

talking truly from conflict to connection

The 'fix-it' trap

How to avoid it when people ask for advice

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It can be very flattering when people ask for advice – but do they really want it?

There is an alternative way of responding that is likely to be more helpful, satisfying – and precious – to both parties.





How to avoid the ‘fix-it’ trap when people ask for advice

The trap

When people ask for your advice, do they really want it? And if they don't, what can you offer instead? For example:

Distraught daughter (whose ‘A’ level results are lower than expected) “Mum... what am I going to do?”

Sorrowful son (whose girlfriend of two months standing is going home to Australia and wants him to go with her) “Do you think I should go?”

Frantic friend (in deep distress over an incident at work) “I feel so helpless. What would you do if you were me?”

You feel for your daughter, your son and your friend. You desperately want to make things better for them and help them get out of their stuck place.

As a parent, you can see things dispassionately – right? You can take the long view. After all, you’ve weathered similar crises yourself.

The ‘fix-it’ response is easily triggered – but it isn’t always helpful

As for your friend... well... you’ve got just the right sort of experience to be able to make some helpful suggestions.

So why not offer advice?

OK. There will be some instances when someone really does want some specific advice.

But hang on a minute. Let’s just check something.

Might you be assuming that:

1. your daughter, son and friend genuinely do not know what to do?
2. they are asking for your advice so that they can act on it?
3. you can offer ideas and suggestions that they have not thought of?

Whether or not these assumptions are true is not the point here. What matters is their power to trigger the ‘fix-it’ response. With the best of intentions – and a desire to make things better for people – you accept the invitation to give advice. But it’s given in the spirit of ‘this is what I think you should do.’

Give someone the experience of being fully heard before you offer advice. ‘Empathy comes before education’

So what is likely to happen next? Your daughter will most probably tell you that to get real. Your son will say you don’t understand and your friend will come up with any number of reasons why your helpful suggestions won’t work.



And where does that leave you? Somewhere on a continuum between mildly frustrated (“Well, you did ask!”) and intensely annoyed (“So why are you asking me for advice when you’re not even prepared to listen!!!?”)

The alternative

Offer your full presence. Listen. Let them know that you can hear their distress – **but don’t try to fix it**. Use all your faculties and intuition to guess at what they might be feeling and needing. That way, they themselves will gradually get clearer about what is facing them and the stories they are telling themselves. They will most probably be able to decide for themselves what they want to do next.

You might not think that you’ve done anything.

In fact, you will have given them a precious gift: **empathy**.

By this time, you will both be clearer about the issues on the table. So what should you do if you still think you have advice to give?

1. Check your motives! Are you offering it because you think the other person **ought** to do what you suggest? Or are you offering it in the spirit of a contribution or gift?

Offer your suggestions without obligation.

2. Explain briefly why you are offering it.

For example:

- *‘I really want people to do what’s best for them.’*
- *‘For the sake of completeness, there’s something I’d like to add.’*

3. Ask if the other person is willing to hear it.

For example:

- *‘I really want people to do what’s best for them – and I’m wondering whether you’ve considered all the options. Would you like to hear a couple of suggestions?’*
- *‘For the sake of completeness, there’s something I’d like to add. Would you be willing to hear it?’*

4. Be prepared to keep quiet if the other person doesn’t want to hear your suggestions.

That way, you avoid the ‘fix-it’ trap.