



Unsolicited advice KILLS influence

Earlier this week I caught myself giving unsolicited advice to my friend Tracy. She outlined a situation she was facing. Wanting to be the helpful friend, I “generously” gave her some ideas describing exactly what I thought she should do. Tracy didn’t *ask* me for my input and I didn’t ask if she wanted it. I simply launched into problem-solving mode. Sound familiar?

It didn’t appear to bother Tracy (or maybe I would have stopped—and that’s a big maybe) but, when I thought of it later, my actions bothered the heck out of *me*!

I truly believe what my mentor, Esther Hicks, teaches, “An answer to a question no one asked is a wasted answer.” Those of our friends who are polite simply act interested and continue to do whatever they want. Our annoyed friends hear in their heads, “Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” endure our advice, roll their eyes when they walk away, and then do whatever *they* want. Either way, our good ideas fell on deaf ears.

And yet there I was, once again—NOT practicing what I preach!



Giving unsolicited advice or input has become such a part of our culture. Many of you have confessed to me an underlying fear that you might run out of things to talk about without it. Like the eager student who is thrilled when they know the answer, we want to be the one called on by the teacher. Except, when I gave Tracy *the answer*, I hadn’t been called on; I was that annoying “know it all” who blurts it out without being chosen.

The following is an exercise I use in some of my workshops that illustrates this beautifully.

The assignment is:

Pick a partner. Designate Person A and Person B.

Person A, you’re going to tell Person B a problem you’re having. Real or invented, it must be at least a little “juicy.” A chronic hangnail, for example, is too minor, although we all know people who could make even *that* a two-hour problem-solving fest. Make it a problem another person would understand and want to weigh in on; a problem they would *know* they could solve.

B's, your job is to hear A's problem, ask open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no") and then truly listen. **You are not allowed to try and solve A's problem.** You are not to offer potential solutions. And don't try to give "hidden" answers in your question: "Have you tried _____?" (We think we're very clever, don't we?)

Every time I use this exercise, I am told, during the debriefing, how difficult it was *not* to solve the problem for the other person. This is true whether I am working with hourly personnel or executives. Many who pride themselves on having exceptional leadership skills actually have good command skills. They are not the same thing.

Men and women have difficulty with it for different reasons but the end result is the same. Men seem to be hard-wired to launch into "fix" mode whenever they hear a problem. It would be unusual for one man to say to another, for example, "I want to tell you a problem I'm having and I don't want your advice; I just want you to listen." The knee-jerk response of the recipient of this would be, "Then why even tell me?"

On the other hand, we women have been raised with mothers and other female authority figures who modeled for us a role of being helpful, the female version of "fix it." We assume we are *supposed* to help friends solve problems.

Start paying attention to how often you answer questions no one asked, how quickly you dive into "fix it" mode. For most of us, the intention is good—to help—but think about how much you enjoy having someone help you in this way when you didn't ask!

Next week, if you want my advice (tongue in cheek), I'll describe what you may want to do instead of giving advice.