

# How to Give Good Advice

*Some people want you to listen; others genuinely want you to speak.*

*By Fred Smith*

I was having lunch with a psychologist. As we talked, she asked me questions about her cases. Finally I said, "This is ludicrous. I've never studied counseling a day in my life. I'm a businessman, and you have a Ph.D. in psychology. Why are you asking me?"

"There's a difference between counseling and asking for advice," she said. "I come to you for good advice."

I was intrigued with her distinction. Counsel is guidance toward a better relationship, attitude, or lifestyle—things that can't be quantified or tightly scheduled. Advice is suggesting a specific action within a specific time frame, and it deals with factual things: purchases, job changes, decisions.

To know whether I can give good advice, I ask myself these three questions: Do I know enough about the situation? Am I qualified? Do I see viable options to recommend?

## How to Give Advice

**1. Analyze your experiences.** Experience is a valuable tool, but it can also lead to bad advice if you don't know how to use it well. Few situations are identical, and we can't assume the differences are irrelevant. The antidote is to analyze your own experiences. This means thinking through the specific circumstances, the people involved, and the aims. Then, distinguish the transferable from the peculiar.

**2. Offer advice only when asked.** People usually aren't ready to act until they're ready to ask.

**3. Give only advice that can be used immediately.** Ralph Cordiner, former president of General Electric, was once talking about communications and said, "Communications are like supplies. If you've got an employee putting nuts and bolts in an appliance, you never give him more nuts and bolts than he can use." And you never give anybody more advice than he can use immediately.

**4. Think through the problem and find the key issue.** When loggers clear a logjam, the foolish ones start at the edge of the jam and start moving logs until things loosen up. The smart logger, however, climbs a tall tree and locates the key log, blows it, and lets the stream do the rest. With advice, the key is to find the crucial issue. The other issues will then be solved more easily.

**5. Avoid snap judgments.** Even if you know you're right, sometimes it's best to take some time before offering your advice. Why? We tend to be skeptical of any advice given too quickly.

**6. Make sure the person understands what you've said.** I'm amazed when I talk with somebody for 30 minutes and then say, "Now tell me what you've heard me saying to you." The response often bears no resemblance to my intended advice. And the more emotional the issue, the less clearly people hear.

**7. Restrain your curiosity.** Good advice always leaves up to the person the option of taking the action. Advice says, "I'm convinced this is the best way, but it's your decision." Never say, "I'll call you tomorrow to be sure you've done this." Help people make the best decision they can—whether or not they carry it out is their responsibility.

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**Discuss**

1. Think about a time when someone gave you advice that turned out to be really helpful. How did this person go about giving you advice?
2. Do you give advice too hastily? Or do you tend to shy away from giving any whatsoever? Which of these guidelines will help you the most when attempting to give good, helpful advice to your small-group members?
3. Smith says we should ask ourselves "Am I qualified?" before giving advice. How can you assess whether or not you're qualified to advise someone about a specific topic? Who can you refer a small-group member to (e.g., a pastor, counselor, other ministry leader) if you feel you're not qualified?