On the Art of Giving Advice

In 1748 the Earl of Chesterfield wrote to his son, “Advice is seldom welcome; and those who want it the most always like it the least.” The intervening two centuries have witnessed little change in the basic attitudes toward receiving advice.

These attitudes, common to us all, present an important challenge especially to school supervisory personnel who must fulfill their professional responsibilities, not only through their own personal and professional development, but also through their skill in influencing the behavior of others. Frequently the educational leader is asked to give advice; often he feels impelled to offer unsolicited suggestions. Failure to use good judgment in these circumstances can jeopardize the use of the advice and may seriously restrict the further usefulness of the adviser.

As school supervisors seek to improve their techniques of offering advice, they may find clues in the experience of educational advisers who are working overseas, assisting the developing countries of the world in the reconstruction of school facilities and programs. Although the specific problems for which advice is sought in other countries vary from those in our own, the difficulties met in offering advice are remarkably similar with one exception: the negative effects of inadequate or poorly given counsel seem to appear sooner in other countries. This rapid development of consequences may simplify the identification of cause and effect relationships and give new perspective to some of the problems faced here in the United States.

To Advise

The verb to advise has many connotations in this country and abroad. We may think of these connotations as extending along a continuum with points along the line identified by such words as prescribe, admonish, advocate, recommend, suggest, counsel, confer with, and exchange observations and views. Where the adviser pegs his style of advising depends on how he sees both himself and the situation within which he works. In other words, his role expectancy influences his actions. In the light of these assertions there are several reasons why an adviser who has just left the United States to serve in a developing country may tend to operate on the prescription-admonition end of the continuum. He assumes he was selected because of his competency; and, further, he assumes that his country is offering technical assistance because of the superiority of the American system of education.
When an adviser first observes the educational program in another country, he sees many practices which he believes are inadequate. He may conclude that the educational system of a developing nation is in a stage of progress similar to that through which the United States has already passed. It is perfectly natural, therefore, for the adviser to believe that his advisees can and should profit from American ideas and practices. Given this perception of the situation, he is operating with the best of intentions when he urges certain changes and prescribes specific actions.

Unfortunately the results frequently are disappointing. Causes are not far to seek. Some results are undesirable because the adviser failed to realize the hazard of transplanting a practice from one culture to another without a thorough understanding of the second culture. One is reminded of the Japanese fable of the monkey and the fish. At the conclusion of a very severe storm, a monkey looked around and discovered that he was the only creature that had survived. Just then he looked down from his resting place on the trunk of a tree and saw a solitary fish swimming in the turbulent water below. With compassion he reached down with his paw and rescued the fish from the water.

Not every educational practice brought from one country to another has so disastrous an effect! Some proposals for innovations are appropriate to the second culture; of these, a few are accepted and prove to be effective. A majority of the recommendations, however, are not accepted. Advisers who assumed that the friendly manner with which their suggestions were accepted meant approval are frequently surprised when their recommendations are ignored. They have been quite unaware that the courtesy of the hosts prevented open disagreement or argument with their visitor. Reaction of the advisers when they discover that their recommendations are not followed varies considerably. A few may become indifferent and say, "I will continue to give them advice and they can take it or leave it. What is it to me?" Others may become critical of the officials of the host country.

Others, searching more deeply, ask themselves if the advice they have given is faulty or if the procedure they have used in developing and presenting their recommendation is in error. These are the advisers who develop an understanding of the cultural background of the people and an appreciation of its uniqueness. They develop a real respect for the intelligence and ability of the individuals with whom they work. In spite of the differences in culture, such advisers discover similarities in some of the
basic values: a belief in the sanctity of the individual, for example, and a commitment to the improvement of education.

Useful to an adviser serving abroad is the realization that behavior which he is observing is largely culturally determined just as is the behavior he observes in the United States. When he realizes that people everywhere behave in the way that seems best to them, he is better able to understand the reason for their actions. If he had the same background of experience and the same basic values, and if he operated from the same basic assumptions as the people with whom he is working, he would behave in much the same manner as they do. He would tend to see the same problems they see and would probably try similar solutions.

Role of Adviser

What, then, is the role of the adviser? Even if it were desirable, he cannot change the experiences or greatly modify the basic value system of the people with whom he is working; nor can he alter his own previous experiences or appreciably alter his own values. In view of this, can an adviser from another culture be effective? The answer to this question can be "yes," but only if he avoids prescription and admonition and uses, instead, conference and the exchange of observations and views. Instead of providing solutions to problems which he has identified, the adviser must help the people with whom he is working to find solutions to the problems which they themselves recognize. The adviser may, through asking questions, assist in discovering the problems that need to be solved. He may need to help his advisees distinguish between a symptom and an underlying cause. He should encourage cooperative effort to develop a clear statement of the problem. Once the problem has been clearly stated, the adviser may assist in collecting information relevant to the problem. Sometimes he draws from his own experience and reading; but, often, he helps his advisees to discover within their own situation facts that are pertinent. As an attempt is made to set up hypotheses and suggest tentative solutions to the problem, the adviser may offer suggestions and again ask questions. Once tentative solutions have been agreed upon, the adviser may assist by suggesting some of the ways in which these solutions may be tested and their effectiveness evaluated.

The rewards will be great when an adviser serves as a member of a team which utilizes a problem-solving approach to educational questions. Not only is there the satisfaction of seeing constructive solutions developed; there is also the further reward of watching people grow in learning a new way of working together. The ability to work cooperatively in the solution of problems is one of the most important skills for American technicians to export.

This brief account has, of necessity, oversimplified the many difficulties involved in offering advice and may have made the work of an effective adviser seem relatively easy. Actually, it is more difficult to work in the way just described than it is simply to make recommendations. In order to work cooperatively with his advisees, the adviser must demonstrate his competency in the area being considered. By his actions he must communicate the idea that he does not see himself as an expert who has come to advise a less competent group; rather, that he conceives of himself as a fellow.
professional with genuine respect for his associates and as one who has come to work cooperatively with them in finding solutions to their problems.

This analysis of the problems involved in giving professional advice abroad has direct application to those of us who work in a supervisory capacity here in the schools of the United States, whether we are classroom teachers, supervisors, consultants, principals or superintendents. In America, as abroad, cooperative endeavor which aims at the constructive solution of educational problems is facilitated when advisers have genuine respect for the work and for the importance of the people with whom they work.


Another Look

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proach to the problems of living in a multi-cultured world. The culture study should be a depth analysis of a total way of life of a people, focusing not upon a superficial cataloging of food, clothing, shelter, and occupational types, but on the problem of understanding systems of needs, values and beliefs, and on how these are translated into patterns of behavior. The culture study would involve the student, both directly and indirectly, in the analysis and interpretation of cultural behavior. Through this analysis, it would lead him to a broader understanding of how culture determines behavior and provides him with specific opportunities to improve his analytic and interpretive skills. The evidence seems to indicate that students will only develop these skills if given an opportunity to exercise and test them. The culture study can provide this opportunity by offering the student the chance to analyze ethnographic data and data which he himself gathers from the local community.

6. Is it really possible to teach for cross-cultural understanding or are we just deluding ourselves?

No matter how strong our personal commitments and desire to achieve a genuinely cross-cultural perspective, we must face the distinct possibility that such a goal is unlikely of attainment. Americans place very high value on success, hard work, technological advancement, thrift, cleanliness, time, and on a rather general concept of progress. This set of values is so strong that it provides the set of criteria against which we judge not only our own behavior, but also the behaviors of others. In attempting to realize these values, we have developed a society in which, judged by our own standards, we have attained a standard of living second to none. Any program designed to promote cross-cultural understanding must necessarily direct the students' attention to other peoples, their way of life, and their material culture. It is quite possible that this look at other cultures is accompanied by some inevitable comparisons between that culture and our own. If this is so, then it is very likely that what culture study does is to reinforce the student's emotional commitment to his own culture by demonstrating to him that it is, indeed, superior.

As educators, we are concerned about the problems of living in an interdependent world. What is needed is a shift from an information-centered to an analytic and behavior-centered approach.