

What Kind of Help Do You Seek?

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“Hey, have you got a minute?” How often do you hear that question in a given day?

The inquiry is clearly a request for help. As a servant leader, you feel obligated to provide encouragement and support.

You interrupt whatever you are doing and focus your attention, hoping the interruption will really only require a minute. Of course, it rarely does! So, you listen, and you provide the requested help.

You should discern, however, the kind of help being sought, so that you respond appropriately. Often, the seeker of help doesn't know. So, you should become familiar with these three categories.

“Relief.” This request typically comes from someone who is stressed. The individual is usually in some trouble and needs to improve the situation quickly. Maybe somebody made a bad choice, or there's been an unexpected change in plans, or circumstances just turned sour.

If proper action doesn't occur, the situation will likely get worse. The individual would have already taken the necessary action, of course, if he or she had the authority, the skill, or the confidence.

Or maybe the person isn't sure what action to take. Perhaps the individual is facing a tough decision and is really asking, “What should I do?” Maybe it's your expertise or your authority that the person is actually seeking. The bottom line request here is, “Hey, I'm in trouble! Bail me out, please.”

“Responsible Choice.” This request is not a crisis, yet some undesirable circumstance clearly needs attention. You probably receive far more of these than you do the requests for immediate relief. Contrary to the “bail me out” plea, avoid answering this “What should I do?” question.

Instead, adopt the role of a coach helping the individual identify and consider alternatives. Multiple options are usually available for addressing any situation, and rarely are the first couple of ideas the best. Encourage the individual to pause for more than a minute and think creatively about possibilities. Ask open-ended questions to stimulate the person's thinking, and offer a few ideas of your own. Your suggestions will likely trigger additional thoughts.

That may be all that's required. The individual may say a quick “Thank you,” then head off to take the action of choice. If that doesn't happen, you can help further by asking, “What are the short-term and long-term outcomes that you hope will result from whatever action you take?”

Don't accept an immediate answer. Encourage the person to think more deeply. Many people don't project out that far before seeking your help. That question may be the most beneficial service you provide! The person may choose to pause and go think about the opportunity more thoroughly.

“Development.” This kind of help causes individuals and organizations to grow! Process improvement and skill enhancement move an organization in the direction of genuine excellence.

A paradigm shift is often involved. Perhaps a new response to feedback causes an individual to recognize that some kind of change is needed. New insights empower individuals to move beyond immediate decisions, seeking greater capabilities to handle both the current and future situations.

The person is forever changed for the better. And the organization is improved because of the presence of a more skilled individual. The desire to enhance one's skills is contagious, fortunately.

I invite you, as a servant leader, to elevate each request for help to this transformational level. How do you do that? When the person describes the help needed, you take the time to think about and reframe the outcome being sought. As “the leader,” you should be thinking “big picture” all the time!

The person making the request clearly has an objective. Could you possibly satisfy not only what is desired now, but also empower the person to be able to perform better in a similar situation next time? Consider extending the interruption a few more minutes and teach an appropriate principle.

Ask the person to consider an expanded situation--something more complex--and then think with you about a generalization. How about delegating some related responsibility to the person, knowing that future situations will arise that he or she could productively handle?

If you are successful in providing this kind of transformational help in just half the instances, you can significantly reduce the frequency of future interruptions. At the same time, you'll build the confidence and competence of your workforce! They win and you win. I like those outcomes!

Note: I wrote an earlier version of this article in October of 2007. Concepts from the book *When Helping Hurts*, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, have caused me to issue this improvement. That book is directed to churches and other organizations seeking to alleviate poverty. I've adapted their language and concepts to guide business leaders in supporting the employees they serve.

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