

How to Give Effective Advice: 7 Concepts for Managers

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In a nutshell: Never give advice. Instead, guide your employee to tell you what their answer is.

If you're a manager or in a position of authority, how do you make sure that your coaching moments are effective? First, you need to realize that "coaching" is not about you – but about the employee. As a coach, remember that your primary goal is NOT to offer advice or solve your employees' problems. **Your goal is to listen more than speak or offer advice.** The worst thing for a leader is a group of employees who can't function on their own or run to ask advice every time they end up stuck.

Key Concept #1: Aim to Coach an Employee for No More than Ten Minutes in an Informal Setting

Effective coaching is about empowering a team and improving its long-term performance. The goal of coaching sessions is to have had a positive effect on work performance. You are guiding your employees toward self-sufficiency. Limiting your involvement effectively prevents you from being buried or "burned out" by an employee's issues and reconnects you and your team to the work that matters most.

Key Concept #2: Use Structured Questions to Initiate and Maintain Constructive Conversations

A lot of managers "coach" by feigning interest and nodding meaningfully as an employee talks. Such behavior isn't productive for either side. To coach effectively, you need a conversational structure that you can follow.

Begin the conversation by asking the *Starting Question*, "What's on your mind?". This helps to either start the conversation or bring it back on track. After you've listened carefully to what your employee has to say, move to the *Follow-Up Question*: "And what else?" The follow-up question prevents a conversation from becoming stuck on a single topic when it's clear there's more that your employee wants to say, but perhaps can't find a way.

If the conversation isn't focused and the employee is starting to talk endlessly, gently interrupt and switch to the *Focus Question*: "What's the real challenge here for you?" When an employee starts to lose their train of thought or if you're having a hard time following, that's a good time to use the *Focus Question*. For example, while an employee might want to vent about problems, it won't solve anything. The *Focus Question* helps you narrow down the problem so you can tackle it together.

But what if the problem is unsolvable? You can't fix your employees' domestic, financial or emotional issues. Part of the trick is to remember that **your goal is not to solve their problems for them.** Instead, remember Key Concept #3.

Key Concept #3: Identify their True Needs and Wants

You can do this by using the *Solution Question*: "So what are you going to do?" to get to the heart of the matter. If they respond helplessly with, "I don't know" or have a defeatist attitude, tighten-up your question by further asking, "What do you want?" and "How can you best go about doing that?" to get to the heart of the matter. If they end up stuck in a loop of despair, repeat the *Solution Question* process by modifying it with, "It sounds like this problem isn't likely to change. So what are you going to do instead?"

Scientists say that people are driven by nine major wants and needs: Affection, creation, recreation, freedom, identity, understanding, participation, protection and subsistence. The *Solution Question* helps you figure out which of these wants or needs is motivating your employee. Does your employee want you to understand that they need to get home early? Do they want to participate in a project more? Do they need more freedom to explore an idea?

Another important tool in ascertaining the needs and wants of an employee is the *Lazy Question*: "How can I help you?" This works best when an employee has nothing to offer but complaints about a situation. The *Lazy Question* sets up a positive coaching moment. Asking this question helps you check if an employee is asking you for something or just wants

to let off steam. It also reminds you that it's not up to you to solve their problem for them. Instead, it clarifies the issue by pushing your employee to get to the point. While it's a direct question, it also will help you earn your employee's respect. When you ask the *Lazy Question*, you show your employee that you want to know what they want. Understanding an employee's wants will set you apart from many other managers who just don't care.

Key Concept #4: Don't Forget Your Role as a Manager

Keep in mind the context of your help: You are a manager. You can't let them skip work shifts, take extra long breaks or give you lackluster performance. That's where clear boundaries are also part of maintaining your identity as a leader by saying, "I can't do that" (and optionally adding, "But here's what I can do..." if appropriate). In short, it's unwise to say "yes" to every request that comes from your employee. To ensure you give yourself time to think clearly, ask yourself the *Strategic Question*: "If I say 'yes' to this, what am I saying 'no' to?"

Key Concept #5: Reflection is What Makes a Lesson "Click"

In general, people learn when they're able to reflect on new information or processes. To guide your employees toward that "click" moment, use the *Click Question*. At the end of every coaching session, ask your employee: "What was most useful for you?"

Key Concept #6: Know how to ask the questions

A good manager knows how to ask questions. But spouting off a series of questions can easily make an employee feel as if they're being interviewed or even interrogated. As a manager, you don't want to make your employees feel uncomfortable. So put an employee at ease by asking one question at a time. Don't beat around the bush, however. Skip the small talk and cut to your first question; it saves both of you time.

Ask "what" questions instead of "why" questions. Don't make the employee feel like they need to be on the defensive with a question like, "Why did you do that?" Ask instead, "What's on your mind?"

It's also important to avoid asking rhetorical questions. Questions that start with, "Did you consider...?" or "Have you thought about...?" aren't genuine questions. They're advice with a question mark at the end!

Make sure you listen to your employees, too. Don't be afraid of silence. Silence tends to make people uncomfortable, but it's an asset in coaching sessions. When you're silent after you ask a question, you give your employee time to think about what they want to say. Silent moments can last up to 10-15 seconds and can drive you crazy at first. But they maintain the structure of, "I talk, then you answer" so that the employee is a participant in the discussion rather than a passive observer.

And when an employee gives you an answer, nod or summarize their thoughts to show that you've understood. Doing so shows that you care and encourages the employee to share more.

Key Concept #7: Develop your new coaching habits

To develop these new habits, you need to put these concepts into practice. Outline an action plan to fall back on when you slip up. Everyone makes mistakes, so you just need to figure out how to get back on track. Importantly, write down your action plan. For example, your plan could read, "The next time John stops me in the hallway with a question, I'll ask a coaching question instead of giving advice."

Your mini-habits are the Seven Concepts you've learned in this summary. Practice them as often as possible. That's your training!

Adapted from *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever*, by Michael Bungay Stanier