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## Getting Good Advice

*by Dan Ciampa*

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# Getting Good Advice

by Dan Ciampa

A LEADER SEEKING ADVISERS TODAY finds no shortage of them. Besides mentors, managers, board members, coaches, and colleagues, there exist consultants of every stripe to dispense advice on all manner of management issues.

But amid this abundance, leaders continue to stumble, sometimes with serious consequences for their companies and their careers. Sure, at times advisers just get it wrong. Yet more often, the problem lies not with advice givers but rather with the advice takers themselves. Many do not take the steps necessary to ensure that the people who influence them have the insight, ability, and knowledge to genuinely be of help. And even when they have chosen suitable advisers, they tend to manage the relationship too passively, making it difficult sometimes to translate sound advice into solid results.

Does it matter if a leader is competent at soliciting help and turning it to good use? It matters when the organization or unit he manages must change and employees must adopt new ways of working. It matters when there is little margin for error and a poor outcome could jeopardize employees' livelihoods, customers' trust, and investors' earnings. It matters when the leader's very credibility is on the line. It matters.

So what does it take to extract more value from the time, effort, and money spent on help? First, the leader must accurately assess what kind of advice she needs and select an adviser or network of advisers accordingly. Second, the leader must actively manage the advice relationship. Among other things, this means constantly critiquing, adjusting, and refining it.

In other words, deriving more value from advice is about becoming a more educated, thoughtful, and discerning consumer of advice. Just as with any other complex, high-value product or service, getting the most from an advice relationship begins with an inventory of one's needs and priorities.

## What type of advice do you need?

When leaders confront the complexities of pushing change through an organization—whether an entire cor-

poration or a business unit—success often hinges on their being able to mobilize help that is actually helpful. What qualities define helpful advice?

- It's **relevant**: It helps solve the problems the leader has identified and does so in a way that suits the conditions under which the problems must be solved.
- It's **grounded in solid experience and expertise**: The ideal adviser has experienced and overcome similar issues himself or has studied them in depth, and he has successfully used his knowledge and experience to guide many others in surmounting such issues.
  - It's **actionable**: The leader can readily translate the advice into productive action.
  - It's **timely**: Because a delay in improved processes or in a much-needed strategic redirection can exact considerable costs, it's critical that advice be just in time.
- It's **sustainable**: Once the leader receives the advice, he should be able to implement it without extraordinary further help.



## Four categories of advice needs

A leader taking on the challenges of a change agenda typically has advice needs in one or more of these four categories:

1. **Strategic** needs having to do with the direction of the organization and the broad choices that will best equip it to thrive.
2. **Operational** needs pertaining to how the organization operates day to day and the processes or systems it depends on to efficiently and cost-effectively meet short- and medium-term goals.
3. **Political and cultural** needs involving internal competition for influence, the cultural norms that dictate the relative levels of cooperation and competition between people and between units, the interplay of coalitions and interest groups, and interpersonal communication and persuasion.

4. **Personal** needs: Because of the pressure and the sense of isolation that often accompany top-level jobs, particularly during change, a trusted adviser can help a leader remain confident and clear-sighted.

Given the strikingly different nature of these four realms, expecting a specialist in one area to offer comparably useful help in another is roughly equivalent to expecting an oncologist to be as expert at treating infectious diseases as she is at understanding the progress of a particular cancer in one patient.

Recognizing the unique requirements of each area, wise advice takers seek different types of advisers for different areas of need. If the leader is new both to a top-level job and to the organization, a *strategy* expert who knows the industry may be particularly helpful. In every organization, people jockey for the CEO's favor and form alliances to advance their own agendas. Culture change initiatives only intensify such politicking. In such a case, an adviser experienced at guiding leaders through difficult *political and cultural* terrain is imperative. Deep *operational* expertise can be crucial in helping a leader achieve financial targets through cost savings and efficiencies. To manage anxiety, self-doubt, and other *personal* issues that can arise

in the face of uncertainty, ambiguity, and resistance, a leader can benefit greatly from a wise, empathetic adviser who can serve as a sounding board.

Here's a story that illustrates how a newly appointed CEO at a financial services provider came close to derailing his career because he failed to select the right advisers for a critical job.

### The right tools in the wrong hands

In his first days in his new role, the CEO determined that the company's IT and financial control systems were inadequate. In his previous position, he had worked with a team of consultants in these very areas, so he brought them in to tackle these operational issues. So far, so good.

Six months down the road, he became aware that teamwork problems were blocking successful implementation of the systems improvements and decided a culture change initiative was in order. But instead of seeking advisers with expertise at these sorts of political and cultural issues, he asked the team of systems consultants to tack on a culture change component to their operational work.

Things went from bad to worse. Though the consultants gamely attempted some of the same approaches that culture change experts likely would have, their lack of experience in this realm led to their overlooking subtle factors important to success in that area. For instance, an employee survey delivered contradictory results because the team of consultants neglected first to address employees' suspicions about the survey's purpose.

The consultants aimed in the right direction and sometimes did the right things, but they simply weren't up to the task. Their mistake was to believe that they could enter an area beyond their expertise and improvise a solution to serious, complex issues. But it was the CEO who bore the primary responsibility for the damage done to employee morale, the systems improvements he initiated, and his own credibility.

Effectively matching advisers to the issues where they can contribute the most is the first step to benefiting from advice. It puts the manager and adviser on the same playing field. However, winning the game depends on their working relationship.

### A working relationship that works

What can leaders do to make an advice relationship a healthy, productive one? Consider the example set by an executive whose facility at creating and sustaining advice relationships enabled him to finesse a particularly complex and thorny set of challenges.

In the days and weeks after taking over the top spot, this leader came to realize that his predecessor had hidden major financial problems. To get the company back on

#### RULES OF ADVICE TAKING

The most relevant, targeted advice in the world will be without value unless the leader is prepared to hear it. Here are some quick tips for becoming a better advice taker.

- Keep an open mind and pay close attention to the advice of people who may be more objective than you are. Make sure you grasp fully what they perceive and you may have overlooked.
- Never make an important decision on the basis of how it might affect your status in others' eyes. Doing so often leads to misreading or underestimating what it takes to succeed.
- Put together a balanced advice network. Avoid overrelying on the kinds of advice you feel most comfortable with at the expense of help mastering new abilities.
- When help is available, use it. Never allow pride or shame to get in the way.
- When a goal is so important that you are willing to risk a lot to achieve it, pay particular heed to the advice of the people whose support you need.

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track, the CEO recognized that he needed to make the senior team acknowledge the scope of the company's troubles and to get them to agree to some tough, unpleasant work.

Each successive meeting with his VP of finance and outside auditors only deepened his concern. By his four-month mark, he had spent most of his time on the worsening financial crisis and very little on the strategic and organizational questions that lay ahead.

The executive scheduled an off-site meeting with his direct reports followed by a town hall meeting of the entire management group to explain the situation the company

faced. The objective for the offsite was to ensure his VPs understood the problems and supported his plan to address them. Because he was not sure how they would react, he scheduled the offsite in two segments one week apart, so, if they resisted, he would have time to chart an alternate path.

During the first segment, the VPs tried to explain away his analysis. As the CEO expressed it later, "They were in denial. And because I was the new boss, they weren't going to believe it just because I said it."

Before the second segment, he put together a small group of advisers: One was a former board member who had high credibility among the senior staff. He had been on the interviewing team to fill the top job and was one of the first people in the company the CEO met. Another was a retired CFO of a Fortune 50 company who had also been an investigator at the Securities and Exchange Commission. The CEO was introduced to him by his third adviser, a former boss to whom he turned occasionally to talk through management problems he was facing.

He met with each adviser to sketch out the situation and ask for different types of help. He asked the retired board member to be a political adviser to help him convince the VPs that action had to be taken. He asked the retired CFO to advise him on the financial risks facing the companies and the remedies the auditors were suggesting. He asked his former boss to act as a sounding board as he navigated his way.

The former board member's attendance at the second part of the off-site meeting and also the town hall meeting that followed gave credibility to the CEO's arguments. The ex-CFO, with his experience in turnarounds and regulatory enforcement, proved invaluable in advising him on directing the auditors. And his former boss helped by listening, playing back what he heard, challenging his thinking, and providing encouragement.

Over the next year, the organization went through its first layoffs and reorganized, the VP of finance was fired, several powerful senior managers were forced to retire, the marketing organization was reorganized, and a division sold. Slowly, growth and profits rebounded, and two new products were introduced that showed great promise.

The CEO continued to meet with his three advisers throughout this period. They mainly stayed in the background but were available whenever the CEO needed their input. As he put it later, "I don't think I could have gotten through [that period] without help. There was just too much going on and so much to get done...and the stakes were so high because we were right on the edge; one wrong move and we would have fallen. I needed people I could

### FOUR QUALITIES OF HEALTHY ADVICE RELATIONSHIPS

To remain healthy, the advice relationship—like any relationship—requires effort on both sides. What defines a healthy advice relationship?

- The advice created within it is **practical**. Advice is of marginal utility if it is outside the capability of the organization or too simplistic because problems have been underestimated. Questions the leader should continually ask of herself include: Have I been clear enough about what I expect, spent enough time with the adviser, and given information needed for useful advice? Did my adviser push me enough to find out what he needed to know?
- The dialogues between the leader and the adviser should create **added value**. At the end of each substantive discussion, the leader should know something useful that she didn't know before or should have a clearer sense of the way forward.
- The relationship should be marked by **dependability**. The adviser does what he says he will do and is available when promised. The leader, for her part, prepares for meetings and keeps them, and minimizes last-minute changes.
- It is grounded in **commitment**. The leader knows that the adviser is genuinely interested in the issues she faces and cares about her success. An observant leader will judge commitment level by the adviser putting in whatever time is required to help, by the questions he asks and how intently, and by whether he is constantly thinking about solutions to the leader's problems.

## Getting Good Advice *(continued)*

trust who were outside the organization and [who] I could get to when I needed to talk.”

### **What did the leader do right?**

These advice relationships succeeded because the CEO made smart assessments before initiating them and took such an active role in managing them. First, the CEO realized he could not succeed on his own, given that he had never faced such a difficult, complex situation. Also, he realized that, as a new leader, he had not established enough of a loyal following for his tough actions to be supported.

Second, he skillfully managed interactions and worked hard to shape a strong relationship with the two advisers with whom he had not worked before; that relationship strengthened as together they tested options for practicality. He was open with them more than with anyone else about his fears that the organization was too fragile and that confidence was too low. In return, he received their increased commitment and dedication so that when he needed his own confidence boosted, these advisers were there to do so. He kept them up-to-date in between their meetings and made sure he was available whenever they tried to reach him.

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Whether new in senior jobs or navigating their companies through new territory, leaders intent on making important changes face difficult, unpredictable terrain. Just as explorers and frontiersmen who survived hired scouts and guides to help deal with the dangers of new territory, wise leaders seek out advisers with the specific expertise they need, and they work hard to make the advice relationship productive and useful. ♦

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*An adviser to senior managers and boards of directors, Dan Ciampa is the author of Taking Advice: How Leaders Get Good Advice and Use It Wisely (Harvard Business School Press, 2006) and coauthor, with Michael D. Watkins, of Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role (Harvard Business School Press, 1999). He can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.*