

ROCHESTER

Democrat and Chronicle

May 31, 2011

Leaders should listen first, speak last

WOMEN AT WORK

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Perhaps you've had this challenge as a leader: finding that team members or co-workers are relying too heavily on you to solve problems. Knowing when and under what circumstances to give advice can be tricky.

Let's say a direct report approaches you with difficulty regarding an assignment. You may be tempted to step in and suggest a solution based on your experience. However, doing so erodes that person's power to address the challenge and grow from it. It also creates an unhealthy over-reliance on you.

In many cases, when people ask for advice, leaders aren't hearing what they really want. What they really want is the gift of presence: to be heard and understood. Leaders give the gift of presence by listening and asking questions.

People don't need leaders to solve every problem. What they need are leaders who encourage them to access their own ability to do it. Help them by refusing to accept their "Stuck Stories". You can get to more fertile ground by asking open-ended questions such as: "What's at stake here?" "What are some options?" "What do you think?"

The more you adopt the stance that people are inherently creative and capable, the more they gain confidence, generate ideas and uncover their own solutions. As they try on new thoughts, be sure to validate. Throw in acknowledgements such as, "That's interesting. Say more." Get them to go deeper. Open the door to their wisdom.

Now that you've listened, questioned and validated, it's perfectly ok to ask, "Are you open to a suggestion?" If the answer is yes, go ahead, give your advice and rest assured that you've empowered, not overpowered. As Peter Drucker, the father of modern management famously counseled, "Listen first, speak last."

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