



## What to Do Instead of Offering Advice

Whether trying to be a leader, or simply a friend, offering unsolicited advice rarely works. When we try, it falls on deaf ears. That's the best-case scenario. The worst-case scenario is that it triggers anger or resentment from the recipient of our brilliant solutions.

So what do you do if you want to help?

This is where the act of asking clarifying questions comes in.



When you ask clarifying questions, you are giving the other person an opportunity to think things through, perhaps uncovering an idea that hadn't previously occurred to him. This is something at which good coaches excel.

Let's face it, when faced with a stressful dilemma, we don't always do our best thinking.

So what kinds of questions do you ask? To answer that very good question, let's return to what we all learned in English class about writing good stories.

### English 101: Remember the “four W’s and an H”?

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY & HOW

These five words are all excellent beginnings for questions because they cannot be answered “yes” or “no.” Answering them requires some consideration.

Let's say a co-worker comes to you really upset because the boss gave her negative feedback about a project. You truly want to lend support and your natural inclination is to give her reassuring advice like, “This is only one project; don't take it so hard,” or “Consider the source; the boss is always negative.” Neither of these statements really helps your colleague to work through the issue.

Instead, you might ask questions like:

- ***How do you think you did on the project?*** You may hear something like, “Well, it wasn't my best work, I have to admit that,” or “I thought it was perfectly fine.” Either way, you're getting her to consider her role in the matter.
- ***Why do you think the boss was so upset?*** This gives her an opportunity to consider the situation from another viewpoint. Oftentimes, when we take the spotlight off our feelings we can begin to appreciate the reasoning behind the other person's actions.

- ***What can you do about it?*** The answer might be, “Nothing,” and, once she realizes that, she can begin to move on. Or she might see a way to take some action that will help to mitigate the impact of her unacceptable performance. Your friend may be upset because she’s afraid and *action cancels fear—every time*.
- ***How can I support you?*** She might answer, “There’s really nothing you can do. I just wanted to vent” or “You’ve already helped me think this through. Are there any other things I should consider?” Again, you are supporting her in developing her own solution. Bravo!

The important thing to remember is NOT to try and cleverly hide your advice within a question. Suggesting a solution by asking, “Who do you think could put in a good word for you?” is just your sly way of giving your opinion. Curb your urge to do this. (It’s SO hard!) First of all, it might not be the greatest suggestion (what?!?!?) and secondly, it may fall on deaf ears. Finally, if she *does* take your suggestion and it makes things worse, who do you think she’s going to blame?

You’re trying to support, not do it *for* the other person. The best way to do that is to help them explore for themselves what the best course of action might be. This is Leadership 101 and an excellent way to practice your leadership skills.

I am eager to hear your experiences with this. Where have you given advice that helped, and when did it backfire? Have you used clarifying questions, and how has that worked?