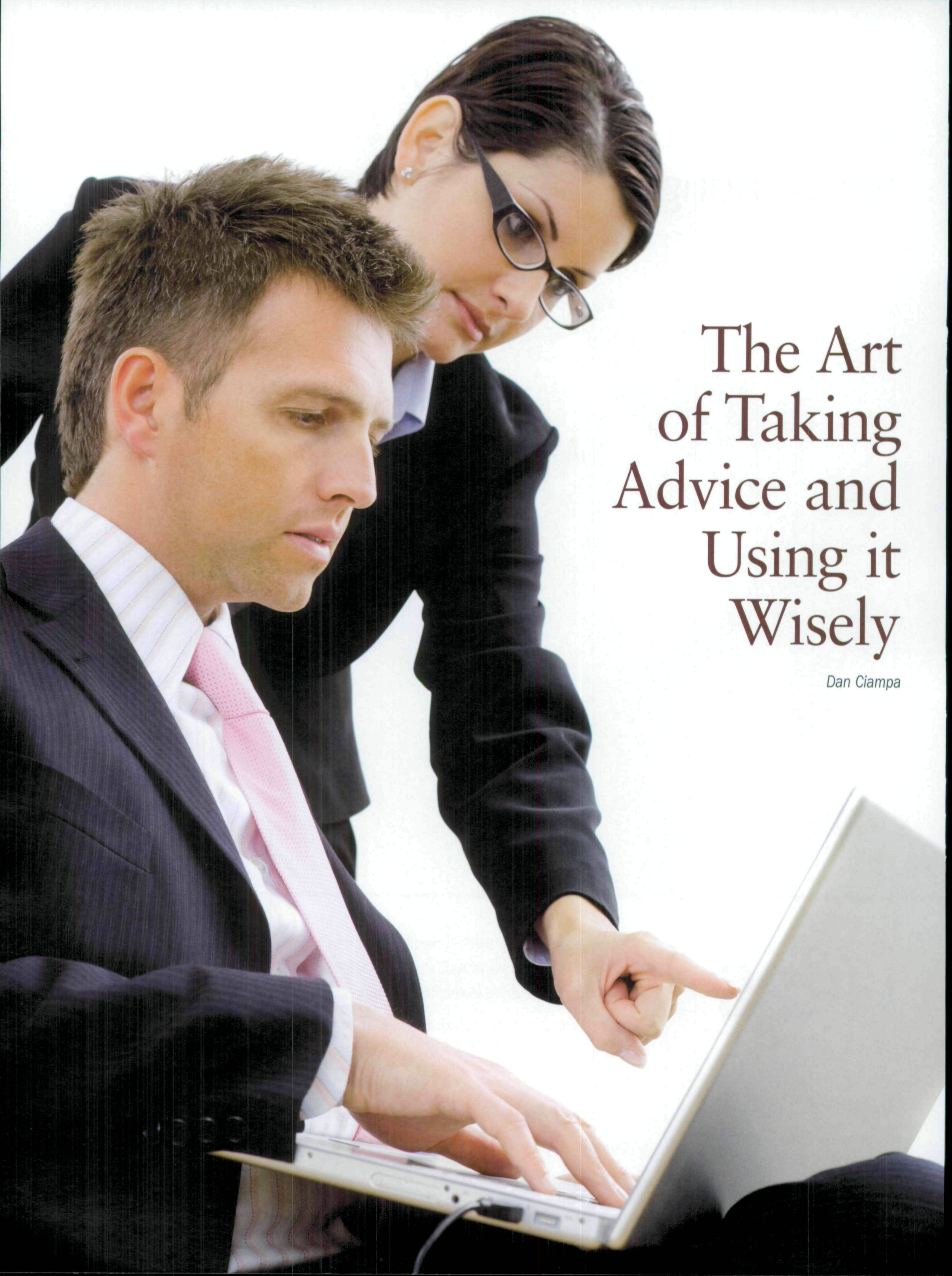
The Art of Taking Advice and Using it Wisely

Dan Ciampa



The topic of how to take and use advice has not gotten the attention it deserves. I have been on the advice-giving side of the equation for a long time, and have offered help to many people who are very smart. But I've meet very few smart clients–that is, people who know how to find and make the best use of help. Most people neither prepare for nor actively take responsibility for conversations with advisers. Rarely do they take steps to make sure that the people who influence them have the insight, ability and knowledge to truly be of help. And even if the advice is on target, its recipients often end up without a clear idea of what they will do differently or how they will put to productive use what they have heard.

Does it matter if a leader is adept at using help? It matters if there is insufficient experience or capability within the organization to meet new, more challenging objectives. And it matters if a poor outcome will jeopardize the leader's career, the livelihoods of employees, and the trust of customers and investors who expect what has been promised to them. Consider two examples of accomplished, competent leaders of successful organizations who suffered from being poor advice takers.

If We Had Only Known Then…

A consumer-packaged goods company known for leadership talent, shrewd decision making, and consecutive periods of positive financial performance launched an ambitious re-engineering project to upgrade business processes. Instead, it damaged customer relations, strained working relationships between top- and mid-level managers, caused talented people to leave the company in frustration, and reversed the steady progress it had made in these areas before the project began. It cost hundreds of millions of dollars and was over budget, but far from its objectives. After deciding to terminate the project mid-stream, the company's president told me:

> *We spent more money on this one project so far than we have ever spent on consulting projects that were completed. And I have to be honest: We got absolutely nothing worthwhile from it. The consultants told me going in that there would be some broken glass, but that they'd get the job done and partner with us throughout it all. They convinced us that the progress we were making on our own was too slow—that if we really wanted to continue as market leaders, we had to tear down what we had and then build up what we needed, do it quickly and have faith in their process that something better could be built to replace what we had. It couldn't be done in our step-at-a-time style. But the managers and employees would see [in the end, it] would be worth it, and the efficiencies would pay for it. They had a good sales pitch, but not the implementation abilities to do what they promised in our environment. The only thing they were right about was the broken glass.*

How could competent and sophisticated managers allow this to happen? They had compiled a steady record of success by taking careful, calculated risks. They were accustomed to big, complex projects and carefully managed operational costs. Why did they leap into something so important in such a haphazard way?

Why was it only in retrospect that the consultants' premise of destroying what had existed appeared so unwise? Mid- and lower-level managers, who were much closer to the problems than the president, had been skeptical about the consultants' approach and capabilities to do what they promised. Why hadn't the president listened to the concerns of his own people?

A senior person in operations had talked to the president several times about his concerns and asked for more time to make progress; the president made the decision to go ahead with the consultants' project on schedule. Why hadn't the advice of the senior manager been heeded?

Why didn't managers voice their opinions more forcefully? Also, the directors of this company included sitting CEOs of successful companies and respected academics; they had been aware of the project before it began and conducted regular progress reviews. Why hadn't the board recognized potential problems?

Many people shared in this failure. Most of all, the consultants who recommended a path recklessly and without confidence that the results they promised could be realized. Because their approach was mostly sales over substance (why this consulting firm eventually went out of business), the cost to the client company was enormous, both financially and culturally. The advice-giving side bears much responsibility. But, for an ill-conceived project to go wrong it has to be bought in the first place. What about the advice-taking part of the equation?

The directors were part of the problem and admitted during an after-the-fact review that they had taken progress updates too lightly. The managers who realized this approach was foolhardy failed to get their message across forcefully enough, even though they were influential within the company. Some admitted later that, had they combined forces and crossed department boundaries to speak with one voice, the result would probably have been different.

Knowing how to maintain emotional equilibrium when things aren't going in the right direction distinguishes leaders who flourish from those otherwise good people who do not perform under pressure.

But the bulk of the responsibility falls on the president and his senior management group (SMG), because it was he who ultimately signed off on the project and the SMG that unanimously chose the winning proposal and sat through regular program reviews. In the lessons-learned review, the head of operations said, "We heard what we wanted to hear...the SMG knew that this was going to be [a very complex project] and when someone came in with all the steps laid out and [sounded like they knew how] to get it all done fast, we lapped it up." Another said, "We never asked the tough questions at the SMG about what this would mean for our employees, what it could do to [our culture]. We saw the savings but not the human cost."

The president admittedly responded, "Well, at the end of the day, this is my responsibility, and I accept that. We'll figure out how to do what should have happened in the first place. But, we have to figure out, too, how to be smarter about using outside help because there will be other [problems we will face] that we won't be able to handle on our own."

Sometimes bad results, like the case of this company, come from taking bad advice. Other times they happen because of failure to take advantage of the help that is needed. A case in point is John, a high achiever at a Fortune 50 manufacturer known for its aggressive, competent management talent.

Self-Management Matters

John had exceeded every financial target in every job he held as he moved up the management ranks. When he was named to the group of the top 150 managers before reaching 40 years old, it was predicted that he would become CEO by the time he was 50.

In John's previous jobs, his supervisors had given him much latitude. They realized that their departments would have a better chance of exceeding targets if he were able to be as free as possible to use his creative talents.

During a board of directors' talent review, in response to the influential head of the compensation committee who pushed for more aggressive development of high-potential young managers, the head of human resources recommended that John's next developmental step be in a unit outside the company's core business and in a location far from corporate headquarters. The president of that division had taken a business that had underperformed and turned it around to become one of the most profitable in the corporation. As a result, headquarters left him alone. Although he was known for being tough on subordinates, the HR head argued that working for him for a while would "test John's ability to adapt to a new style."

John started his new assignment on a worrisome note. In their first meeting, his new boss, Al, laid out the rules through which he ran his business. He expected weekly activity memos, sent to no one else but Al, and copies of John's schedule detailing his whereabouts. Also, any contact from corporate headquarters was to be reported immediately and none was to be initiated without Al's approval. He said to John, "You've done okay so far and you can help us here, you're a very talented young guy. But get one thing clear—I don't care how you've operated [before]. I run this business and when you're here, you do it my way."

Over the next months, John became more and more distressed under Al's management style. Gamely, he tried to make the best of the situation by working harder than usual, hoping that exceeding his goals would win him more flexibility from Al's restrictive rules. On a trip to corporate headquarters, he bumped into the CEO who invited John to his office to fill him in on how his new job was going. Also, after the presentation of his operating plan for the next year, the head of HR asked the same question. John said nothing negative to either person and stressed how much he was learning about a business and market that had been unfamiliar.

A short time later, Al began John's performance review by listing each of his accomplishments over the past year in a dry, unenthusiastic way. Then he told John what the amount of his bonus would be, a figure so low that John repeated it to make certain he had not misunderstood. Struggling to maintain his composure, John asked how, given all he had accomplished, Al had decided on such a figure. Al replied that John had violated one of his rules by talking with people at headquarters about the division without approval and then not letting Al know after John returned. "That's disloyal and unacceptable," said Al.

John was stunned, and then angry and hurt. He considered calling people at corporate, but decided that would only make things worse. Cut off from his support network, John felt trapped with a boss he did not respect and who, he was convinced, would ruin any chance he had of promotion. His normal enthusiasm, high energy level and creativity disappeared, and he became increasingly withdrawn. Over the next several months his behavior became erratic and unpredictable, amid rumors that he was using alcohol throughout the day.

Knowing how to maintain emotional equilibrium when things aren't going in the right direction distinguishes leaders who flourish from those otherwise good people who do not perform under pressure. John was very talented but had trouble managing in a high-pressure situation where he had little control. A boss he did not respect, his own ambition and inadequate resilience skills caused John to behave in a way that stopped his promising career. He did not ask to be put in this situation, and, certainly, the human resources department and the board bear much responsibility for placing John where he was unlikely to succeed. But in the final analysis, and especially at John's organizational level, success rests with the individual who accepts risks to move to higher positions. John lost control of his career because he could not figure out how to build a winning relationship with his boss and how to manage himself when he was unhappy.

Could this tragedy have turned out differently? Could the right advice have helped? Probably.

Before taking on his new assignment, John could have reached out to people who better understood what he was about to encounter. In this company, managers rotate from one position to another regularly; John surely knew someone who better understood Al and his style. Instead, John was shocked at his first meeting with Al rather than prepared. Second, he could have formed relationships with other direct reports to Al and sought their counsel and support. Instead, he suffered alone. Also, John could have sought advice from outside advisers who were familiar with the company and with Al; using outside help was not among Al's list of taboos. In fact, John had a large consulting budget, but used it all for advice in marketing, product analysis, product planning and motivational meetings of the sales force.

Finally, the head of human resources at the division, also a direct report to Al, was a possible internal adviser to John. She had helped others before him navigate this difficult relationship. But John took none of these possible helpful paths, probably because he believed he should have been able to handle this situation on his own and did not want to appear as though he needed help.

The research on resilience stresses the need for certain self-management steps to avoid self-pity or feeling trapped when confronted with adversity. At the top of the list is forming a support network made up of people who care about and can counsel the person going through a difficult time. In John's case, his failure to reach out was the primary reason for the absence of this success factor. Because he was separated from his support network, people were not readily available who might have recognized warning signs and stepped in to help. But had he asked for advice, the company could have found some way to provide support.

Also, John's case emphasizes a subtle, often ignored rule in getting to the top: The capabilities that bring success at lower levels are insufficient when promoted to the most senior positions. For John, it was necessary to add interpersonal and influence skills to handle a high-stress situation where he did not have full control, resilience skills to bounce back and self-management tools to handle his own emotions. Without them, he was overwhelmed in a situation he could not manage alone.

Common Threads

There are three common threads running through these examples that offer lessons on the wise use of advice.

First, none of the executives in these cases considered their needs for help to solve important problems as carefully as they did the problems they were facing. The consumer-packaged goods company CEO was correct in deciding that upgrading processes was crucial. Sluggish response time, poor coordination, and other signs of process problems had been analyzed, so they designed a homegrown approach and it was making progress. But when the senior group heard the consultants' sales pitch, they abandoned their normal cautious style to embrace an untested approach based only on the hope of faster, more dramatic savings. Had they analyzed it more carefully and been more discriminating about whom to choose as their advisers, they would have realized that re-engineering was unlikely to be successful in their environment.

John's case emphasizes a subtle, often ignored rule in getting to the top: The capabilities that bring success at lower levels are insufficient when promoted to the most senior positions.

At the root of John's problems was his failure to consider his emotional and political situation in the same clear-headed way he approached his managerial duties. If he had, he would have seen his assignment in the broad context of his career. He would have recognized that the test he was expected to pass was not whether he could exceed his financial targets yet again, but rather, his ability to succeed in a new, unfamiliar situation and an environment much less-suited to his personality and style. Rather than making it easier, his decision to work harder and concentrate more than usual on exceeding targets contributed to John's problems by increasing his stress and making it less likely that he could choose the best path.

The second major thread is that both ignored or rejected the attempts of the people inside of the company to give advice. Typical of the feelings of many managers is the comment of the person who ran sourcing and procurement at the company in the first example: "It was so typical of what happens ... [the senior managers] listened to [the consultants] instead of to us. We told them what the risks were...that there was something just not quite right about what they were selling. But they went ahead [with what the consultants recommended]. Why does that always happen?" Perhaps a closer look will help to answer her question.

The CEO explained, "Yes [several of the managers] came to tell me their concerns, but it was never a very strong complaint. It came across to me as being pretty vague. There weren't many specifics. I'm not real good on subtleties...but it just wasn't laid out so that it was very clear...and they came across as being a little defensive, too, which was understandable because after all [the consultants] were only here because they criticized our approach as just not fast enough. So I probably [discounted the argument of my managers] a little bit because of that." Also, the managers who were troubled enough to speak out did so individually rather than as a group, which would have had more impact.

John had two potential sources of help inside his company, peers who also had worked for Al and the human resources vice president. One reason that he did not take advantage of either was that he believed that the key to his success under Al was the same as it had been in other divisions: Out work the people on either side of you, don't show any weakness and beat your targets.

Because he was not paying enough attention to the importance of his relationship with Al or of managing the political and emotional aspects of the situation, he did not believe that he needed help in those areas. While John bears primary responsibility, the HR head reflected on her role after John left the company: "I offered to help John when we met on his first day here, but he didn't seem to respond to the idea. Afterwards, I thought to myself that I hadn't been very clear to him about what I was offering help about ... and he may have thought I was talking about our on-boarding process. But, I could have done more once he settled in...by just giving him feedback. He wasn't the most accessible person [to listen to feedback about himself], but I should have tried harder."

The Third Thread-Internal Advice

What does all this suggest about internal advice? That it is often under-utilized. One reason is that while they have much to offer, employees often do not know how to best get their arguments and concerns across to their bosses or other senior executives. Often they fail to accurately size up what the person whom they want to influence is thinking. For example, the consumer-packaged goods CEO offered two clues to how he's best persuaded:

- an argument must be laid out logically and very clearly (something the consultants no doubt picked up on)
- he was suspicious that the source of the managers' concerns was a sense of competition with the consultants who had criticized their progress

If the managers had anticipated that reaction, they could have taken the initiative to raise this issue with the CEO. This action would have shown him they understood it and opened the door to discuss it. Instead, their motives were questioned.

While many employees could improve their advice-giving and influencing skills, this is only a secondary reason internal advice is ignored. The primary reason is that leaders do not seek it out actively enough or know how to use it. The third thread that runs through these cases suggests why: Leaders who need help lack a concept or theory of advice to provide a framework they can use productively.

In each of these cases, advice-takers seemed unaware that there were various types of advice from which to choose and that their particular situation called for different advisers, each contributing something unique. The CEO and John settled for types of advice that might have been sufficient in other circumstances, but were inadequate for the issues they faced. Because of their choices, time, money and careers were unnecessarily wasted. Perhaps the single most important lesson from these examples is the high cost of failure to determine the type of advice most appropriate and the kinds of advisers who can be of most help.

What would a framework look like that considered advice taking strategically?

A Framework for Advice

Three propositions form the basis for this framework for advice:

- There are four types of advice that leaders neede in change-oriented situations.
- Wise use of advice requires the right advisers to be combined in a network balanced to serve the leaders' style and situation.
- There are certain attributes that wise advice-takers master but are missing in those who do not make the best use of help.

Types of Advice

The advice needs of leaders correspond to four primary challenges that always demand time and attention: strategic, operational, political and personal. For leaders who must rally their organizations for change while maintaining their own mental toughness in the face of relentless stress, these four needs fall into two categories: important and essential.

Important: Strategic & Operational Needs

Strategic needs involve the direction of the enterprise and the broad choices that will best enable it to gain and then extend advantages that competitors will have difficulty achieving. The leader must grasp the implications of staying on the organization's current course and understand expectations of stakeholders as well as employees, and then judge the capacity of the organization to most efficiently meet those needs. He will then seek information such as how competitors are approaching similar challenges and what technological, economic and social forces may help or hinder ongoing success. Last, he will clarify cultural markers, such as the best managers for the challenges he faces and how they make decisions or share information.

Operational needs cover the capabilities to meet short- or mid-term goals on an on-going basis and by which products and services are designed, produced and distributed. Processes to help meet these needs include information technology and financial reporting and control systems, as well as management of the human resources needed to keep the organization going.

While most people reach the top because they have mastered these strategic and operational needs, they often still need help. Strategy advice supplements those without deep experience in, for example, competitive analysis or mergers and acquisitions. Also, new operational approaches have developed at such a brisk pace that it is challenging to keep up with them.

There are plenty of places to turn for help, with more advisers in these two areas than in any others. Also, external advisers are usually better equipped to critique the coherence of the existing strategy or evaluate the company's operational needs than employees who may have a stake in the status quo. While they might be experts, external advisers do fall short of expectations, usually because they fail to get to know the organization thoroughly enough. They underestimate how difficult it will be to implement recommendations given the company's capabilities or do not anticipate resistance to change, because they fail to accurately diagnose the culture.

Most often in these two areas, outside advisers are most useful to diagnose problems. Solutions are best implemented through a combination of external help and internal resources. Employees are closer to problems, have valuable institutional memories and have a stake in practical and permanent solutions.

While strategic and operational needs are important, in the final analysis, they are not the areas that distinguish excellent from average leaders. Nor are they enough when one's career is at stake or when leaders must implement big change agendas. In these situations, the leader's (and by extension, the organization's) success depends on cooperation and coordinated action, support from colleagues and subordinates, influential alliances and coalitions of followers, and the leader's own personal hardiness and resilience. This is the reason that help with political and personal needs is essential.

Essential: Political & Personal Needs

The political dimension of a leader's job involves the relationships necessary for the organization to move forward as smoothly as possible. It has three parts:

1. The alliances and coalitions that can either block or support a push for change;

2. The ability to recognize who can be trusted and how much, as well as who are trusted by the people who are important to the leader's success and why; and
3. The organization's culture.

The new leader hired from outside must appreciate what about the culture is important to employees, how norms and core values came to be and what sustains them, and the needs of individuals who are key to maintaining those norms and values. For the in-place leader determined to extend success, understanding the forces acting on the culture will point to the best levers for change and where resistance is most likely.

This political dimension, fueled by the influence and interpersonal strategies of key people, determines how things get done much more than does the organization structure. But for many senior leaders, it remains obscure because they isolate themselves far above employees and depend on people who shield them from bad news.

The second essential need has to do with managing the demands of leadership and the stress that comes with them. Those who do this well keep a certain emotional equilibrium enabling them to maintain perspective, even when events seem to others to be moving too fast. They project a sense of being in control in the face of more complexity and as problems or tensions grow.

But over time even the best leaders will suffer from accumulated stress. Some will become exhausted and less sharp or act in unusual ways. Loss of focus will cause them to misinterpret important information. Eventually, they slip to the ragged end of the behavior scale where the likelihood increases for poor judgment. Knowing how to stay on stable footing, on the rested end of the scale, distinguishes leaders who flourish in times of change from otherwise good leaders who perform less well under pressure.

Most leaders are less adept at meeting political or personal needs than they are at handling strategic and operational needs. For many, it's because of gaps in education (generally, graduate business schools concentrate on strategic or operational abilities and leave students to figure out the political and personal categories) and gaps in training as they rise through their organizations (training and development programs run by human resources departments vary widely in quality). This lack of preparation, combined with the importance of these two areas, make political and personal help crucial.

Political advisers understand the patterns of influence that they must harness to realize a new strategy or to improve operational effectiveness. They point out the relationships that will have the most impact on success and how to best use them, and help shape the sort of culture necessary to realize a new strategy or implement new operations. In addition to external advisers who specialize in this area, a mentor, previous boss or former board member may play this role (because of the board's oversight responsibility and potential conflict of interest, it is less likely to find a current director in this role). Some leaders offer retired managers a part-time position; one chairman/CEO of a Fortune 100 corporation brought two former employees back into the organization in this role, each with an office and secretarial help simply to have them available.

A leader's source of personal advice is often a spouse, partner or close friend. Within the comfort of a trusting relationship, the leader can let down her guard to reveal emotions and conflicts that ordinarily stay hidden. The personal adviser's insight and support can make all the difference in a high-stress situation, because without a safe harbor where one can express emotions and hopes, judgment and perspective can suffer. At such times, often it's only the personal adviser who gives difficult-to-hear feedback or reveals what others see but the leader can't. At these times, the personal adviser assumes the role of the guardian of reality to ensure the leader sees what must be seen, to broaden her thinking and gain proper perspective.

A Balanced Advice Network

A mid-tier manager ascending the levels of the organization may seek help in one or two of the categories that have been described—typically strategic and operational. But on reaching the top job and/or embarking on an effort to change the organization in a fundamental way, the leader suddenly experiences all four needs simultaneously. Strategic decisions are tougher because the leader must take into account the needs of the entire organization. Pressure to make decisions often conflicts with operational commitments for cost, quality and speed. And often the political and personal management skills demanded at the top are unfamiliar.

To keep all the parts of his organization moving in the same direction, the leader must manage myriad relationships to make the political environment work in his favor. The complexity of these demands drains the leader's time and energy; increasing the risk that personal stress will compromise his ability to lead. Help is needed because the leader must ensure the changes he seeks are done right the first time.

Can a single adviser, whether a mentor or a professional consultant, provide the right capabilities in all four areas? No; at least not at the level of expertise needed by those at the

> The leader facing tough, complex challenges will be served best by creating a network of advisers, balanced with different areas of specialty.

very top. Deep knowledge and experience are necessary to help meet intricate strategic, operational and political needs. The best consultants will understand what each sphere requires, but they will have specialized in one to master its subtleties. Those who have been or are leaders themselves have experience to offer, but often it is limited to the particular set of conditions they faced themselves. Spouses, while trustworthy and dedicated to the leader's happiness, are less objective and often do not understand the organizational complexities that leaders must manage. The leader facing tough, complex challenges will be served best by creating a network of advisers, balanced with different areas of specialty and individuals well-suited to his style and organizational needs.

Getting the most from an advice network is not unlike any other relationship. The leader must think through what he wants to gain, how to judge progress, put effort into nurturing it, and there must be constant, honest communication. Also, the relationship must be forged to meet the leader's needs ... and to do that, the relationship between leader and adviser must have three characteristics: familiarity plus adaptability, close collaboration and shared responsibility.

While advisers in an enduring advice network deeply understand the leader's style and values, familiarity alone is not enough for a useful relationship. In addition, advisers must adapt to the unpredictable conditions the leader faces, and always design better ways to help the leader handle the challenges he faces. The wise advice taker will make adaptability a primary criterion for advisers he chooses. The right degree of collaboration will enhance familiarity and adaptability.

A bond between leader and advisers is a prerequisite for a productive, satisfying collaboration. It may come from mutual respect for the other's values, from the adviser's admiration for the leader's vision, or from the leader enjoying the kind of challenging give and take that produces a 1 + 1 = 3 result. Whatever the reason, for an advice network to work well, real value to the leader depends on whether she and her advisers want to work together. She must be self-aware enough to recognize how her behavior affects open dialogue and perceptive enough to pick up cues of how the people with whom she is interacting react to what she says. Leaders who have difficulty building solid relationships tend to not have winning advice networks.

The third characteristic has to do with the responsibility for getting the most from the relationship. Advisers must accommodate to the leader's time constraints by getting their thoughts across in ways that conform to the leader's learning and decision-making styles. In fact, one way to decide whether to continue working with advisers is the degree to which they have facilitated communication and made it easier for the leader to do what she must. But while advisers must do their part, the leader is the one who determines whether the relationship works to her advantage. Because she has the most to gain or lose, the responsibility is the leader's alone for shaping a network of advisers, ensuring the appropriate balance, and making sure it works best for the leader's interests. How well the leader does so depends on her mindset about being an advice-taker as she seeks and manages help. That leads to the third part of the framework: attributes of great advice-takers.

Attributes of Wise Advice-Takers

Even when working with the most talented advisers, making the best use of help requires full engagement and skillful management, which in turn requires certain attitudes. What attitudes make the most difference? There are three that are most decisive:

1. Willing to be responsible for the helping relationship, while at the same time being receptive to being influenced;
2. Being inquisitive and open to new ideas; and
3. Being self-aware and the willingness to accept feedback.

Responsibility/Receptivity

The starting point is the leader's sense of her role in the relationship. In particular, she must accept certain responsibilities that only she can address, starting with the nature and scope of what the adviser should tackle. One CEO put it this way: "On some [projects or problems], it's pretty apparent what I should take ownership for and what [the advisers] should ... we just have to put in the time to decide [mutual responsibilities]. But on something like changing behavior, culture change or people problems, it's usually not clear what has to be done until you get into it. [In those cases] we have to keep talking about it...but it's my responsibility to keep bringing it up. If I don't do that, there's no target, no end state we can aim at. "Ends and means" is not a bad way to put it. My job is the ends, [the adviser's] job is to tell me how to get there."

Those leaderswho do not take responsibility for the relationship abdicate tasks that they alone should execute. When leaders leave to outside consultants the articulation of company values or the vision of what type of organization personifies those values, they are outsourcing their leadership responsibilities. Some consultants can help in such areas if they are thoughtful and have enough experienced. But the role of advisers is to test the ends the leader wants, recommend ways to realize them and help get there.

Closely related to taking responsibility is a willingness to be influenced. The most basic block to getting the most use from advice is refusing to accept help when it is needed. I'm not referring to carefully considering advice and not acting on it because it is off-target, but failing to look for or accept help when it is clear it is necessary. Why do some leaders refuse to be influenced, while others who are equally talented are so receptive?

Sometimes it is because of insecurity. Some resist others' ideas because of a need to believe they are correct and find it difficult to admit that they do not know or cannot do something. Sometimes it is due to arrogance. Some leaders who believe with deep conviction that their path and strategy are correct will refuse to listen with an open mind to other opinions. Often, they eventually surround themselves with only those who agree and who substitute blind loyalty for objective feedback. Also, an unusually high need for control might be the cause for being closed to advice. This happens with those who are inflexibly tied to one approach, so that others feel shut out and believe their ideas are not wanted. Or it might be due to narcissism, a personality type with a negative side that affects advice-taking. Because they are self-absorbed and self-protective, narcissists tend to listen only for reinforcement or their preconceived notions of what is best for them. They also are overly sensitive to criticism and lack empathy, an important key to successful relationships that helps us listen with understanding and appreciate others' views.

Refusal to be influenced could come from any of these traits, but, regardless of the precise cause, the effects can be disastrous. When a leader ignores available help, he is abdicating his responsibility and letting down those who depend on his stewardship.

Inquisitive/Open

Smart advice-takers know that there are times when a well-phrased question is much more powerful than a forceful, declarative statement. Questions from the leader cause advisers to "go active" as they run through a mental checklist. Why is she asking that? Is this a rhetorical question or does she really not know? Am I supposed to know the answer? How am I going to find out so that the next time, I'll be ready? By contrast, a statement or other pronouncement allows advisers to be passive by only requiring them to listen respectfully.

Skillful advice-takers also tend to be open to input and seek to learn from multiple sources. Not coincidentally, they tend to run organizations that do the same, engaging in frequent best practices benchmarking, where employees visit other organizations and observe how they address similar problems. They also regularly engage their advisers in conversations, looking for new ways of addressing the challenges their companies face. One of them said, "No leader has all the answers all the time. I need [outside advisers] who get to know us well enough to be able to point to what other companies have done that can work for us...and [inside advisers] who are always questioning what we do and looking for better ways to operate."

In contrast, leaders who are less able to extract value consistently from their advisers tend not to look outside their own experience or environments. One sign of lack of inquisitiveness and openness are phrases such as "we don't have much to learn about that, we do a better job than anyone else" or "this doesn't really apply to us because our business is different." Lack of inquisitiveness and openness to new ideas goes hand-in-hand with another trait that hinders advice taking: lack of self-awareness.

Self-Awareness and Acceptance of Feedback

The more self-aware a leader is the more benefit he will gain from advice. When well-tuned, self-awareness means being aware of one's emotions, reading them accurately as they are being experienced, and understanding the impact they have. It is not always the case that self-awareness leads to the right choices about managing emotions, but without recognizing them in time to take action, there is a greater likelihood of negative behavior. Unmanaged emotions can wreck havoc on a marriage or a friendship, but why is this important for advice-taking?

One reason is that self-aware people are more likely to realize when their emotions are causing them not to listen or to too quickly jump to a conclusion. If, for example, they perceive growing frustration or impatience with an adviser, they can do something about it before it causes them to shut off a useful source of help.

A second reason is that self-awareness is essential to building a relationship. Without being aware of our own emotions, we cannot adequately perceive them in others; and without that, a solid trusting relationship with an adviser is unlikely.

Self-awareness plays a central role in empathy, the ability to sense the unspoken and usually subtle drives and feelings of others. Empathy is essential for loyal "followership," as followers will be more likely to give the leader their support if they believe he grasps and appreciates what they want. Advisers, whether internal or external, will work harder to help the leader succeed if they feel a connection. Such a connection is a function of the leader's relationship-building skills, the foundation for which is his self-awareness.

Self-aware leaders tend to be more realistic about the limits of their strengths and where they must improve, and tend to look at their organizations with an equally critical eye. This realism, in particular about shortcomings, causes self-aware people to actively seek out feedback.

For feedback to be useful, it must be given competently as well as taken well. The "giving it" side of the equation has received the most attention. But even if it is expertly given, feedback won't be of help unless the receiver is skilled at taking it.

What are the rules for taking feedback? There are at least six.

- The leader must be aware if he is getting negative feedback as well as positive. If not, he must not assume everything is going well, but determine what he is doing or not doing to cause lack of enough negative feedback.
- The leader must hold people closest to him accountable for giving straight and honest feedback.
- People who take the risk to give negative feedback should be rewarded, publicly whenever possible.
- The leader must discriminate in whom he chooses to listen to, making sure about the perceptiveness, expertise and motives of those who offer feedback.
- The skills to make the most of feedback must be honed, in particular, the ability to listen carefully, without being defensive.
- Most important, the leader must be an active partner in the process of receiving feedback, not a passive listener. He must grasp the importance and implications of the feedback as well or better than the person giving it.

Summary

The main message in all of this is that being a better advice-taker matters. For all leaders, it should be high on the list of what they must master. Leaders must carefully consider the help they need, be more discerning about whom they choose to advise them, and understand that there are different types of advice that should be combined to meet their particular needs. And once the right advisers are selected—whether inside or outside the organization—leaders should take responsibility to shape an effective give-and-take relationship. Finally, they must recognize the impact their attitudes and beliefs have on how well they listen to, accept and act on the help that is offered.

Dan Ciampa is an adviser to senior leaders and boards of directors, particularly during leader transitions. He is the author of *Taking Advice: How Leaders Get Good Counsel and Use it Wisely* (Harvard Business School Press 2006). He can be reached through **www.danciampa.com**