

Forward Motion Coaching Newsletter

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The Best Advice

*"I owe my success to having listened respectfully to the very best advice,
and then going away and doing the exact opposite."*

-- Gilbert K. Chesterton

Chesterton's words are worth remembering the next time the phrase "here's what you should do" begins a path across your lips. Although usually given with the best intentions, advice always reflects the needs, experiences, and now science tells us, the thought process, of the giver. More often than not, the needs of giver and receiver don't match, creating frustration all around.

Counter-intuitive though it may sound, resisting the urge to give advice to colleagues (and to seek it when you're feeling uncertain) can actually improve productivity. Some well-chosen questions, directed along the lines of finding a solution, can inspire creative insights that the logical analysis of a problem can't.

Sound simplistic? Socratic-like questioning has long been used to help people think outside the box. Now, new research into brain functioning is validating the efficacy of guiding people to find their own solutions. Scientists have discovered that every person's brain processes information in a unique way, so the connections that yours makes to solve a problem will be completely different from those of another person wrestling with the same dilemma.¹ In addition, when the mind is focused on reaching a desired outcome, the brain connects data in a brand new way, which creates "aha!" moments.²

One practical way to apply these principles is to ask people open-ended questions (ones that can't be answered with a "yes" or a "no") instead of explaining how you would address an issue. Notice the difference between saying, "You should categorize your emails and respond to them only at 9:00am and 3:00pm," and asking questions like, "*Where do you need help prioritizing? What needs to change so that you can get projects done on time?*" While the chance of someone adopting the email schedule is slim, the open-ended queries focuses the person's thinking on finding solutions that make sense to him or her.

As a manager, there are times when your suggestions are needed and appropriate, and open-ended questions can be useful in these cases as well. While coaching an overwhelmed entrepreneur, for instance, I posed queries like, "*What tasks can you delegate? How valuable would it be to make a list of priorities for the week?*" It's a sure bet that if I had said, "You should delegate more and write down your priorities," the reply would have been all of the reasons those ideas wouldn't work!

May's Coaching Challenge: Whether you are managing your own business, business unit, department, or work team, try using open-ended questions to get colleagues and staff members "thinking different." If someone comes to you in a quandary, ask how you can help them think the matter through instead of jumping in with a fix. People are much more likely to follow through on ideas that they come up with, and you may be amazed at the results you get from using this one simple technique.

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