

Advice Givers

We are being bombarded by an attack of the killer advice givers.

From television and talk radio to the incessant clatter of bloggers, the number of people who want us to take their opinions, complaints and endless suggestions to heart multiplies in what feels like geometric proportions. There is an army of people out there who are determined remake us. They want to tell us what to say, what to think and what not to wear. It is like the array of chattering teeth that Johnny Carson used to parade out from time to time on his TV show. (Anyone remember Johnny Carson?)

And it doesn't stop there. Mother wants to tell you who you should date and Aunt Mildred can't help herself when she tells you to lose weight because "dear, you are getting a little plump." Your doctor wants you to exercise more and he or she encourages you by trying to frighten you. "Your blood pressure makes you a good candidate for a heart attack!" Everyone wants to help you "be all that you can be" as long as it fits his or her image of what makes the perfect you.

It seems that the world can't help itself. From governmental agencies to Village Commissions, individuals and institutions want to tell us how to manage every aspect of our lives. Even your neighbors are concerned about the items on your porch or the condition of your lawn. In gated communities the gates may keep

intruders away, but they also keep their residents imprisoned in “thou shalt nots” that reach into nearly every aspect of daily living.

It’s difficult to say what can be done with governmental agencies or condo boards, but in day-to-day living few have been able to figure out how often giving advice has the opposite of its intended effect. What happens when people come along and argue for a change in our behavior that even we think we may need? We feel compelled to argue for staying right where we are (“My weight is just fine, thank you.”). Advocacy for one point of view often has the effect of people taking the contrary position.

If we’re honest with ourselves, even in those aspects of our lives where we sense we ought to make some kind of personal change, we often experience ambivalence. There are good and bad aspects of any change—pros and cons. Sometimes the pros aren’t strong enough (“I’m not *that* heavy.”) Sometimes the cons are driven by fear (“I’m not sure I can do it.”), and sometimes cons are bolstered by the thought that maybe the cure isn’t worth the price. (“So, I’ve stopped drinking, but now I can’t hang out with my friends or go to the old haunts.”) Ambivalence is a fact of life for most of us. When the advice-giver argues strongly for change either by focusing on the cost of continuing with current behavior or on the benefits of making a change, the advice triggers arguments for maintaining the status quo. In these situations not only does the advice fall on deaf ears, but it sometimes solidifies the individual receiving advice

into holding more firmly onto the problematic behavior. (“Tonya--although she lived to regret it--ended up marrying Harvey because mother had argued so strongly against the match.”)

There is a better way.

If instead of taking a position of advocacy for this or that action, a true helper can offer opportunities for balanced thinking and objective weighing alternatives. People who really help others let them take the pros and cons—the options of maintaining current behavior or embracing change—into account. The advice giver’s role in these situations is to help someone flesh out pros and cons for him or herself, to listen carefully and then reflect on what has been heard. It is not to argue for a point of view, but rather to let the person explore his life situation on his or her own. When individuals are able to dig more deeply into their own ambivalences, they are frequently getting the best possible help. And often this leads to change.

In the movie, *Casino Royale*, James Bond says to his female companion, “Why is it that people who can’t take advice always insist on giving it?” In a culture addicted to advice giving, it is useful to remember how little advice translates into something that is truly useful for another person. True change always begins and ends with the people who have to make the changes in their own lives. The

best answers are usually those we find on our own. Coaches, teachers, parents, relatives, friends and advice givers of every persuasion take heed.

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