



INFLUENCE

The Art of Giving and Receiving Advice

by [David A. Garvin](#) and [Joshua D. Margolis](#)

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Seeking and giving advice are central to effective leadership and decision making. Yet managers seldom view them as practical skills they can learn and improve. Receiving guidance is often seen as the passive consumption of wisdom. And advising is typically treated as a matter of “good judgment”—you either have it or you don’t—rather than a competency to be mastered.

When the exchange is done well, people on both sides of the table benefit. Those who are truly open to guidance (and not just looking for validation) develop better solutions to problems than they would have on their own. They add nuance and texture to their thinking—and, research shows, they can overcome cognitive biases, self-serving rationales, and other flaws in their logic. Those who give advice effectively wield soft influence—they shape important decisions while empowering others to act. As engaged listeners, they can also learn a lot from the problems that people bring them. And the rule of reciprocity is a powerful binding force: Providing expert advice often creates an implicit debt that recipients will want to repay.

FURTHER READING

What You Don't Know About Making Decisions

Magazine Article by David A. Garvin and Michael Roberto

Why most leaders get decisions all wrong.

But advice seekers and givers must clear significant hurdles, such as a deeply ingrained tendency to prefer their own opinions, irrespective of their merit, and the fact that careful listening is hard, time-consuming work. The whole interaction is a subtle and intricate art. On both sides it requires emotional intelligence, self-awareness, restraint, diplomacy, and

patience. The process can derail in many ways, and getting it wrong can have damaging consequences—misunderstanding and frustration, decision gridlock, subpar solutions, frayed relationships, and thwarted personal development—with substantial costs to individuals and their organizations.

Because these essential skills are assumed to emerge organically, they're rarely taught; but we've found that they can be learned and applied to great effect. So we've drawn on extensive research (ours and others') to identify the most common obstacles and some practical guidelines for getting past them. Though heavily disguised, the examples in this article are based on interviewees' real experiences in a

range of settings. Of course, advice takes different forms in different circumstances. Coaching and mentoring are covered extensively elsewhere, so here we focus on situations that involve big, risky, or emotionally charged decisions—those in which you might consult with someone multiple times—because leaders struggle with such decisions and must learn to handle them well.

Know What's Called For

By understanding the different types of advice, seekers can make requests with greater precision—and advisers can give more-targeted guidance. We present the types separately here for clarity, but they frequently overlap in practice. For instance, one-off requests for guidance often segue into requests for counsel. And we've included coaching and mentoring, even though they aren't discussed in the article, in order to round out the picture of advice seeking and giving.

TYPE	ACTIVITIES	DESIRED OUTCOMES	EXAMPLES
Discrete advice	Exploring options for a single decision	Recommendations in favor of or against specific options	Which of my managers should I promote? Where should we build the new factory—in China, Brazil, or Eastern Europe?
Counsel	Providing guidance on how to approach a complex or unfamiliar situation	A framework or process for understanding and navigating the situation	How should I approach price negotiations with our overseas supplier? How should I handle my domineering supervisor?
Coaching	Enhancing skills, self-awareness, and self-management	Task proficiency; personal and professional development	How can I run more-effective meetings? How can I work more collaboratively with peers?
Mentoring	Providing opportunities, guidance, and protection to aid career success	A relationship dedicated to building and sustaining professional and personal effectiveness and to career advancement	Should I accept the position in Mumbai? How can I get more exposure for my project?

Why This Is Harder Than It Looks

Whether you're receiving or giving advice, flawed logic and limited information complicate the process. Advice seekers must identify their blind spots, recognize when and how to ask for guidance, draw useful insights from the right people, and overcome an inevitable defensiveness about their own views. Advisers, too, face myriad challenges as they try to interpret messy situations and provide guidance on seemingly intractable problems.

Below we describe the biggest obstacles on both sides. One reason they're so common is that they're basic—people often don't realize they're getting tripped up—so you may find it helpful to do a reality check of your behavior against these lists.

When you're seeking advice, watch for these obstacles:

Thinking you already have the answers.

As people are deciding whether they need help, they often have difficulty assessing their own competence and place too much faith in their intuition. The result is overconfidence and a tendency to default to solo decision making on the basis of prior knowledge and assumptions. A related tendency is to ask for advice when one's real goal is to gain validation or praise. People do this when they strongly believe they've solved the problem but still want to “check the box” with bosses or peers. Or they do it when they have lurking doubts about a solution but dread the time and effort it would take to do better. It's a dangerous game to play—they risk alienating their advisers when it becomes evident (and it will) that they're requesting guidance just for show or to avoid additional work.

Choosing the wrong advisers.

Sometimes knowingly, sometimes not, decision makers stack the deck by turning to like-minded advisers. In a study of CEOs, for example, those at companies with poor financial performance (measured by market-to-book value) were more likely than those at high-performing ones to seek advice from executives in the same industry and with a similar functional background. The result was limited strategic change—less product-market and geographic diversification. What's more, several field studies confirm that advice seekers are more receptive to guidance from friends or other likable people. Though friendship, accessibility, and nonthreatening personalities all impart high levels of comfort and trust, they have no relation to the quality or thoughtfulness of the advice.

Seekers also fail to think creatively enough about the expertise they need—which fields might bring valuable insight, who has solved a similar problem before, whose knowledge is most relevant, whose experience is the best fit—or cast a wide enough net to find it. Unfortunately, to make sense of a messy, volatile world, leaders often shoehorn people into tidy categories that don't reflect their full range of wisdom. That's a mistake President John F. Kennedy made leading up to the Bay of Pigs invasion. He didn't consult Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg for advice, assuming that Goldberg lacked a background in military matters. But as the journalist David Halberstam describes in *The Best and the Brightest*, Goldberg had run guerrilla operations during World War II, so he understood that guerrillas were “no good at all in confronting regular units.” He explained to the president: “Whenever we used them like that, we'd always lose all our people....But you didn't think of that—and you put me in the category of just a Secretary of Labor.”

Defining the problem poorly.

Seekers frequently have trouble reaching a mutual understanding with their advisers—sometimes because of imprecise or ineffective communication, and sometimes because of cognitive or emotional blinders. When communicating

ineffectively, they may tell a lengthy, blow-by-blow story that causes listeners to tune out, lose focus, and perhaps misidentify the core of the problem that needs solving. Or they may omit details that reflect badly on them but are central to seeing the big picture. Many seekers also take for granted background essentials (often about past incidents or organizational politics) that their advisers don't know. Or they may misdefine the problem by placing arbitrary boundaries around it and excluding important data, which skews their own and their advisers' assessments (a pitfall that the decision-making experts Max Bazerman and Dolly Chugh call *bounded awareness*).

Discounting advice.

Once seekers have advice in hand, their most common mistake is to undervalue or dismiss it. This is a strong, recurrent finding in organizational behavior research—so it's pretty safe to assume that you're at least susceptible to this problem. For one thing, "egocentric bias" often clouds seekers' vision—even when people lack expertise, they put more stock in their own opinions than in others' views. For another, seekers understand their own logic but may be unaware of advisers' reasoning. Or they may become so anchored in their preformed judgments that they can't adjust their thinking when they receive feedback to the contrary. Over time, discounting advice can damage important relationships. Advisers notice when they're repeatedly not being heard, and it generates mistrust and ill will.

Advice on Advising

William Lee is one of the foremost intellectual property attorneys in the United States, a former co-managing partner at WilmerHale, and the senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation, Harvard University's governing board, so he gives a lot of advice for a living. Because he's

Individuals in powerful positions are the worst offenders. According to one experimental study, they feel competitive when they receive advice from experts, which inflates their confidence and leads them to dismiss what the experts are telling them. High-power participants in the study ignored almost two-thirds of the

earned a reputation for doing it so skillfully, Garvin and Margolis included him in their research sample for this article. HBR spoke with Lee about his approach to advising and what he's learned with experience.

HBR: How would you describe your advising style?

Lee: I try to understand what the other person faces and provide guidance that makes sense from that perspective. My firm represents large clients such as Apple and Intel, but when we're advising institutions like that, we're also advising individuals who work there. They have the company's best interests in mind, but they have a boss to think about, their own goals, their personal lives, their ups and downs. Our advice has to work for them as well as for the institution. If we have something to say that the client CEO won't want to hear, we take the heat. If we're saying exactly what everyone wants to hear, we let an inside person report that.

How do you approach less formal advising—for instance, when you're mentoring someone?

advice they received. Other participants (the control and low-power groups) ignored advice about half as often.

Misjudging the quality of advice.

Most seekers who accept advice have trouble distinguishing the good from the bad. Research shows that they value advice more if it comes from a confident source, even though confidence doesn't signal validity. Conversely, seekers tend to assume that advice is off-base when it veers from the norm or comes from people with whom they've had frequent discord. (Experimental studies show that neither indicates poor quality.) Seekers also don't embrace advice when advisers disagree among themselves. And they fail to compensate sufficiently for distorted advice that stems from conflicts of interest, even when their advisers have acknowledged the conflicts and the potential for self-serving motives.

When you're giving advice, be on the lookout for these tendencies:

Mentoring is the most important kind of advising, in my view. You have to really get to know the person. I like to begin with a simple, open-ended question: “How are things?” That lets you know what’s on the other person’s mind, so you can better understand what the issue is and how you might help.

What do you look for in an adviser?

Someone who is open and candid. Someone who gives advice that people can act on. (Otherwise it’s like telling them, “Get taller” or “Get smarter.”) Also, someone who recognizes that every situation is different. I advise clients. I also advise folks about their careers. A lot depends on the circumstances a person faces. When I was younger, and often on the receiving end, I was probably more inclined to believe that there’s one way to think about problems. Over time I’ve realized it’s more complicated than that. I’ve learned how important listening is.

Listening is a big theme in this article—but how do you home in on the right details?

Overstepping boundaries.

Though many people give unsolicited advice, it’s usually considered intrusive and seldom followed. (That stands to reason. We all know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of “helpful suggestions” we haven’t invited and don’t really want.) Another way advisers overstep is to chime in when they’re not qualified to do so. It can give them an ego boost in the short run—but at a significant cost. People who liberally offer baseless advice quickly lose credibility and influence in their organizations. Even a single instance of bad advice normally leads to a rapid decline in an adviser’s standing.

Misdiagnosing the problem.

Advisers must gather intelligence to develop a clearer picture of the problem to be solved. Here they can slip up in a couple of ways, as Edgar Schein, of MIT’s Sloan School, has pointed out. First, they may define the problem prematurely because they *think* they see similarities with challenges they’ve faced. (Often those analogies don’t hold up when the full scope of the problem is revealed.) Second, they sometimes forget that seekers are self-interested parties who

At times the conversation has to be guided. Asking “Have you thought of the issue this way?” or “How would so-and-so think about the problem?” can turn the conversation in a different direction. The hardest thing to resist is simply cutting off a wandering narrative and giving the advice. It’s much better to ask questions that allow people to reach conclusions themselves. If they do, they’ll feel much more confident in the process and the choices they make.

What were some of your toughest experiences?

About 25 years ago I was the lead trial lawyer in a major case. My second chair was younger, a fine lawyer and a great person. We worked well together. When he came up for partner, we both knew that the decision was largely up to me. He had great presence, but his skills weren’t the best match for the direction the firm was headed. Over lunch one day, we talked openly about it. I told him he’d be enormously successful in a different environment, but not if he stayed with the firm. He went somewhere else and really thrived there. It was the most difficult conversation I’ve ever had at work, and he later told

may—deliberately or not—present partial or biased accounts. Taking such accounts at face value leads to inaccurate assessments and flawed advice. All this is compounded by an irrational but compelling fear of looking incompetent: Advisers tend to avoid asking basic, probing questions because they don’t want to jeopardize their expert status.

Offering self-centered guidance.

Advisers often frame their guidance as “how I would respond if I were in your shoes.” This approach is both off-putting and ineffective, because they’re clearly not thinking about how the seeker feels, perceives the situation, and understands the choices ahead—the kinds of insights that lead to empathic understanding and useful recommendations. Advisers may also share personal stories and experiences that fail the “doability test” because they simply don’t accord with the seeker’s level of power, negotiating skill, organizational savvy, or situational constraints.

FURTHER READING

Let Me Give You Some Advice

Article by Francesca Gino

me the same. But he also said it was the best conversation he's ever had.

Our instincts about where to turn for counsel are often flawed.

Communicating advice poorly.

Several mistakes fall under this rubric. Advisers may provide vague recommendations that can easily be misconstrued. (For example, “Align behaviors with goals” might refer to unit goals or company goals, and it’s not at all clear what behaviors are in question.) Or, when providing specialized expertise, they may use jargon or other inaccessible language. They may also overwhelm seekers with too many ideas, alternatives, action plans, perspectives, or interpretations. Nothing causes paralysis like a laundry list of options with no explicit guidance on where to start or how to work through and winnow the list.

Mishandling the aftermath.

Though the final decision is not theirs to make, many advisers take offense when their guidance isn’t accepted wholesale, curtailing further discussion. This has both short- and long-term costs: in the moment, lost opportunities to provide a general sense of direction even if some of the seeker’s choices are not to their liking; and over time, a growing distance between adviser and seeker that may limit the trust and intimacy that lie at the heart of effective advising. The reality is that recipients rarely take one person’s advice and run with it. More often they modify the advice, combine it with feedback from others, or reject it altogether—and advisers often fail to treat these responses as valuable input in an ongoing conversation.

Best Practices for Seeking and Giving Advice

As a leader and a decision maker, you must “give as good as you get,” and vice versa—but how can you overcome all those obstacles? We’ve identified some guidelines by combining lessons from academic research with the practical wisdom of

experts on the ground—people we interviewed because they are known for their skill at advising. Although they come from a variety of fields (technology, financial services, law, politics, educational administration, consulting, and not for profit), we found striking parallels in their behavior throughout the five stages of advising.

1 FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

IF YOU'RE A SEEKER

- Have a preexisting "board" of diverse, complementary advisers
- Determine what type of advice you are seeking
- Choose one or more advisers who fit your current needs

IF YOU'RE AN ADVISER

- Assess fit: Do you have the time, expertise, and experience to help?
- Identify other potential sources of guidance

2 DEVELOPING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

IF YOU'RE A SEEKER

- Provide just enough information about your problem
- Acknowledge uncomfortable truths

IF YOU'RE AN ADVISER

- Set the stage for effective advising: Allow ample time, and choose a place that's free from distractions and ensures privacy
- Listen actively and suspend judgment
- Ask open-ended questions to broaden understanding and then shift to more-detailed probes
- Once you have a complete picture of the problem, agree on what type of advice is needed

3 CRAFTING ALTERNATIVES

IF YOU'RE A SEEKER

- Contribute actively to the development of options
- Ask questions to understand:
 - the costs, benefits, and rationale of each option
 - the relevance and applicability of the advice
 - the approach to implementation

IF YOU'RE AN ADVISER

- Understand and articulate your role as providing guidance, not making the decision
- Push to generate several viable choices
- Spell out the rationale, personal experiences, and principles behind your advice

4 CONVERGING ON A DECISION

IF YOU'RE A SEEKER

- Beware of uncritical and dismissive reflexes
- Consider soliciting a second or third opinion
- Develop hybrid solutions

IF YOU'RE AN ADVISER

- Ensure that all the options are evaluated; don't jump too quickly to a solution
- Pause frequently for reactions
- Convey your availability for further clarification and elaboration

5 PUTTING IT INTO ACTION

IF YOU'RE A SEEKER

- Be sensitive to changes in the situation or context and any need for midcourse corrections
- Follow up and seek additional guidance if necessary

IF YOU'RE AN ADVISER

- Reaffirm that the decision and the consequences are the seeker's
- Convey your availability for additional guidance and support

SOURCE DAVID A. GARVIN AND JOSHUA D. MARGOLIS

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Stage 1: Finding the right fit.

Each request for advice is unique, reflecting a distinctive combination of circumstances, personalities, and events. But because time is often of the essence, you won't want to search anew for potential advisers in every situation. Put together a personal "board" in advance, including people you value not only for their judgment and their ability to keep confidences but also for their diverse strengths, experiences, and points of view. All of them should have your best interests at heart and a track record of being *really* willing to tell you what you don't want to hear. Try to find at least one person you can turn to in a variety of situations, because that adviser will develop a multifaceted sense of the problems you face and your natural proclivities and biases.

When selecting an adviser (or multiple advisers) from that board for your immediate needs, determine how you'd like her to help and why. Sometimes you'll

want a sounding board—someone who can listen carefully to help clarify and sharpen your thinking. At other times you’ll want to test a path or an alternative you’ve tentatively chosen. Or you may want someone who can expand your frame of reference, drawing on rich experience and expertise to unveil dimensions of the problem that you did not see. Or perhaps you’re looking for process guidance—a way of navigating through a ticklish situation—or help generating substantive ideas. The better you understand what you need, the better your selection will be—and the better equipped your adviser will be to support you.

What Advisers Can Do

Depending on what’s needed, advisers might:

Serve as a sounding board	Test a tentative path	Expand the frame of reference	Provide process guidance	Generate substantive ideas
Restate and play back arguments to sharpen the seeker’s understanding of the situation and the conclusions she has drawn	Scrutinize the reasoning behind the selection of an option and elaborate on the potential consequences	Provide greater breadth and depth of understanding about the nature of the problem the seeker faces—and the implications for action	Suggest how to approach and manage a complicated, delicate, or high-stakes situation	Increase the number and range of options being considered
KEY PRACTICES				
Asking a few well-chosen questions that probe the seeker’s underlying rationale and motivation—and listening attentively	Assessing the seeker’s thinking, often using hypotheticals and critical questions to achieve a deeper understanding	Sharing key details and tendencies from prior experiences in similar situations to flesh out the larger context	Examining the interests involved, the possibilities for action, and alternative steps the seeker might take	Brainstorming with the seeker

SOURCE DAVID A. GARVIN AND JOSHUA D. MARGOLIS

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Take this example: A regional supply chain head at a medical supply company was asked by the chief procurement officer to play hardball with a local government that was perpetually late paying for purchases. As the accounts receivable kept stacking up, the CPO suggested choking off supply—but the manager worried that government officials would turn that into a cause célèbre. It was a high-stakes situation, and he needed guidance. When considering potential advisers, he knew he wanted people who could provide calibration. Were his concerns justified or blown out of

proportion? The person with the most-relevant experience, he decided, was a manager who oversaw supply chain in a similarly sensitive region. He also turned to a colleague with experience analyzing risks across borders. As a result, he was able to make a balanced recommendation to the CPO: that they canvass multiple regional heads about his proposed plan to choke off supply. And on the basis of their input, the CPO decided not to move ahead with his plan.

As the supply chain manager realized, no single adviser can be helpful in all situations, and the most readily accessible one might not be the right fit. Try to pinpoint what you don't know and how that accords with the knowledge and experiences of the people you might turn to. As the Harvard Business School professor C. Roland Christensen frequently observed, "When you pick your advisers, you pick your advice." Your goal is to find a match between your deficiencies, limitations, or uncertainties and their experiences, expertise, or knowledge base. Avoid picking advisers primarily for their confidence, likability, friendship, or reinforcing points of view—as noted earlier, those are not proxies for quality.

When the roles are reversed and you're approached for advice, ask yourself whether you are indeed a good fit. Do you have the right background to help in this particular situation? Can you dedicate enough time and effort to attend to the seeker's concerns? It's much better to decline the request than to give uninformed advice, rush the advisee, be distracted in meetings, or discover late in the process that you have little of value to offer. Ask why the advisee sought you out—but remember that *you* are in the best position to assess whether your judgment and experience are relevant. Saying no is a service too, and you can further help by identifying other sources of expertise. Even if you are well qualified to serve as an adviser, consider recommending some other people to bring in complementary or alternative views. That will give the seeker a more textured understanding of the challenges and choices.

Stage 2: Developing a shared understanding.

At this stage your primary goal as an advice seeker is to convey *just enough* information for your adviser to grasp the problem you face, why it poses a challenge, and where you hope to end up. That will allow her to offer informed, unbiased recommendations without getting lost in the weeds. So ground your narrative with telling details and provide context—but avoid taking her on a lengthy tour of antecedents, diverse interpretations, and potential consequences. Otherwise you may distract her from the central issues or lose her interest.

When you're approached for advice, ask yourself whether you're indeed a good fit. Do you have the right background? Can you dedicate enough time and effort to attend to the seeker's concerns?

In the telling, you may need to acknowledge some uncomfortable truths about your behavior or weaknesses. Your discomfort with revealing certain information may actually signal its importance to fleshing out the story. An adviser can be only as good as the personal and organizational portrait she has to work with, so share all key details—even those that are unflattering or difficult to discuss. It will help her get past your biases and blind spots.

As an adviser, you'll want to get a complete picture while also expanding the seeker's understanding, all in a reasonable amount of time. So set the stage for openness and efficiency: Pick a place that will free you both from distractions and allow sufficient (but not unlimited) time for a robust discussion. Privacy and confidentiality are essential. Create a "safe zone" where you can both speak openly. Hear the seeker out, allowing his story to emerge with minimal intervention. Suspend judgment and resist the urge to provide immediate feedback and direction: You don't yet know enough to

offer thoughtful advice. Jumping to conclusions or recommendations typically signals a flawed or incomplete diagnosis, so gather more information. Begin with broad, open-ended questions—such as “How are you feeling about this?”—because they establish rapport, uncover what is truly on the seeker’s mind, and often take you right to the heart of the matter. (Anthropologists call these “grand tour questions” and suggest using them as a starting point for interviews.) Follow up by drawing out supporting details and additional context to help the seeker move beyond a self-serving account.

In our interviews with advisers, two people shared stories about seekers who had come to them for affirmation, already intent on a course of action. Both seekers had (and thus articulated) only a partial view of the problem; the advisers said they had to tease out the rest through patient inquiry before they could begin to formulate sound advice and move the seekers from affirmation mode to a dawning and genuine understanding of the challenges they faced.

Determine the seeker’s personal interests and goals and compare them with those of the organization. Consider, in the words of one of our experts, giving “homework assignments” to further the seeker’s thinking (“Come back to me next week with five reasons why moving to Dallas would be a good idea”). Finally, deepen your own understanding as well, by inquiring about root causes, potential consequences, and other pertinent issues not explicitly mentioned. They’ll speak volumes if you can get them out in the open. The stated problem may be only a symptom of these underlying issues.

Once you've done all that, you'll be well enough informed to agree or disagree with the seeker on a key question that is seldom asked: What role should you play? Should you serve as a sounding board, provide reassurance, flesh out the picture the seeker has of this sort of situation, or present fresh insights and options? Discuss your conclusions with your advisee to ensure a shared understanding of what's needed.

Stage 3: Crafting alternatives.

Because decision making improves dramatically when diverse options are available, seekers and advisers should work together to come up with more than one possibility. Even go/no-go decisions yield improved results when nuanced alternatives are described and considered.

Take this example from our interviews: A consumer products division head at an electronics company decided to relocate his marketing group to improve collaboration with engineering. He was eager to adopt this industry trend because of its potential to speed up product development and get everyone thinking about more-targeted offerings. But his marketing VP felt it would put too much distance between her staff and sales.

So the division head turned to a trusted colleague, the chief operating officer, for advice on how to deal with marketing. The COO agreed that the move made sense and worked with the division head to generate ideas for getting the marketing VP on board—without resorting to fiat. For instance, the division head might try sharing the proposal at small cross-functional meetings so that the VP could hear her direct reports discuss the merits of being closer to the engineers. They could also meet with major retail customers or Wall Street analysts—either could comment on how competitors were benefiting from this approach. Talking to the COO expanded the division head's perspective—he could now see options beyond one-on-one conversations with the VP.

If you're seeking advice, adopt an analytic, probing mindset to identify and weigh multiple choices. Certainly offer up your own ideas, but also listen to your adviser's suggestions, especially those that may take you in a different direction altogether. Imagine how you might apply those recommendations—but subject them to a lot of poking and prodding as well. You want to play out what you would actually do. Ask pointed questions about the costs and benefits of each, the underlying rationale, the relevance of the advice to your situation (to confirm that your adviser isn't forcing his preferred principles and prior experiences to fit), the tactics for implementing the ideas, what repercussions might follow, and any contingencies you should prepare for. In short, scrutinize the advice as closely as your adviser scrutinized your description of the problem to be solved. The ensuing discussion will prepare you to overcome implementation hurdles.

If you're the adviser, think of yourself as a driving instructor. While you provide oversight and guidance, your ultimate goal is to empower the seeker to act independently. Our interviewees were unanimous in saying, essentially, "It's the seeker's job to find the path forward." You can never fully step into the advisee's shoes, and it is important to acknowledge that clearly. As you're helping her generate viable choices, spell out the thinking behind each possibility. Describe the principles that are shaping your advice, along with any experiences you are bringing to bear or using as analogies. Articulating your thought process—and your possible biases—can help both you and the seeker determine how well your reasoning and perspective fit the situation. If you are senior to the seeker, you can shrink the power difference and increase the likelihood that your advice will be useful by explicitly asking what doesn't seem quite right.

Stage 4: Converging on a decision.

When it's time to narrow down options and choose a course of action, seekers often fall prey to confirmation bias, picking the "easy way out," or other forms of flawed reasoning. So test your thinking by reviewing discarded or briefly considered options

and by asking your adviser to play devil's advocate. And don't hesitate to solicit a second or third opinion at this stage—particularly if you remain uncertain. This can offset any biases or conflicts of interest your adviser may have. Experimental evidence suggests that two opinions are generally enough to yield most of the benefits of having multiple advisers. But for complex, ambiguous, highly visible, or contested problems, or when implementation is likely to be complicated, a few additional points of view are often helpful. No matter how unsettling or urgent the situation, resist the impulse to jump on the simplest, most readily available solution.

You may want to combine recommendations from multiple advisers with your own insights to form a hybrid solution. A team leader at a consulting firm did this when she was having a hard time managing project meetings. Veterans and newcomers would engage in endless debate, each faction convinced that the other didn't "get it." Because the leader communicated well with everybody one-on-one, she considered reducing the group meetings and managing the project in hub-and-spoke fashion.

Her advisers provided a range of reactions. One emphasized the importance of allowing the group to discuss the client's challenges rather than just argue about competing solutions. Another said that the two camps needed to hear each other to broaden their perspectives. And a third suggested openly discussing the team's dysfunction. The leader drew on all three pieces of advice. After explaining in a series of one-on-ones how the next project meeting would be run and why, she brought her team together and asked individuals with varying levels of expertise and experience to share their views of the client's challenges. Debate didn't disappear, but it was far more constructive: Team members arrived at a collective understanding of the problems to be solved. At the end they talked about how they might have more meetings like that one.

If you're a seeker of advice, don't hesitate to solicit a second or third opinion—particularly if you remain uncertain. This can offset any biases or conflicts of interest your adviser may have.

If you're an adviser, your goal at this stage is to work with the advisee to explore all the options at hand before she makes a choice. Talk through the most likely outcomes of each possibility, assessing the relative pros and cons and ensuring that the conversation remains a dialogue rather than a monologue. Pose hypotheticals—"Imagine it's a year from now, and you did fire that talented but difficult manager. What might happen? How bad, or good, could things get?"—to tease out likely implications. Then focus the discussion on a course of action. This might entail making the case for a single option, or you might suggest experimenting with a few ideas.

Pause frequently to gauge how comfortable the seeker is with the proffered advice and the extent to which she accepts the underlying rationale. Work together to bring to the surface unstated assumptions, lingering doubts, and unresolved questions. At the same time, recognize that "I don't know" is a fine answer if you can't predict the impact of certain options, especially if you make clear recommendations on how to learn more about the alternatives.

Follow-up meetings are often essential for firming up advisees' choices and developing detailed action plans. So make yourself available for clarification and elaboration. That said, seekers sometimes come back for more and more

conversations to delay decision making. If you suspect that's happening, either say so and ask what might be done to move things forward, or encourage the seeker to try out a solution and check in with you about how it went.

Stage 5: Putting advice into action.

As a seeker, you'll need to act on the advice you've received and make real-time adjustments. Advice is best treated as provisional and contingent: It should be a cycle of guidance, action, learning, and further guidance—not a fixed path forward.

Especially if the advisory process has occurred over an extended period, circumstances may have changed by the time you are ready to act.

So follow up for further advice if needed. You may benefit from multiple meetings, especially if you have gleaned new information from your first steps forward or have a series of decisions to make. It's also considerate and helpful to let your adviser know what you've done and how it's working out. It's a way of expressing your gratitude, strengthening the relationship, and helping the adviser learn as well.

If you're the adviser, step back from the process at this stage. Reaffirm that it's up to the seeker to move forward. Both the decision and the consequences are his, not yours, and must be recognized as such. That will help ensure personal accountability and prevent misplaced blame if things don't work out as hoped. But remain open to providing additional guidance as events unfold. Especially in fluid, rapidly changing situations, even the best advice can quickly become irrelevant. To the extent that you're willing to help with midcourse corrections, convey your availability.

Though seekers and advisers work together to solve problems, they have different vantage points. Recent social psychology research shows that people in an advisory role focus on overarching purpose (*why* an action should be performed), whereas

recipients of advice—who usually face an impending decision—are more concerned with tactics (*how* to get things done). An individual is likely to think idealistically as an adviser but pragmatically as a seeker, even when confronting the same challenge.

Suppose a hiring manager must decide whether to fill a key role with an outside candidate or promote an ambitious employee from within. If you're advising that manager, you may see the merits of bringing in a fresh perspective and the healthy shake-up it could provide. But if you're the one seeking guidance, you may be more inclined to see the challenges of getting an outsider integrated and poised to deliver and also the time saved and the boost to morale of going with an insider. Keeping both perspectives in mind, no matter which is yours, will help you achieve mutual understanding, identify the key priority driving the decision (reducing time and effort to integrate? bringing in a fresh perspective?), and prepare for the downsides of any option.

Overall, our guidelines for both seekers and advisers amount to a fundamental shift in approach. Although people typically focus on the content of advice, those who are most skilled attend just as much to *how* they advise as to *what* they advise. It's a mistake to think of advice as a one-and-done transaction. Skilled advising is more than the dispensing and accepting of wisdom; it's a creative, collaborative process—a matter of striving, on both sides, to better understand problems and craft promising paths forward. And that often requires an ongoing conversation.

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

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Excellent article on the limitations of advice giving, as well as ways to maximize its impact.

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