

Nobody Likes Unsolicited Advice!

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Are you a helpful person? If so, this article may offend you.

Okay, maybe “offend” is too strong a word. However, this article could surprise you. You may decide to reevaluate some behaviors that come so easily for you that you don’t even think about them.

I hope you will reflect on how your well-intentioned efforts may be received by some individuals you want to help. You may unintentionally be offending other people even though your desires are purely honorable.

When a trusted colleague explained that nobody likes me offering unsolicited advice, I was stunned. I examined why I offered advice at all, and I knew it was only because I wanted to help. Then I tried to figure out why I was so interested in helping others. After some self-examination, I realized that my mother was always offering to help, and I’d learned that habit from her.

Then it hit me! My mother has given me unsolicited advice all my life. She still does. I’m 63 years old, and when she says, “Honey, you might want to consider _____,” I just cringe. I feel like a child she’s still trying to “fix.” Out of respect for her, however, I just smile and thank her for the suggestion. But I don’t like it!

And I started wondering how much people dislike my unsolicited advice! Ugh! No wonder I sometimes witness resistance when I expected overwhelming appreciation for my wisdom!

In last week’s article, I shared a concept known as “The Platinum Rule,” which is to treat people the way they want to be treated. Is being subjected to my unsolicited advice what people typically want? No!

This is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, you want to help others. But on the other, they may feel controlled and manipulated by you. What’s a leader to do?

If I’ve raised a new thought for you, consider doing some self-examination. Use my confession of ignorance as a stimulant. Keep in mind, however, that examining your own actions may not be sufficient. Go get some feedback from the people who have experienced your unsolicited advice.

Now, let me make one thing clear. As a leader, you have every right to give direction to anyone under your authority. If he or she is performing less effectively than is required, it’s your responsibility to take corrective action. I’m referring here to you exercising your authority in seeking compliance with expected behavior.

This issue of unsolicited advice is something quite different and is rarely that clear. The enticement to give unsolicited advice to help another person improve is subtle, yet powerfully attractive. You think the other person would like to be better, more effective, or more skilled. And you want to support the person.

It seems to you that the other person is just crying out for you to share your expertise and wisdom. That is the key! If the person asks for your advice, then it’s clearly not “unsolicited,” right? By all means, then, give the person what she or he has requested--your advice!

What happens if you see a way you can help someone who has not sought your input? You can ask the person for permission to share an idea. You might say, “I have some familiarity with that kind of situation, and I’ve found some things that work. Would you like to hear about my experience?”

If the person gives you legitimacy to share your insight, go ahead. If the person turns you down, however (or is only feigning interest), honor his or her request. Your perspective will be more valued in the future!

I find avoiding unsolicited advice to be very difficult in my job. Leaders pay me to help them be more effective, more skilled, and better at serving their constituents. Yet even clients who have engaged my services don’t like unsolicited advice. I have to remind myself repeatedly to keep my tongue silent until my opinion is sought!

My articles last week and this week are very consistent with servant leadership. The basic premise is to give the person what he or she wants. Become adept at recognizing what is needed and if, when, and how to supply it.

Be very careful that you are not working your own agenda. Too many times, offering unsolicited advice is a sneaky way of making yourself look and feel good. Unless the person has asked you to be the hero of the story, spend your time seeking to understand and further eliciting the individual’s thoughts.

Helping a person analyze, even wrestle with his or her own perceptions--ah, now that’s valuable service!