

A Word of Advice



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

February 11, 2015

Helping our members think through their risk-related challenges is incredibly rewarding. We approach member questions as wonderful opportunities to learn about and understand the pressure points in risk practice in the public, nonprofit, and business sectors.

But although we formulate and dispense [Risk Help](#) each and every day, a new article in the Jan-Feb 2015 edition of the *Harvard Business Review* has led me to realize that like every profession, the advising business is fraught with risk.

According to David A. Garvin and Joshua D. Margolis, authors of "[The Art of Giving and Receiving Advice](#)," the essence of advice-giving is wielding "soft" influence that "shapes important decisions while empowering others to act." And there are several tendencies that short-circuit the influence of a trusted advisor. These include:

- **Overstepping boundaries** — Have you ever been given advice you didn't ask for? Many years ago I bristled when a trusted advisor offered unsolicited parenting advice. Although his suggestions on anything related to organizational management had always been incredibly helpful, I resented his tips for taming my daughter's impertinence. Garvin and Margolis warn that "Though many people give unsolicited advice, it's usually considered intrusive and seldom followed."
- **Misdiagnosing the problem** — A second common mistake made by management mavens is haste: offering solutions without taking time to understand the problem. Try to formulate and pose a few probing questions before attempting to provide a relevant response to a caller's question. A good internal protocol is to view the initial question as the beginning of a conversation. And it's not unusual when the "answer" leads to additional, more complex questions.
- **Communicating advice poorly** — A common complaint of consultant-weary advisees is that many so-called experts deliver only vague or jargon-filled recommendations. Garvin and Margolis explain that "Nothing causes paralysis like a laundry list of options with no explicit guidance on where to start or how to work through and winnow the list."

The HBR article includes a suggested process for receiving and giving advice. Consisting of five stages, the process highlights the importance of taking time to develop a shared understanding of the problem. The process also emphasizes the fact that while an effective advisor may suggest options and key considerations, the decision about what to do must remain with the advice-seeker.

Seeking the advice of a trusted advisor, colleague or mentor can help you broaden your perspective on the risk-related challenges facing your entity. If approached with care, candor and a commitment to jargon-free communications, the relationship between advisee and advisor can be a collaborative and mutually rewarding endeavor.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and a trusted advisor to nonprofit boards and leadership teams. Melanie's consulting work includes leading governance-themed risk assessments, ERM engagements, and youth protection initiatives. Melanie invites your inquiries about NRMC consulting services at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.