# How to talk to your staff

By Terry Barker

The second book in a three part series

[Communications Skills for Managers Old and New](http://www.amazon.ca/Communication-Skills-Managers-Old-BossTalk-ebook/dp/B00ABKOFIC/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195559&sr=8-1&keywords=communications+skills+for+managers+terry+barker)

[How to Talk to Your Staff](http://www.amazon.ca/talk-your-staff-Boss-Talk-ebook/dp/B00ABL1K52/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195588&sr=8-1&keywords=how+to+talk+to+your+staff+terry+barker)

[How to Conduct a Successful Management Interview](http://www.amazon.ca/Management-Interview-Boss-Talk-ebook/dp/B00ABN2H16/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195649&sr=8-3&keywords=communications+terry+barker)

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## RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Welcome to part two of my series of books on managing people in the new millennium. Learning some of the following skills and concepts will save you a lot of time and trouble in the months and years to come, and you’ll start seeing the benefits right away.

Let’s start with some basic relationship skills

Some people believe it's impossible to change someone else's behaviour. And it doesn't help to tell someone to “quit acting like a kid” or “smarten up”. That just seems to make people worse.

Let's look at changing behaviour from two standpoints: on the job and in the home.

**ON THE JOB**

Before you try to change another person’s behaviour, you must define the “discrepancy”. In other words, find out what is the difference between what they are actually doing (the performance) and what they are supposed to be doing (the performance standard).

Then follow these steps:

1. Ask, “Is the discrepancy important enough for me to spend the time on it that it would demand?”

If the answer is no, forget about it.

2. If I do decide to spend the time, do I have a hope of succeeding?

If no, forget about it. You can’t win.

3. Ask, “Is this discrepancy caused by lack of skill?”

If the answer is yes, try one of the ideas in List A.

If the answer is no, try List B.

**LIST A (SKILL DEFICIENCY)**

Practice sessions

Skill maintenance program

Feedback

Checklists (job card)

Formal training

Refresher training

On the job training

Change job requirements

Transfer

Terminate

If you decide that the discrepancy is tied to a skill deficiency, then it makes sense to give the employee a chance to develop the skill (if they don't have it) or rebuild it (if they once had it). Skills can rust through lack of exercise.

If on the other hand you decide that the employee does have the skill but isn't using it, then look to more psychological causes. These might include punishments for good performance (like beheading the bearer of bad tidings in ancient times). Or there might be rewards for non-performance, such as excessive overtime. Examine List B:

**LIST B: OTHER CAUSES**

Remove performance punishment

Remove non-performance reward

Give useful and timely feedback

Motivate

Remove job obstacles

Improve working conditions

Counsel

Transfer

Terminate

Perhaps the employee doesn't think anybody cares whether the job is done or not. In that case, offer feedback.

Sometimes the job is just too difficult to do under the circumstances. Unclear instructions, missing parts, balky machines, poor lighting and too much noise are examples of job obstacles and poor conditions.

Finally, consider the possibility of personal problems so overwhelming that they affect performance. When your marriage is collapsing, it's hard to keep your mind on your drill press. Take a few minutes and do some effective listening.

**IN THE HOME**

If you want someone close to you to alter their behaviour, start by changing your own part of the relationship. In other words, if you want someone to start loving you, you yourself should become lovable.

There are six things you can do with behaviour:

DO NOTHING: leave it alone. “Iffen it ain't broke, don't fix it,” and “Don't monkey with a well-running machine.” DO MORE OF IT: increase or enhance the behaviour. DO LESS OF IT: reduce the behaviour.

STOP IT: cease the behaviour altogether. START IT: commence a new behaviour, perhaps to replace an old one. CHANGE IT: alter the behaviour in some direction which is different from the old..

A simple example would be smoking cigarettes. One can just continue the pack-a-day habit; increase to 2 packs; reduce to half-a-pack; quit cold-turkey; start smoking, if you are not now a smoker; or change to something different (e.g. cigars).

A more practical example could be “picking on your son”. He has the table manners of a rhinoceros, and you have been helpless to resist the urge to nag at every meal. It is destroying your relationship, and you wish to do something about it.

Using the list, you see that you could:

Continue the practice.

Criticize him even more.

Criticize him only at lunch, or every second day.

Quit bothering him about it. Forget it.

Start a new behaviour, such as complimenting him for mowing the lawn or getting good marks.

Change the behaviour into something else. Decide that you'll study table manners through the ages with him and see which of them make sense.

Listen — changing relationships, especially with those we care about, is a serious business. It shouldn't be left up to chance, and “hope it comes out right”. It's a good idea to plan things out, and even try the words out on someone you trust just to see what they sound like when spoken out loud. Rehearsal will help make you effective, not phony.

**SIX STEPS FOR CHANGING YOUR OWN BEHAVIOUR**

Analyze the behaviour you want to change. Describe it. Write it down. Nail it firmly to the wall so it can't get away on you. Decide which of the six options you'll apply to this behaviour. If the present behaviour is negative, you'll probably want to stop it, do less of it, or change it.

Make a plan for getting from where you are now to where you want to be. Set a time limit for various phases: for instance, cut down to half a pack by August 1, quarter pack by September 1.

Reward yourself lavishly when you do succeed in meeting a deadline. If you fail, don't worry about it: just start again.

Practice the new behaviour consciously until you feel it is safely in your repertoire of natural patterns.

Change some other behaviour!

Some people try to change everything all at once. That's a cop-out! The banker who gets religion on Sunday night is back throwing widows and orphans out on the street by Monday noon because he forgot himself and lit a cigarette at breakfast. “I tried,” he says, “and I failed, so I'll just go back to my normal sinful self.” You can't change the whole person at one go, and if you try, you are probably secretly trying to fail so you won't have to change anything.

The rule is: CHANGE ONE BEHAVIOUR AT A TIME.

So go change one!

## COACHING SKILLS

One hot Saturday afternoon in a lumber supply store, the boss was trying to teach a young woman how to handle the cash. A customer wanted a credit card refund. The young woman didn't know which form to use, so she asked her boss.

“I already explained it to you a hundred times,” he growled. “Here, stupid, I guess I'll have to show you again.”

She burst into tears. The customer told the manager not to worry, he'd write direct to the credit card company — and mention the treatment the girl had received. Two customers decided on second thought not to buy anything that afternoon after all. The girl ran out the door.

The boss no doubt had troubles of his own, but he violated the most basic rule of dealing with employees:

Never criticize an employee in front of others.

There are thousands of reasons for this dictum. Two of them are: it's not fair to punish people when they can't answer or explain; and they lose face in front of their peers (and thus lose effectiveness as a worker.) But the biggest one is that when you became boss, and took the extra pay that goes with it, you gave up the right to lose your temper on the job.

Did you get that? You can't lose your temper on the job. It's unfair and unprofessional.

And it plays hell with your organization's efficiency.

One of our most important responsibilities is training our employees. Sometimes it's a matter of updating their skills, or checking performance to see if they're still up to standard. Other times, you have new hires who must be taught basics. Or there might be new equipment or procedures to master.

The manager of that lumber store was doing his job, but doing it badly. He had to train her, but not like that!

So — how do you go about teaching Susie Slowlearner or Bill Thickhead to handle refunds?

**ON THE JOB TRAINING**

Most of our on the job training is in the form of coaching. It means that we have to:

(1) explain,

(2) demonstrate,

(3) get them to imitate the demonstration themselves, and then

(4) give them feedback (positive if they succeed, constructive if they don't).

It really does make sense, doesn't it? Getting impatient, yelling at people, making them cry or lose their own tempers in turn — not much learning can happen in such a relationship. There was a day when all you needed was a whip, but you don't have slaves any more, do you? Verbal whips are a poor substitute, and will probably win you a disciplinary hearing of some kind (with you on the receiving end).

Let's go through those four steps in some detail.

## THE FOUR STEPS TO GOOD COACHING

**1.EXPLAIN**. Make sure you're thoroughly prepared, with any training aids (forms, equipment, etc.) on hand and a simple plan that you might have scribbled down on a memo pad (or, if you're luckier than you deserve, inherited from a thoughtful predecessor who took the trouble to write his plan down and file it where you could find it).

In bite-sized segments, in simple language, tell them exactly what you are going to demonstrate. One piece at a time, please. Don't try to tell the whole story in one huge indigestible glop.

Explain clearly, then ask them questions which will tell you if they heard and understood. “Where does the customer sign?” “Which form would you use for a refund on Visa?” “Show me where the phone number goes.” “What do you do if the imprint isn't clear?” And so on.

**2. DEMONSTRATE**. Make sure the trainee can see everything you do. Don't hide the action with your body. Explain as you go.

**3. IMITATE**. Give them the imprinter and some blanks. You become the customer. Use a little role play ingenuity: “Hi, I'm John Q. Customer, and I'd like to charge this purchase, please.”

**4. FEEDBACK**. This is the most crucial (and difficult) part of the whole procedure. Trainees are anxious for your approval. You're the boss, remember? They need to get positive strokes from you.

It doesn't matter whether they are your employees, friends, or your kids. The pattern is always the same:

Offer praise for work done correctly. You don't need to be lavish about it, but do begin by recognizing the value of the trainee's efforts (even if they failed). “You got the form in correctly, and the imprint was nice and clear.”

Treat mistakes as problems to be fixed, not as sins to be punished. This is the most important skill for a manager to possess: taking a positive attitude to employee errors. If you waste your time blaming trainees for their mistakes instead of helping them learn correct techniques, you will probably produce a crop of fearful, hostile and badly-trained subordinates who are afraid to ask questions or admit slip-ups. And that, my fine scaly friend, means that sabotage and great hairy predicaments are waiting for you just beyond the bend in the road.

End on a note of encouragement. Yea! Yippee!!! NICE GOING, PAL!!!!

Pat Nygaard worked for a terrific boss who always used to say, “Bring me the problems when they're small enough to handle. Don't wait till they're great monstrous dragons with pointy teeth and bad breath.” Pat had to go to him one day with a sad tale about how he'd failed to write a submission clearly enough. There was a one hundred thousand dollar discrepancy between him and his funding department. His boss could have reacted to the bad news in a variety of ways. He could have screamed like a wounded weasel, reared up like a kodiak bear, or savaged him like a wolf. Instead, he merely blinked and said, “Well, how can we fix it?”

Those are powerful words when giving negative feedback in the coaching process: “How can we fix it?” Not, “Damn but you're stupid.” Or, “I already explained that!”

Ask, instead, “How can we fix it?”

## CONSENSUS SEEKING

If you make solo decisions and then call your staff together to tell them what you've decided, it's called *Rule By Boss.*

If you get them to vote on an issue it's called *Democratic*.

But if you take the time and trouble to develop full, free, unforced agreement, it's called *Consensual Style.*

Otto Kratt, a senior manager in a big government department, demonstrates these methods:

“The first method is — I make the decision,” he says. “That's the traditional way, I might add. When they were building the pyramids they didn't stop to consult with the slaves on how to haul the granite. No, the boss decided and if the slaves didn't perform they were whipped.”

“What's the second way?” you ask.

“Voting. I tell 'em, 'Look, we're gonna be democratic about this. The majority rules. As for me, I'm gonna vote YES. How are you gonna vote? Howard? Milly? John? Maria?' Then they vote the way they're supposed to.”

“It doesn't sound very democratic,” you say.

“It's as democratic as I'm gonna let it get,” he growls.

“What's the third way?”

He looks at you sideways, as if you'd said a bad word. “They call it consensus,” he says, “but I call it doo-doo. It means that everyone has to agree. But actually it doesn't bother me much. I just say 'Okay everybody, if those goons at the top say we gotta have consensus, I'll give them consensus. I'll tell you what we're gonna do — and you all freely decide I'm right. Okay?”

Otto's negative feelings about his staff will keep him at Method One until they start picking orchids at the North Pole. But some of the rest of us do have different feelings and will want to use different techniques.

Any of the three decision-making methods will work if you obey one all-important rule:

Tell them in advance what decision-making method you intend to use, and then stick to it.

People are very forgiving. If you want to make all the decisions, they'll let you. You're the boss, remember? But they have trouble with inconsistency.

If you tell them, “I want everyone to get involved in this decision. We don't leave here till we reach consensus” — and then you get impatient and say, “All right, I'll let you know tomorrow what I've decided” — they'll be a lot less enthusiastic about your next meeting. In fact some of them may find excuses not to attend. Can you afford that?

There's a story about Sam Goldwyn. Someone told him he should get more involvement from his vice-presidents. He called a meeting and thundered at them, “NOW LISTEN! I don't want you to be a bunch of YES-MEN!” They all chanted, “Yes, Boss.”

“That's better,” he said. “ From now on I want you to say whatever's on your mind — even if it costs you your job!”

At least he was consistent. His subordinates knew exactly what to expect from him.

The method which seems to give us the best shot in today's technological world, in which staff are often highly trained, capable and creative, is consensus. The reason it works best is that people who have input into making group decisions usually feel some ownership over the decisions that are reached, and will therefore try harder to make them work.

How do you make consensus work?

**1. PRIOR AGREEMENTS**

The very first piece of business you must do when you form a team is to agree on your decision-making method. You probably will settle on consensus, but what if you get a hung jury or you run out of time?

Get your group to agree on both up-front back-up methods.

Then, months from now when you need a solid decision at 4 PM today and the group can't agree, you call up that old agreement and it will be accepted.

**2. ASK FOR IT**

Use expressions such as “Well, do we all agree that — ?” and “Do we have agreement on — ?” Each time you ask such a question, you move the session along a little.

**3. ENCOURAGE CROSS-TALK**

Help members to talk to each other, not just to you. Use eye-contact to let them know that you expect them to interact (when Bill is speaking to you, look at the person you want Bill to talk to. Bill's eyes will follow yours.) When Maria has spoken her piece, ask Helen to comment on it: and look at Maria while Helen is speaking.

**4. GET UNANIMITY**

Don't settle for less than 100% free agreement unless you're stuck with the situation described in (1) above.

**5. INSIST ON TOTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Make sure that each member participates. If some are shy or retiring, ask them directly for their contributions.

Staff personally involved in decision-making usually form strong bonds and become powerful working groups. a force to be reckoned with in the organization.

## DELEGATION SKILLS

If you got to be boss because you were the best police officer or typist or machinist or clerk in your organization, you may find it particularly hard to delegate your former tasks.

This is partly because you were the best, after all, and so no one else can do it as well as you. So if you delegate, you feel you are settling for a lesser quality of production.

There is also the possibility that you know the old job but you haven't learned the new one yet. The old job was solving crimes or typing or machining or filing: the new job is supervising those who solve crimes, type, machine, or file. The skills are totally different.

If you don't delegate tasks, you will have to do them all yourself. What's more, your staff will be under-employed, and you know what they say about idle hands. Besides, aren't you supposed to train and develop subordinates?

This is true of bossing a watch. a shift, an office, a department, a bowling team, a detachment, or a family.

You must settle for less quality and quantity of work than what you could produce so that later, when they are trained, your subordinates will be able to produce much more and much better together than you ever could alone.

**ALLOCATE OR DELEGATE?**

If you give a typist a report to type for three this afternoon and check from time to time, you are allocating work. Allocate means “assign”.

But if you say to your typist, “I'm making you responsible for all report typing. You can do it yourself or get others to do it if you are too busy. I'll see to it that they all know that you're in charge of this work. I'll check with you on Fridays at two p.m. to have a look at the week's production” — that's delegation. Delegation means “deputizing”.

When you allocate work you simply assign tasks. But when you delegate you must also give the other person authority, responsibility and accountability.

Authority means “the right to act”. You have given the delegatee enough power to be able to accomplish the task (including the right to get others to act, if necessary). If you give them a task but withhold the authority, you have created an impossible situation.

Responsibility means “the duty to act”. If you give employees power but you don't require them to do anything, then you have put the cat among the pigeons. The whole thing becomes a game, a sort of exercise in triviality. “The boss doesn't seem to care whether I do it or not — she never asks me how I'm doing. So why bother?”

The third element in the triangle is accountability. It means “the need to meet standards”. A person can use authority to accomplish tasks for which he is responsible, but unless s/he is also accountable the performance could be ineffective (poor results) and inefficient (poor use of resources).

**UNDERSTANDING THE TASK**

Good practice requires that boss and employee sit down together and develop an understanding of the task. The employee (with your help) should prepare to do the following things:

Plan the task. Set goals. Consider what alternative methods there are to accomplish the goal. Pick the best strategy. Set reporting dates.

Organize the operation. Decide what materials, finances and personnel are necessary.

Lead the group (if there is one). Have regular team meetings. Learn good leadership skills.

Report. Evaluate progress at previously agreed-on check points.

Note that you must teach the subordinate to plan, organize, lead and evaluate. You must also exhibit enough trust in them so that they are encouraged to think for themselves and make decisions, but not so that they feel abandoned. Trust doesn't mean leaving people out in the rain to rust. It means giving them room to fly, but with a safety net.

**MONITORING**

There's a fine line between having regular reporting sessions and breathing down their necks.

If you don't have them report to you, how will you know if they need help? And how will you know if the work is going well, and a positive stroke is in order?

On the other hand, the surest way to create a mistake is to monitor a subordinate's work too closely. Try it for yourself. Go out into the office and stand behind a typist. How long will it take for a typographical error to occur?

Some reporting mechanisms are:

Written reports (daily, weekly, monthly) — often used by sales personnel or those workers who are on their own out in the field somewhere.

Oral reports. Useful when the subordinate needs coaching or feedback and recognition. Sit down together over a cup of tea on prearranged occasions to discuss progress to date.

MBO plans. “Management By Objectives” is a system in which subordinates agree to achieve certain work goals within definite time frames. These deadlines are great excuses to get together for a review!

**ACTION PLAN**

Here's a little chart to help you decide if you can delegate more than you are doing.

First, sit down and make a list of all your major duties. Include all of them, even the ones which you are personally responsible for and cannot be delegated.

Second, check off whether each duty is PRIMARY (both urgent and important) or SECONDARY (either urgent or important, or neither).

Third, decide whether the task could or should be delegated. If you say it can not be delegated, ask yourself why. Be round with yourself: demand a proper answer.

Finally, design a little action plan to start delegating one new task tomorrow. Do it as an experiment. Don't be a new broom sweeping clean — you'll scare the stuffing out of your staff if you do! If you get good results, after a while try another bit of delegation. You may even find you like having all that clean desk in front of you, and the empty in-basket, and an industrious staff (but then, if you manage yourself out of work to do, you'll just have to start doing what you're paid for — managing). Make a little chart with three headings: TASK, PRIMARY OR SECONDARY, and CAN I DELEGATE IT?

## PERSONAL COUNSELLING

We tend to avoid this kind of interview— it is much harder to do well, has a greater risk connected to it (and more catastrophic consequences for failure), and can sometimes be downright embarrassing.

You can't do any homework in advance because you don't usually know it's happening until you're right in it.

You can't command this kind of interview. Your role as enabler — not commander — is to help other people make sense of their personal problems without interfering or offering advice. So that they can reach decisions that will let them get on with their lives.

**1.WHAT IS PERSONAL COUNSELLING?**

Personal counselling can sneak up on you when you aren't expecting it:

*EMPLOYEE Hey, Boss, got a minute?*

*BOSS Sure, what's up?*

*EMPLOYEE I think I need some time off. It's my kid. He's just been diagnosed as having leukemia...my wife is a basket case and I'm not much better.*

Or you're in the middle of what you think is a disciplinary interview:

*BOSS I notice that you've been late for work five times this month. That's very unusual for you. You've worked here for ten years, according to your file, and you've never been late once — until now.*

*EMPLOYEE You'd be late too if your husband beat you up and left you unconscious on the kitchen floor. He's lost his job, see, and he's started drinking....*

Sometimes people will come right out with it, if they know you have skills in counseling:

*BILL Roger, I'm in trouble and I need help. You're a good listener, and that's what I need right now.*

*ROGER Uh, well, sure, Bill.*

**2. WHEN DO YOU COUNSEL?**

Twenty years ago, the answer would have been “As seldom as possible”.

We expected staff to “leave their troubles at home” and not be wimps on the job.

We've since learned that it doesn't make the least bit of difference where people do their suffering; it pervades them 24 hours a day anyway. Commanding people to “leave their troubles at home” is just about as silly as asking them to deposit their body organs in a box at the door.

If emotions are stirred up, body chemistry changes. The glands work overtime. Hormones play crazy games through our blood stream. We don't sleep properly at night, and so we are tired and cranky during the day. We make mistakes and we're late for work, which causes the boss to lean on us and make things even worse.

At the end of this downward spiral, we are at odds both with our work place and our homes, leaving no haven.

Sometimes people almost deliberately seem to draw your attention to themselves through their degraded performance. They may welcome your inquiry.

Sometimes they'll approach you. They want you to know that they haven't lost interest in the job — it's just that they're going through a “bad patch”, and they want you to understand.

And sometimes they're in such pain that they can't tell you about it, though they might want to. If that is the case, you may well fail at the counselling attempt: but if you're sensitive to the situation you can still play a useful backstop role, letting the other person know you're on his/her side.

A driver for a soft drink company was going through a painful divorce. He had worked for the company for five years and had a good record. He understood that every driver is also a salesman, and should try to increase his clients' orders: but for the past few months his sales had been decreasing.

One day his boss called him in.

Certain he was going to be fired, the driver gritted his teeth and waited. But the boss merely said, “Sit down, Jack. We haven't had a chat for a long time.”

Jack sat down, and the two of them chatted for a few minutes about inconsequential matters. Finally the boss said, “Jack, I've noticed that your stats are down. I wonder if you want to tell me what the problem is.”

Jack shook his head numbly, afraid that if he spoke he might start to cry.

His boss said, “Well, I don't want to push. If you do want to talk about it, I'm here for you. The company has a lot of services to help staff, you know: there's a psychologist and a doctor, and debt and legal counselling as well. Just let me know how we can help.”

He stood up and shook Jack's hand.

When Jack got behind the wheel of his truck, and realized that instead of getting fired he had been offered help, he felt a rush of loyalty for the company that galvanized him into action. His stats rose to where they had been three months before, and stayed there.

That was twenty years ago.

Jack moved on to another job, but still talks of the soft drink company with affection — and to this day won't drink the competing brand. “They didn't kick me while I was down,” he says.

**3.WELL, WHY NOT JUST GIVE ADVICE?**

*The Consequences*

Sometimes people will flat out ask for advice. “I don't know which way to turn,” they may say. “You're a wiser head: tell me what to do.”

This is flattering but hazardous. You've been given an invitation to play God in someone else's life, but unlike God, you have to live with the consequences.

*CHARLIE I think Brenda is having an affair with my neighbour. What should I do?*

*ROGER If she was my wife, I'd kick her butt around the block fifty times.*

Roger might contend that he didn't offer advice — he merely stated what he would do — but that's not the way Charlie heard him. Tune in on tomorrow's dialogue:

*CHARLIE I told Brenda what you said I ought to do to her. From now on, stay out of my personal affairs, okay?*

Police officers are very aware of the special risks involved in “Domestics”, incidents where they are summoned when one spouse is beating the other. They must separate the battling partners immediately or run the risk of having them gang up on the “outsider”. Often the most violent is the one who requested them in the first place!

The same reasoning holds true when someone asks you to side with them against another person “What would you think of a woman who'd do that?” Charlie asks you. If you tell him what you think of Brenda — and tomorrow they are back together again — you'll be remembered as someone who spoke against his spouse. The fact that he asked you to will be forgotten.

If your daughter comes home to you in tears having left her husband, it's a terrible temptation to say, “Well, I'm glad you finally got it together to leave that terrible beast. I always knew he was no good!” But if you do say it, and then they subsequently reconcile, your daughter will believe that you finally spoke your true feelings about her beloved Charlie.

*Competence*

Besides, how competent are you to offer opinions on how other people should behave? In the past, when societies changed so much more slowly, perhaps tribal elders had valid advice to offer; but the rules and traditions we learned as children often have little relevance today.

If a young stone-cutter in the year 1190 needed advice on how to live his life, he could ask the senior stone-cutter in the village, and the advice would make sense. That's because what the senior stone-cutter had learned was still valid in that society: village life was the same, year in, year out.

*DONALD I need your advice, Uncle Owen.*

*OWEN Certainly, my boy. I've lived a good many years, and I'm glad to advise you.*

*DONALD I want to marry Rose, daughter of Reginald, the Pig Farmer. How do I go about asking for her hand?*

*OWEN You must speak to Reginald the Pig Farmer. First, bring him a gift. Then....*

Owen knew what the rules were. They were passed on orally through the generations; the elders were the repositories of accumulated wisdom. So we created role models over the centuries, of the wise seniors who can advise the young.

But if a young person today asks a senior, it's a different story:

*DONALD I need your advice, Uncle Owen.*

*OWEN Certainly, my boy. I've lived a good many years, and I'm glad to advise you.*

*DONALD I'm thinking of shacking up with Melanie....*

*OWEN Pardon me...what did you say? Did you say — “Shacking up”?*

*DONALD Yeah. Or maybe with Ronald. I swing both ways.*

*OWEN (SPEECHLESS).*

Uncle Owen has no competency in the arena of 21st Century relationships. In his youth, people who “shacked up” were considered to be “living in sin”, and their offspring were known as “bastards” (and were sometimes stoned on the school playground). Unless Uncle Owen is a most unusual man, who has kept up with all the twists and turns of modern life, he won't be able to get past his built-in prejudices.

So for at least two good reasons — that we do not want to accept the consequences of advice-giving and that we are not competent to give it in the first place — you should obey this useful rule: NEVER GIVE ADVICE.

**4. THE ROGERIAN THREE-STEP**

If it is dangerous to give advice but inhuman to ignore the pain of a fellow human being how are we supposed to deal with these cases?

An American psychologist named Carl Rogers developed a pattern that has proved useful to bosses of all sorts. There are three steps:

1.Help the other person understand the problem.

2.Help the other person examine all possible solutions.

3.Help the other person make a decision.

Note that each step begins with the word “Help”. Rogers taught that the role of the effective counsellor is not problem-solver, but enabler — someone who helps others solve problems but doesn't do it for them.

When you help other persons to solve problems, you are teaching them to do it for themselves. But if you do it for them you are proving once again that they are not competent to run their own lives.

For this reason, the process is sometimes called “The Helping Relationship”.

*Let's study the steps in detail:*

1. **Help the other person understand the problem**

The other person may not be sure just what the problem really is. Gentle questioning will help bring the underlying emotions out:

*BOSS Charlie, I noticed that you used the wrong cables in the Brackman Marshall installation, and it all has to be rewired. That's unusual for you — you're our most dependable installer.*

*CHARLIE Yeah, well it's all their fault. They bugged me till I didn't know up from down.*

*BOSS Oh? But they're always like that. What made this occasion different?*

*CHARLIE Hmmm....well, maybe it wasn't them so much as it was me.*

*BOSS How do you mean, Charlie?*

*CHARLIE Aw, I haven't been sleeping too good lately.*

At this moment, alarm bells should begin ringing in the boss's head. This is not normal Charlie behaviour. He's the most macho guy around; he would never whine about himself.

The boss proceeds with care:

*BOSS You're not sleeping well?*

*CHARLIE Naw.*

*BOSS You usually sleep pretty well, don't you, Charlie?*

*CHARLIE Yeah....*

*BOSS But lately you're not?*

*CHARLIE Yeah.*

*BOSS Why is that?*

*CHARLIE It's a — a personal matter.*

*BOSS Charlie, I respect your right to privacy. On the other hand, if you have a problem and you feel like talking about it....*

*CHARLIE (AFTER A PAUSE) Yeah, I do.*

*BOSS So, what's the problem?*

*CHARLIE I'm having this problem with my father. He's moved in with us. He has Alzheimer’s, see, and it's tearing my family apart. He keeps me up half the night, my kids have to bunk in together, and my wife says she's thinking of moving out. But what can I do? I can't throw the poor old guy out on the street.*

Now Charlie has identified his problem to the boss. His problem is that his dear old dad has Alzheimer’s and has nowhere to go except to live with his son, and that is causing havoc in Charlie's home life.

**B. Help the other person examine all possible solutions**

To do this, the boss needs to ask two questions:

What have you done about it so far?

What have you thought about doing?

These two questions are so powerful that many people have committed them to memory. They will bail you out when the boat looks like it's about to sink.

*BOSS So, your family life has gone down the tubes since your dad moved in, is that right?*

*CHARLIE That's about it.*

*BOSS What have you done about it so far?*

*CHARLIE Well, I checked with the Social Worker, but she said that there's no way that a retirement home will take him because of the amount of care he needs — and there's a six month waiting list at the hospital.*

*BOSS What else have you done?*

*CHARLIE What else is there?*

*BOSS Well, let's think about this. You must have some other ideas?*

*CHARLIE Yeah, I thought about my brother, but he just got married and I wouldn't wish it on him. My sister would take him but she lives in Winnipeg. To tell you the truth, and I'm ashamed for it, sometimes I wish he'd just go take a walk in the snow.*

*BOSS That's natural. We all wish our loved ones dead at one time or another. It doesn't mean anything.*

*CHARLIE Anyway, that's all I've been able to come up with.*

At this point, the boss has scraped Charlie's barrel clean. Now he can add some ideas to the list without seeming to offer advice:

*BOSS Could you talk to someone in your church?*

*CHARLIE Dad never went to church much. I suppose I could talk to my pastor, though.*

*BOSS Let's make a list of the possible courses of action. (WRITES) Let's see — you mentioned relatives...retirement homes...hospital...and your pastor.*

*CHARLIE Yeah.*

*BOSS There may be some other options. Can you think of any more?*

*CHARLIE I could talk to my wife and kids without losing my temper....*

*BOSS (WRITES) Confer with family....*

*CHARLIE Learn to cope better....*

*BOSS (WRITES) Coping skills....*

*CHARLIE And that's all I can think of.*

*BOSS Do you know about our Employee Assistance Program?*

*CHARLIE EAP? That's for debt counselling, right?*

*BOSS No, it's for anyone who needs help in solving any kind of problem that's bothering you. It's smart for the Company: the sooner you fix up what's bugging you, the sooner your production goes up.*

*CHARLIE Hmmm....maybe it would be a good idea to talk to someone about this.*

*Now the boss moves to the third step:*

**C. Help The Other Person Make A Decision.**

This is the simplest part of the process: just ask the other person what s/he is going to do.

*BOSS Charlie, here's the list of things you can do about this situation:*

*Retirement home Hospital in 6 months*

*Talk to your pastor*

*Confer with your family*

*Learn to cope better*

*Employee Assistance Program*

*CHARLIE Well, the first one is out. They won't take him.*

*BOSS What about the rest of them?*

*CHARLIE I'm going to start with my family. I'm going to have a family conference and see what everyone has to say. I think the main problem is that I haven't been bringing them in on things....I've just been calling the shots by myself. Maybe that's why things are so bad. And those other things — I'll put them out on the table for discussion.*

*BOSS That sounds great, Charlie.*

*Now the boss does the Follow-Up Bit that doubles the chances that Charlie will really do something:*

*BOSS When will you have this family meeting, Charlie?*

*CHARLIE Tonight! I'll have it tonight!*

*BOSS Excellent. How about dropping into my office tomorrow morning before going to Brackman Marshall? I'd like to know how it went.*

*CHARLIE Sure, boss. I'll pop in about 8.*

*BOSS Is there anything else you want to talk about?*

*CHARLIE No — but thanks a lot for listening. I feel a lot better.*

## SOME SAMPLE SCRIPTS

The usual power relationship between counsellor and other person is not very important in these interviews. What is important is that the person with the problem should feel that the counsellor is a good listener who really cares about his/her welfare.

**Options Script**

Here is a situation in which the other person understands the problem but doesn't know what to do about it. The counsellor's job is to help the other person look at all the options clearly and choose one.

MELANIE I really don't know how to handle John. He's getting very persistent.

SUSAN They all get persistent after two dates.

MELANIE Yeah, but I don't want to lose him. I think I really love him. But he wants me to do things I'm not ready for.

SUSAN Let me get this straight. John wants to go all the way, and you don't want to, is that it?

MELANIE Yes. He says if I really loved him I'd want to please him.

SUSAN What options do you have?

MELANIE Well...I can go all the way — or not. That's about it!

SUSAN Aren't there any other possibilities?

MELANIE We could, uh, talk about it some more.

SUSAN So you can do it, not do it, or discuss it some more.

MELANIE Yes....I think we'll go for a long walk tonight. Maybe I can make him understand that I do love him, but that what he wants is against my religion and my principles. And if he can't accept that — well, maybe he doesn't love me as much as he says he does. B. Listening Script

Sometimes the other person has already thought it all out, and merely wants a listening ear. In such a case, the very last thing s/he wants to hear is advice. The counsellor gets to practice lots of uh-huh's and head noddings but contributes little else.

CHARLIE Andy, have you got a minute?

ANDY Sure, Charlie.

CHARLIE I've got this problem, see, and I think I've got it figured out, but I'd like to get your opinion.

ANDY Okay.

CHARLIE It's my 25 year old son, Al. He's been getting into a lot of trouble lately — drinking, smoking pot, hanging around with losers. He's been living at home.

ANDY Uh-huh.

CHARLIE He's had a couple of chances at good jobs, but he blew them both. I guess it's just too easy, hanging around my place. He doesn't lift a finger to help, either.

ANDY That sounds like a real pain.

CHARLIE So I've given it a lot of thought. I've tried talking to him, but he doesn't listen — just gets mad. I asked our pastor about it, but he's got a kid of his own in the same situation. So I talked with one of the counsellors in the Employee Assistance Program, and I decided that the best bet is to boot Al out. Let him fend for himself. He's never going to grow up as long as Daddy pays his bills.

ANDY That must have been a hard decision to make.

CHARLIE Yeah, Martha and I sweated over it. I'm going to tell him tonight. Uh — do you think it's a good decision? Do you think I'm doing the right thing?

ANDY Charlie, it sounds like you've already worked through all your options.

CHARLIE Yeah.

ANDY Do you feel that this is the best choice for you right now?

CHARLIE Yes, I do.

ANDY Then do it. Hey, drop in tomorrow morning and tell me how it went. C. No-Win Script

The most frustrating kind of session is the one where the other person has really considered every option, and none of them work. However, there are two more options that most people fail to consider: (1) do nothing, and/or (2) change the name of the problem.

(1) Do Nothing:

GRACE So, Cathy, I have examined every possible avenue, and each one is a blind alley.

CATHY What would happen if you did nothing at all?

GRACE If I did nothing? I hadn't thought of that. I guess we'd just keep blundering along....now that I think of it, all the alternatives I've been considering would only make matters worse. Better to suffers the evils we know than to fly to those we know not of, eh?

(2) Change The Name Of The Problem:

GRACE So, Cathy, I have examined every possible avenue and each one is a blind alley.

CATHY Then maybe you should look at the problem from a fresh point of view.

GRACE How do you mean?

CATHY Change its name. Instead of “HOW TO SOLVE A PROBLEM THAT YOU HAVE ALREADY PROVED INSOLUBLE” call it —

GRACE Call it what?

CATHY Well, “HOW TO COPE” for instance. Develop some coping skills. Manage your stress.

GRACE I can't get rid of the stressor — so I should learn to deal with that fact instead of moping?

CATHY Sounds good to me.

GRACE I'll read some books on stress.

\*

This concludes the second part of my three book series on managing in the new millennium. If you found it engaging and useful try the other books in the series, *Communications Skills for Managers Old and New* and *How to Conduct a Successful Management Interview*, or *Bosstalk – The Guide for People in Management Roles*. I’m always interested in feedback so feel free to email me at tbarker@dccnet.com, or through this website. Terry Barker. [tbarker@dccnet.com](mailto:tbarker@dccnet.com)