

Stop *Giving* *Grievous Advice*

By Lorne R. Armstrong

In thinking about this issue I considered several different titles while looking for a good synonym for “lousy” – as in stop giving lousy advice. *Lousy* didn’t quite say it. *Grievous* captures some of the concerns I have with advice giving.

But before we go further down that path, let’s distinguish the type of advice we’re talking about here. There is a world of difference between advice on how to deal with non-living objects (a hammer, software, processes, etc.) and how to deal with people. Here we’re talking about giving advice on how to deal with other people. This ranges from advice to a friend on how to deal with someone in their life or a colleague on how to deal with their boss, to advice on leadership, communication or collaborating with others.

YOUR STRENGTHS ARE NOT OTHERS’ STRENGTHS

Two primary problems arise in advice giving. First, we can’t help but give advice from our strengths. If you think about it, for a minute, it would be hard to give advice on any other basis. Common sense would have you want to give others the best advice you can. You recommend to others what you have found works best – for you. Unfortunately, in a sense, what works best for you is in your area of strength. It’s actually not unfortunate for you – it’s just unfortunate for others if they take your advice and try to resolve or accomplish something with someone else out of your strength instead of theirs. They are highly unlikely to be successful trying to operate out of your strength. Others, like you, will be most effective operating from their strength – not from trying to emulate someone else’s strength.

Your greatest strengths are unique to you, and others don’t have easy access to your strengths. In fact, most of the time even you are blind in your area of greatest strength. In the area of your greatest strength you have never seen the world differently; there are some things you have always been impatient with, or patient with. Some things you find easy and don’t understand why others don’t find those things as easy as you or some things you seem to struggle with no matter how hard you try.

One way of gaining some insight into your greatest strengths is to become aware of what annoys or bothers you; what seems obvious to you that others don’t seem to notice or appear to struggle with; the

common sense you see that is frustratingly uncommon. When any of these occur you are in an area of your strength. And, at the level where others are blind to what appears as obvious to you, you have access to a strength – a way of relating – that others do not have your access to.

PEOPLE ARE NOT THINGS

The second difficulty arises when we do not see that there is a tremendous difference between giving advice about how to deal with physical things and advice on how to communicate, lead, manage, collaborate, or resolve issues with other people.

The expert in Excel can give us good advice on using Excel pivot tables and the golf coach can give Tiger Woods good advice on improving his swing. With good Excel advice we can manipulate the data into a pivot table, but another level of judgment is required to determine which data and how to interpret the results. Similarly, Tiger can improve the mechanics of his swing but tremendous judgment is required to determine which club to swing and where to aim in the particular conditions of the day.

Advice about relating with others can be thought of either as recommendations about principles or advice about how to do something or what to say and when to say it.

There is less risk in giving advice at the level of principles¹ like the following: Start where you are – with yourself, others and the situation – not where you think you or they *should* be. Be willing to earn sufficient trust in each new situation and relationship. Do not mistake your view for the truth. At the level of principles, people have the opportunity – indeed a demand – to bring their own strengths to it.

The trouble starts when you start telling others what to do or how to do it at the level of specific actions:

“The next time he says that, I’d say, ‘What were you thinking!’”

“You need to tell them that their performance needs to improve.”

“The next time that happens, call a meeting of the whole team.”

This type of advice ignores or assumes a tremendous amount and following through relies on the skill and strength of the person giving the advice.

For example, it does not take into account the history, strength and nature of the relationship between the people involved, the current circumstances for you, for them, and the larger context of the organization, team or family.

Additionally, it does not take into account your strengths and way of being and their strengths and way of being. For example, if you were the

¹ Adapted from Contegrity Program Designs precepts.

one giving the advice, “You need to tell them that their performance needs to improve”, it is very likely that you would be entirely capable of engaging with “them” regardless of their answer. Alternatively, while you are giving that advice now, you would be discerning enough in the time leading up to *telling them their performance needs to improve* to pick the right time to do it, or to hear that something else is called for.

Your advice is offered from *your* strength and predicated on *your* ability to discern appropriate action and handle the situation you are giving advice about.

When others try to emulate your strengths, or try to do what you recommend without your strengths, discernment and judgment in the area, that’s when your advice becomes grievous²:

1. Causing grief, pain or anguish.
2. Flagrant; outrageous; atrocious.
3. Burdensome or oppressive.
4. Causing fear or anxiety.
5. Shockingly brutal or cruel.

ADVICE FOR YOU

So now here’s my advice for you.

Discover your unique strengths and develop others in your strength. Engaging with others to contributing your strengths to them will develop you in the area of your strength.

Develop your ability to “hear” others unique strengths and help them develop ways to put their strengths to work to accomplish what they intend to accomplish.

It’s far more effective and far less painful than trying to get them to do it your way!

² Grievous. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/grievous> (accessed: May 09, 2008).