend or colleague playing the role of the client. I have learned that the simple act of watching oneself in conversation immediately reveals opportunities to phrase things differently to avoid the perception of being pompous, assertive, threatening or unclear.

One doesn't need an expert in communications to help you debrief the experience—when we listen or see ourselves on tape, the areas for improvement are usually blatantly clear. As the poet Robert Burns noted, it is of great benefit "to see ourselves as others see us."

A Teacher's Skills

In many ways counseling skills are similar to those of great teaching. A teacher's task is to help a student get from point A (what they know, understand and believe now) to point B (an advanced state of deeper understanding and knowledge). It represents poor teaching for the professor to stand at the front of the class and say, "B is the right answer!" (As the old joke goes, a lecture is the fastest means known for getting ideas from the notes of the teacher into the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either.)

A teacher needs two skills to be really effective. First, the teacher must have a good understanding of point A—the point at which the student/client is starting from. What does he or she understand now? What do they believe, and why do they believe it? What are they doing now, and why are they doing it that way?

This understanding of one's student/client can only come from doing a lot of questioning and listening while saving one's reactions until later in the teaching (or advisory) process.

Having understood point A, the teacher/advisor cannot jump straight into a discussion of point B, the end point. The second required skill is to develop a step-by-step reasoning process that takes the student/client on a journey of discovery.

The goal is to influence their understanding so that, eventually, the student/client says, "You know, on reflection I think that B is a better answer!" The teacher/advisor can then respond, "OK, that's what we'll do!"

This process is, of course, usually termed Socratic teaching. It is generally accomplished by using the following types of questions:

•*Why do you think we have this problem?*

•*What options do we have for doing things differently?*

•*What advantages do you foresee in using the different options?*

•*How do you think the relevant players will react if we do that?*

•*How do you suggest we deal with the following adverse consequences of such an action?*

•*Many other people encounter the following difficulties when they try that. What can we do to prevent such things from occurring?*

•*What benefits might result if we tried the following approach?*

Socratic reasoning does take a great deal of patience. It is normal for the teacher to feel an almost overwhelming temptation to scream out, "But the answer is clear—we should do B! Listen to me!" This would be an entirely intellectually correct answer but a complete failure in advice-giving.

Dealing with Client Politics

Among other things, effective advice-giving requires an ability to suppress one's own ego and emotional needs. The most effective way to win influence over a client is to make the client think that the solution was his or her idea, or at the very least his or her decision.

One way to do this is to help the client understand all the available options by conducting a thorough exploration of advantages, disadvantages, risks and costs. You can then gently guide the client to the preferred solution. Notice that this usually means avoiding the temptation to take a stand yourself early in the process.

An advisor's role is to be an expert guide in the process of reasoning through the problem. Your ability to be accepted as a trustworthy guide can be damaged if your client believes that you have already reached your own inflexible conclusion.

The advisor's role as a guide through the reasoning process becomes even more critical when dealing with committees, groups or other situations where more than one person is involved in the decision. In such situations, one must learn how to assist one's client by building consensus among the client personnel.

Rarely does an advisor have only one person as the client. Even if you are reporting to the CEO, it is usually the case that others must be "won over" in order for any action to take place. Even powerful decision makers such as CEOs tend to involve their CFO, their general counsel or other corporate officers before a final decision is reached.

Not surprisingly, since they represent different corporate constituencies, each of these other players brings a different perspective to the problem you have been asked to help with. It follows that client politics are unavoidable in any advisory situation. If you can't deal with client politics, you cannot be an effective advisor.

Accordingly, all advisors must learn the skills and methodologies for bringing the different players "on board." For example, in many (if not most) advisory situations, clients schedule meetings that involve a number of important players, each (usually) with his or her own agenda. Some advisors show up at these meetings and try to facilitate the session by dealing with the different interests, agendas and perspectives in "real time." In reality, few professionals are skilled enough or fast enough on their feet to deal with the many objections and concerns that surface during such meetings.

However, if you are diligent about finding out who is going to be at the meeting, and disciplined enough to call each of them one at a time, in advance, you could then ask each person to share their take on the issues, their concerns, objectives and so on. Prepared in this way, it will be easier to plan and run the subsequent meeting(s) and to help bring the group to consensus. Even though the individual agendas will not always be reconciled, it is likely that significantly more progress in decision making will be made.

It is tempting (and probably true) to think that conflicting agendas, priorities and goals are the clients' fault, not yours. However, unless you can develop the approaches and skills necessary to deal with these, your advice will not be acted upon, and you will not be seen as a helpful, useful advisor.

Customizing Your Approach

While I have tried to shed a little light on the principles involved in advising clients and tried to provide a few specific "how-tos," the fact remains that advice-giving is an art, not a science.

There are few books (if any) that provide a road map for learning these crucial skills, and (to my knowledge) no training programs are available in the public domain, except perhaps for Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and*

Influence People. (I would be delighted to learn of anything that does exist, as well as additional "tips" that experienced counselors have learned or developed—phone, fax or email them to me!)

Most of us have to learn these skills by trial and error as our career progresses. While I have hopes that one day a book and training program will appear, the odds are that advice-giving will remain an art. Individual tips and tactics are helpful, but to apply any of them unthinkingly across the board with all clients would be a huge mistake.

The essence of advice-giving is the ability to design a process and means of interacting that fit each unique client situation. I can imagine (and, in fact, have encountered) clients who have little tolerance for Socratic reasoning and say, "Cut the crap; just tell me what you think." If that's what works for that client, that's what I'll do.

However, the burden is still on me to quickly understand each individual client's preferred style of interaction and to be sufficiently flexible to deal with the client in a manner that they find most comfortable and effective. The one thing I must not do is commit myself to a single consultative style and say, "Well, that's my style; the clients can take it or leave it."

Now that really would be pompous, patronizing and arrogant!

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