

The Leader Within

When it comes to advice, the leader is doing something of a balancing act.

How many times have you either observed a leader or followed a leader and had the feeling that they must have the answers--maybe not all of the answers but most of them? There is something that qualifies a leader to lead and it is often associated with some type of expertise.

An expedition leader blazing a trail through the woods; a business leader mapping out a new direction for the company; a community leader suggesting members follow an innovative program—any one of these inspires confidence because we think that the leader knows what needs to be known in order to reach the goal.

If you are a leader, then you know that this "just ain't so." Often, we don't have all the information or answers (sometimes not even all the right questions) to accomplish what is needed. Nonetheless, people get involved and we move ahead as a team.

And here is the balancing act: (1) being prepared to seek out and take advice, (2) being ready to give advice, (3) being honest enough to say "I don't know" when others expect us to have the answers.

Consider (3) . . . When we say, "I don't know," there is always the risk that the confidence of some team members will drop a notch or two. That has more to do with their expectations than with our ability to lead. Yet, is that not a responsible action to admit our lack of complete knowledge (perhaps wisdom and discretion are more important qualities at this point).

Consider (2) . . . When we are ready to give advice, it's a more comfortable posture in terms of leadership. I'll challenge this on one point. If a leader delays (not giving immediate advice) and works on the matter with the team member (circumstances permitting), it might result in a growth experience for that other person.

Consider (1) . . . When it comes to taking advice (even seeking it out), a leader reveals a lot about his or her style and even character.

Is the leader anxious to tap into some good resources coming from other respected leaders and authorities? Is the leader willing to listen to team members if they have ideas and advice? Is the culture of the team such that advice is welcome?

Bret Maukonen

The Coach Within

In my experience, people do not request advice nearly as often as it is given. Is there something within that urges us to adamantly work out our own solutions? Think of a small child waving off a parent's help by saying, "Mommy, let ME do it!" When a person grows up, he might be inclined to say, "If I want your advice, I'll ask for it." Perhaps there is something about the way that advice comes to us that causes a first response of refusal.

Yet, if we stop and think about it, there are probably a lot of things that we do on a daily basis because we have received and have acted upon well-intentioned, sound advice. Can you think of any examples in your own life?

As a counsellor, people often come to me looking for advice about their life situations. As a coach, this is less frequently the case because of the model that I use (i.e., the client is expert of his/her own situation). However, sometimes a client will ask outright, "What do you think I should do?" Neither as a counselor nor as a coach am I inclined to give advice.

I have learned that, typically, clients benefit more from resolving their own dilemmas and creating their own solutions. That may even involve tapping into other resources outside of the relationship that I have with my client. (An aside—It's not that I don't have an opinion or an idea. I like to challenge the thinking of the client in a search for possible solutions. Being too quick to suggest options, short circuits this "working through" process.)

Over the past couple of decades, there has been a general movement away from seeking the advice of experts towards focusing on the individual's innate wisdom and problem-solving ability. There are times when it is very appropriate to rely on ourselves and yet, there are times when it is desirable to seek the advice of those whom we trust. Bret and I can look back to times in our own lives when we have made decisions without seeking advice from reliable sources. In some cases, we know that we could have had a better outcome with more input and counsel. A key issue is: Are there people in your life whom you trust and to whom you can readily turn for balanced, considered advice? And do you make judicious use of this valuable resource as often as needed?

In closing, I have to admit that I was really stuck on starting my column on this topic. Eventually, I had the good sense to seek advice and so, you have some words about the **Coach Within**.

Lynne Maukonen

To Ponder . . . What was the last bit of advice you gave? What was the last bit of advice you took and acted upon? Are you part of any committee, board or advisory group? (Include your family setting too!). What difference does it make to the functioning of that group when people "brainstorm" and share their thoughts and advice? Is it valued?