

# COACHING *for* LEADERS

## **The Advice Trap: Be Humble, Stay Curious & Change the Way You Lead Forever**

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### **Dave's Reading Highlights**

This book shows you what causes the Advice Trap and how to escape it so you can unlock the potential of people and the organizations in which they work.

Here you are, holding a book of advice...on how to give less advice.

Here is the thesis of this book: advice is overrated. Not advice itself. There's a time and a place for good advice. The problem is the default habit of giving advice.

The Advice-Giving Habit (AGH! for short) is the Advice Trap, and it's a trap because it locks you into a vicious circle. AGH! The Advice Trap The more I give them advice The more they want my advice You become overwhelmed, exhausted, tapped out, and a bottleneck. The other person in the loop is frustrated, disengaged, limited, infantilized, and frustrated. Neither party's happy. Nobody's thriving. And nobody's potential is unlocked. Plus, your advice doesn't work nearly as well as you think it does. More times than you'd care to know, you're "solving" the wrong problem with a not-that-great idea. Not the best way to unlock the organization's potential and help drive better

results. To get out of the Advice Trap, you've got to tame your Advice Monster. And that's what this book is all about.

Obviously, there's a time and a place for giving advice. I'm not saying never give advice. In fact, the last chapter is about how to give advice. But I am saying: break that default habit of giving advice.

The three reasons your advice doesn't get results 1. You're solving the wrong challenge More often than not, you're offering up insights and solutions (brilliant or not) to the wrong problem. You've been suckered into believing that the first challenge that's mentioned is the real challenge. It rarely is.

Highlight [page 16]: Now you're playing a game about power and control. You're at a crossroads. Is the win to have you give the answer, an answer that's fast and right? Or is the win for someone else, someone likely less experienced than you or less senior than you, to figure out an answer? Down one path, speed and a confirmation of your status within the group. Down the other, an act of empowerment—and with it, an increase in confidence and competence and autonomy—and most likely an answer that's certainly good enough and quite possibly even better than yours.

In Drive, Dan Pink is clear on the three drivers that actually motivate people: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. If someone is constantly on the receiving end of advice, with no option to share their own ideas, their autonomy and mastery certainly decline, and most likely their purpose too. Being told what to do—even with the best of intentions—signals that the advice-receiver is not really here for their ability to think, but only for their ability to implement someone else's ideas.

Not only are you doing your own job, you're doing other people's jobs for them as well. You no longer have the time and space for the work that makes a difference.

For anything beyond the simplest situation, the odds are ridiculously low that you've identified the right challenge and that you also happen to have an excellent, perfectly articulated solution to hand.

The loudest and most obvious persona the Advice Monster plays is Tell-It. Tell-It is here to convince you that you were hired to have the answer; if you don't have the answer, you've failed in your job. Having the answer is the only real way for you to add value, and the only way you'll be recognized as a success.

The second persona your Advice Monster likes to play is Save-It. This one is a little more subdued and seemingly less assured than Tell\*it, but it's just as pervasive and damaging. Save-It's tactic is to take you aside and explain, earnestly, that if it wasn't for you holding it all together, everything would fail. Your job is to be fully responsible for every person, every situation, and every outcome. When in doubt, take it on yourself (and when not in doubt, take it on yourself).

The final persona your Advice Monster likes to play is Control-It. This is the most tricky of the three. It's a backroom operator, and with a tone of gentle authority will assure you that the only way to succeed is to stay in control at all times. At. All. Times. It convinces you that everything is controllable, so long as you're in charge. Don't trust others. Don't share power. Don't cede control. If you let control slip, even just a little, disaster will befall us all.

In fact, I'm not saying almost everything you're probably making up that I'm saying. I am saying that in those situations when your Advice Monster has seized the moment, and you're telling others what to do, or you're saving them from themselves, or you're keeping control of the situation, the belief that's behind those reactions is: I'm better than them. I'm faster or smarter or more experienced or more senior or more certain of myself or louder or more creative or more strategic or more right or... In these moments, you're also saying that they're not enough. Not smart enough, efficient enough, wise enough, resilient enough, capable enough, competent enough, courageous enough, original enough, moral enough, generous enough, trustworthy enough, [insert whatever word matters to you] enough to figure this out. You're saying that they're not good enough. They're not good enough. They're not good enough. Sit with that and feel how uncomfortable it is to admit. How unsustainable. How

unscalable. How exhausting for you. How disempowering for them. How, when we get to the bottom of it, inhuman it is to you both.

You can't Tame Your Advice Monster until you know what sets it off. Mostly commonly, that will be a type of person combined with a type of situation. On the next page you'll find a fun mix'n'match table, so you can start identifying the people and situations that get your Advice Monster going. Which combinations might be true for you?

Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay didn't just arrive at base camp and then zip up Mount Everest the next day. They went back and forth, up and down, for seven weeks—making some progress, acclimatizing, establishing the new norm, retreating a little to gather strength, pushing forward to the next camp, and so on. If you add them up, they had over forty phases from their first day on the mountain until they summited. Behaviour change is like this. Lots of small experiments and safe steps forward and back are the way to climb to the summit of Mt. Doing Things Differently.

As you've read, we're saying that being more coach-like means you should:

- Stay curious a little longer.
- Rush to action and advice-giving a little more slowly.

Coaching focuses on the process, not the outcomes. The outcomes can be great, of course, but we focus on what we can control, which is our behaviour.

- The definition of coaching doesn't say "never give advice" or "only ask questions." That would be deeply impractical.

Rather, it implies that advice-giving has its place in your life, and that advice-giving is usually an overdeveloped muscle. What you're trying to do is train an underdeveloped muscle: curiosity.

Be Lazy is of course the most provocative principle. I'm pretty certain you're working hard, as are those around you. No one's rising up the ranks by sitting around and twiddling their thumbs. In fact, Be Lazy is classic misdirection, because being more coach-like is actually hard work. I want you to be lazy about jumping in and solving other people's problems for them. Just stop it.

Be Curious is the essential principle. There's no getting around it: you can't be more coach-like if you're not being curious. While I want you to be lazy, I also want you to work really hard at staying curious and managing the process of the conversation. This is what it means to tame your Advice Monster.

Be Often is, slyly, the most radical principle. It blows up the idea that coaching is an occasional, hierarchical, formal event. Every interaction can be a bit more coach-like because, after all, it's just a question of staying curious a little bit longer. So you can be more coach-like in meetings, on the phone, by text, by Slack... by pretty much any channel of communication.

The Kickstart Question: "What's on your mind?" A perfect way to start many conversations. Both open and focusing at the same time. 2 The awe Question: "And what else?" The best coaching question in the world—because their first answer is never their only answer, and rarely their best answer. 3 The Focus Question: "What's the real challenge here for you?" We're all wasting too much time and effort solving the wrong problem because we were seduced into thinking the first challenge is the real challenge. 4 The Foundation Question: "What do you want?" This is where motivated and informed action best begins. 5 The Strategy Question: "If you're saying Yes to this, what must you say No to?" Strategy is about courageous choice, and this question makes commitment and opportunity cost absolutely clear. 6 The Lazy Question: "How can I help?" The most powerful question to stop us "rescuing" the other person. An alternative is, "What do you want from me?" 7 The Learning Question: "What was most useful or valuable here for you?" Learning doesn't happen when you tell them something, it happens when they figure it out for themselves.

Stick to questions starting with "What." You may have noticed that nearly all the seven questions start with "What ...". That's no accident. We avoid "Why. . ." because it can often trigger a defensive response, and "How. . ." because it moves the conversation too quickly to the action-oriented/time-to-solve-it phase of the conversation. "What . . ."

questions are rooted in curiosity, and seem to work best on a daily basis to open up new insight.

Just because you're turning the attention to them doesn't mean you don't have sympathy for what it's like to deal with that person and situation. You don't have to play back every detail you've just heard. In fact, that's often annoying. You can just say, "This sounds hard/tricky/difficult/frustrating/enraging/[insert word that works best]." Then say what you see and tell them what you're doing: you're bringing the focus back onto them. "But I'm interested in how this is hard for you."

Then resist picking where to start, and instead ask them to do the work. Default to this variation of the Focus Question: "Of all these, which one is the real challenge here for you?" Emphasize "one": you're asking them to make a choice. You can try out variations, some of which will be faster and easier: "Where should we start?" "If we could focus on only one of these, which would have the most impact?" "Which one, if we solved it, might make some of these other challenges go away?"

Because Rank is about power and control, it's worth noting that I'm writing this as a tall, over-educated, straight white man. I've pretty much been dealt the best hand possible, and it means I have more Rank than most to play with and give away. If you tick most of the same demographics as me, then you too can raise others' Rank by lowering yours. If you don't tick those demographics, then I'd encourage you to be thoughtful about how you manage Rank, and particularly about when and how you lower your own status.

Coaching is no longer a one-off, occasional, "come into my office so I can coach you" way of managing someone. Because coaching is an in-the-moment behaviour—stay curious a little longer, rush to action and advice-giving a little more slowly—it is an everyday way of showing up in any interaction, any channel, any moment. You always have the choice to stay curious longer.

When the boss offers up their suggestion on what to do, what happens? Exactly. Everyone nods, writes down the "suggestion," and

agrees that this is the right thing to be doing. Sure, I'm exaggerating a little. But only a little. Learning to tone down the assuredness in the way you present your idea reduces pressure. It takes the pressure off them having to say yes. It takes the pressure off you for needing to have the idea that's right, that's best, that works. Here are some well-tested phrases you can add before any advice, which helps reduce the "because I'm saying it, it must be right":

- Here's my best guess . . .
- I may be wrong . . .
- I'm not sure if this will work/is useful/might be an option. . .
- This is just one idea/option/thought . . .
- This may be completely off-base . . .