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The Way of Advice

If people were only as fond of accepting advice as they are of dispensing it, the world could make greater use of its reserves of knowledge and ability. Here we consider the taking and giving of advice, both of which require thought and skill ...

Of the many good reasons why people should make a habit of seeking advice, the best is that nobody is infallible. As the great Elizabethan playwright Ben Jonson wrote, "No man is so wise that he may not easily err if he takes no other counsel but his own."

From sages in ancient temples to consultants in modern office towers, the message has been handed down through the centuries that advice is essential to both individual and group endeavours. The Bible has much to say in support of giving and taking counsel. "A word spoken in due season, how good is it!" the Book of Proverbs exclaims.

But though the wisdom of the ages is unanimously agreed as to the desirability of advice, it has always taken note of the maddening reluctance of people to follow it. Sounding for all the world like a mother reproaching her teenaged son, The Book of Isaiah complains to the unrighteous, "your ears are wide open but nothing is heard."

When it comes to advice, the mass of people clearly subscribe to the biblical doctrine that it is more blessed to give than to receive. In fact, as the worldly French philosopher Duc de la Rochefoucauld observed, there is nothing people will give more lavishly. The sheer volume of advice, and the ease with which it can be thought up, is one of the chief reasons why it is often not taken seriously enough.

In his poem *Tam o'Shanter* Robert Burns presents a sardonic image of wives' "counsels sweet" and "sage advices" falling on the deaf ears of husbands. And it is true that much of the "advice" routinely dished out in households runs the risk of being treated as mere background noise.

This is especially so where young people are

concerned. It is ironic that people are most exposed to good counsel at a time of life when they are least-inclined psychologically to take advantage of it. Adolescents who are constantly being exhorted to "listen to me" are apt to regard parental guidance as part of an adult conspiracy against their age group.

Their disinclination to listen to the voices of maturity is based on the delusion that the advice of their elders is obsolete. Everything has changed since these older people were in their formative years, so that whatever they have to say is irrelevant — or so it seems. Generation after generation, the story is the same; youths have no way of knowing how little the fundamental elements of human happiness and misery have altered beneath the shifting surface of fashion and trends.

But "the best substitute for experience is being 18," and in many cases there is nothing to be done but wait until actual experience comes forth to teach its harsh lessons. It is unfortunate that nature has arranged it so that young people must learn from their own mistakes, instead of those of others who have gone before them and are only too glad to point out the pitfalls. But as Benjamin Franklin declared, "we can give *advice*, but we cannot give *conduct*. Remember this: they that will not be counselled cannot be helped."

It must be noted that not all advice consists of pure reason, and that not all of the sensible courses of action so sagely recommended to young persons are suited to their circumstances and personalities. What is good guidance for the majority may be very bad for some.

As a general rule, however, it is unwise to reject

any advice without first considering it carefully. If, as the saying goes, advice costs nothing to give, it also costs nothing to take into account.

These days, indeed, it might be deemed almost a luxury to have access to well-meaning advice, whether or not you act on it. There was a time in Canadian society when an ordinary person faced with an important decision would automatically have a number of experienced people to turn to — parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours, teachers, clergymen, etc. Now, in the state of isolation that accompanies mobility and urbanization, many people may have no one close to them to help them make up their minds.

It is particularly worth listening with deference to what older people have to say, on the reasonable premise that advances in age bring advances in understanding. De Rochefoucauld speculated that “old people like to give good advice, as solace for no longer being able to provide bad examples.” Be that as it may, people do tend to have more knowledge of the world and to grow more thoughtful the older they get.

No doubt a bad example can detract from the effectiveness of good advice. If he genuinely wants his patients to do what he recommends, a doctor who promotes a spartan diet should not let them see him gorging himself in a restaurant.

On the other hand, it could be said that the worst (or formerly worst) people make the best advisors,

Though we should never flatly reject advice, we should sometimes be wary of advisors

if only because they bring a certain expertise to bear on a subject. A cloistered saint cannot be of much help on the details of what to watch out for in the way of temptation. The numerous mutual-support groups that have grown out of Alcoholics Anonymous realize that those who have fallen and picked themselves up are in a better position to assist in the rehabilitation of others than those who have never slipped.

Support groups composed of individuals who face more or less the same problems in life have proved to be an especially valuable source of guidance on practical matters, in addition to providing mutual sympathy. The difficulty in persuading people to seek help from them or other sources of counselling illustrates the more general difficulty in getting people to act on advice of any kind.

Some seem to think that to turn to others for guidance is a sign of insufficient self-reliance, whereas it is really only sensible self-reliance to get all the back-

up you can muster. The Toronto management consultant William Nolan is an advocate of what he calls the “advice call,” in which people confronted with career decisions call on successful role models and ask their advice about their professional situations. “The advice call has worked for thousands of people in many fields” in grappling with career decisions, Nolan says.

One of the advantages of actively soliciting advice is that that you — not the person giving it — are in control of the process.

Many friendships have ended when a little friendly advice has been too close to the bone

You can weigh and sift through the recommendations, accepting and rejecting which parts are appropriate to you. You can canvass different viewpoints in the hope of

being exposed to new perspectives on the situation you face.

Of course, this does not apply to unsolicited advice, which is why many thinking persons are suspicious, if not exactly of advice, then of advisors. Part of this wariness arises from the fact that the advisor is in a position of psychological superiority over the “advisee.”

Some advisors glory in the opportunity to demonstrate how much brighter and generally better they are than their auditors. As Dr. Samuel Johnson observed, people will sometimes reject counsel given in this spirit even when it may be to their advantage: “Vanity is so frequently the apparent motive of advice that we, for the most part, summon our powers to oppose it without any very accurate inquiry whether it is right.”

Certainly much advice carries a whiff of patronization which makes it difficult for a sensitive person to accept cheerfully. For instance, prosperous people are in the habit of making helpful suggestions to the poor, such as “why don’t you get a job that pays more?”

Unsolicited counsel always stands to be despised, which is why a Spanish proverb holds that you should never give advice unless you are asked for it. Though it is usually well-intentioned enough, at least one form of it should be regarded watchfully. This is advice which contains a discernible degree of flattery. It has been shrewdly said that “when men abuse us, we should suspect ourselves, and when they praise us, them.”

Flattery is a fairly reliable indicator that someone is “advising” you to do something that is to his or her own advantage. Behind the reassuring face of a person whose only apparent concern is your welfare,

a conflict of interest may lurk. Of course, some people who call themselves counsellors make no bones about being out to sell you something. If they truly believe in their product, they can advise you to buy it with all the honesty in the world.

The more powerful or prosperous your position, the more self-serving advice you are likely to come in for. In his examination of men in high places, Francis Bacon noted that it is rare for them to receive counsel that is not bent to the giver's personal purposes, "except it be from a perfect and entire friend..."

Many the friendship has in fact been terminated when a little friendly advice has been *too* direct, and thus touched the nerve-ends of truth about a person's shortcomings. George Canning once made light of such situations in a little poem: "Give me the avowed, the erect, the manly foe/ bold I can meet, perhaps turn his blow!/ But of all plagues, good Heavens, thy wrath can send,/ save, save, oh save me from the *candid friend*."

Nevertheless, if their friendship is to qualify as solid and true, friends are positively obliged to treat one another with frankness. It is only sensible to have friends whose honest opinions you can ask for on matters so personal that your vision is likely to be distorted by your own self-love.

Referring to the judgment of friends is one way of avoiding the perils of having your own judgment stuck in the rut of your personality, with all its inherent prejudices. In fact, contrasting personality types can form creative and productive relationships by trading their peculiar insights — the believer and the sceptic, the optimist and the pessimist, the individualist and the participator.

In de Rochefoucauld's opinion, "it takes nearly as much ability to know how to profit from good advice as to know how to act oneself." Can that ability be cultivated? Is there an art or science to the taking and assimilation of advice?

Though there are no real rules, a few logical guidelines might help us get the best out of advisors. Such as:

- Never ask only one person for an opinion on a situation. Ask several. In this way you can cover a range of considerations, some of which might otherwise have been overlooked, when you make up your mind.
- Be critical. Don't accept advice holus-bolus. There is a story in management consulting circles about a chief executive officer who implemented a consultant's report down to the last detail. Far from being pleased with this, the consultants were stunned; they had expected him to make changes

to their plan to fit the detailed circumstances. The result of his uncritical acceptance of their recommendations was a mess.

- Literally *listen* to advice to make sure you have understood precisely what was said. Hear your advisor out without interruption. When he or she is finished, ask questions to bring out points that may have been passed by. At the end of the discussion, restate the conclusion in your own words to make sure that the meaning you gathered was actually what was meant.
- Try not to be defensive if the advice contains criticism of you or the way you do things. Don't seek to find personal fault with the advisor to disqualify him or her as a judge. Don't be flippant, don't argue, and don't try to change the subject to avoid a disagreeable message. Don't be paranoid in the face of criticism, looking for a hidden agenda on your critic's part.

Since advice usually concentrates how things might be changed, an element of criticism of the way things stand at present is almost inevitable. Advice that is devoid of criticism of any kind is often not really advice at all. It is merely what comes of people asking for advice when all they actually want is approval. Their minds are made up as to their course of action, but if there are negative repercussions, they can always point to the fact that they consulted with someone before they went ahead.

It takes real character not to be satisfied with the charitable opinion that nothing much needs to be changed and to insist on a more rigorous assessment of a question. Even more character is required to reject the easy way out when you are in the position of having to give advice.

In cases where painful adjustments of behaviour are called for, it is tempting to obviate unpleasantness by recommending that little or nothing be changed, even though you know in your heart that changes would be in the subject's best interests in the long run.

The manner of giving advice is almost as important to its effectiveness as the advice given. Before you even start to dispense it, you should examine your own attitude, to wit:

- How do you feel about the problem? Do you have any fixed prejudice regarding the general subject that might colour your judgment on the specific case before you?
- How do you feel, period? What sort of mood are you in: Depressed or happy? Is life going swimmingly for you, or are you in the grip of an emotional crisis? Try to compensate for these factors when you form your advice.



- What is your personal feeling towards the person you are about to advise? Do you especially like him or her, or the opposite? If you like certain people, you may be inclined to be too easy on them, shielding them from disagreeable realities they should rightly be made aware of. If you do not like them, you may be overly hard on them, coming down with a sledge hammer on minor faults that really don't need to be changed.

All this, of course, refers to what might be called general advice of the kind that is passed around informally among friends, acquaintances, and family members. There is a categorical difference between it and expert advice by people who are in the position of giving it because they know things most people do not know.

We often solicit the advice of such experts on our own account — lawyers, accountants, decorators, and, if we are unfortunate enough to need them, marriage or other types of personal counsellors. Businesses and governments employ a variety of expert consultants all the time.

Apart from ascertaining that they really do know what they are talking about, the prime requirement for dealing with consultants is to be sure that you understand what they are saying. If there is a misunderstanding as to what they are recommending, large sums in fees could go down the drain. Consultants are notorious for using jargon, euphemisms, evasions and other gobbledegook, so it is especially important to pin them down as to their meaning. In dealings with them, the rules of good listening must be assiduously applied: hear them out carefully, question any statement that may be unclear, and confirm the meaning of everything that is said by restating it in your own words.

Capital cities seem to contain more and more advisors with every passing month. Not only are they legion in the bureaucracy, but they form phalanxes around the politicians. When you match the number of "spin doctors" and "mavens" on the political scene with the number of political and policy blunders made, you can see that not all counsel is wise counsel by any means.

It may be, however, that where politicians and policy-makers go wrong is by listening to *too much* advice, especially of the cautious kind, so that what

began as clear-cut policies are compromised into a state of confusion or uselessness. With power hanging in the balance, political advisors are prone to be more concerned with what is expedient than with what is right.

"In a multitude of counsellors there is safety," the Book of Proverbs says, and in a way this applies to politics. When politicians are unwilling to tackle a sensitive issue, they send for someone to study it in the hope that, by the time the task force or commission is ready to make its recommendations, the problem will have faded away. By continually calling for advice as to whether to act on prior advice, action can be postponed indefinitely. Like some individuals, governments will also try out one advisor after another until they finally find someone willing to say what they want to hear.

The same tactics are also employed by managers in business who are afraid of making substantive changes. An ideal way to keep an issue from popping up to spoil a comfortable way of life is to smother it with studies; with any luck, you can study it to death.

But the fact that recourse to advice is sometimes abused should take nothing away from the value of the advisory process. Advice is a great generator of synergism, the interaction of efforts in such a way that the total effect is much greater than the sum of the efforts had they been made independently. The great political philosopher Edmund Burke was impressed by the "multiplier effect" of advice: "He who calls in the aid of an equal understanding doubles his own; and he who profits by superior understanding raises his powers to a level with the heights of the superior understanding he unites with."

It would therefore seem self-defeating not to search out good advice wherever possible. Why would anybody not want to? Burke's contemporary, the distinguished English preacher John Balguy, found the answer to that in the sin of vanity: "Whoever is wise is apt to suspect and be diffident of himself, and upon that account is willing to hearken unto counsel; whereas the foolish man, being, in proportion to his folly, full of himself, and swallowed up in conceit, will seldom take any counsel but his own, and for the very reason that it is his own."

