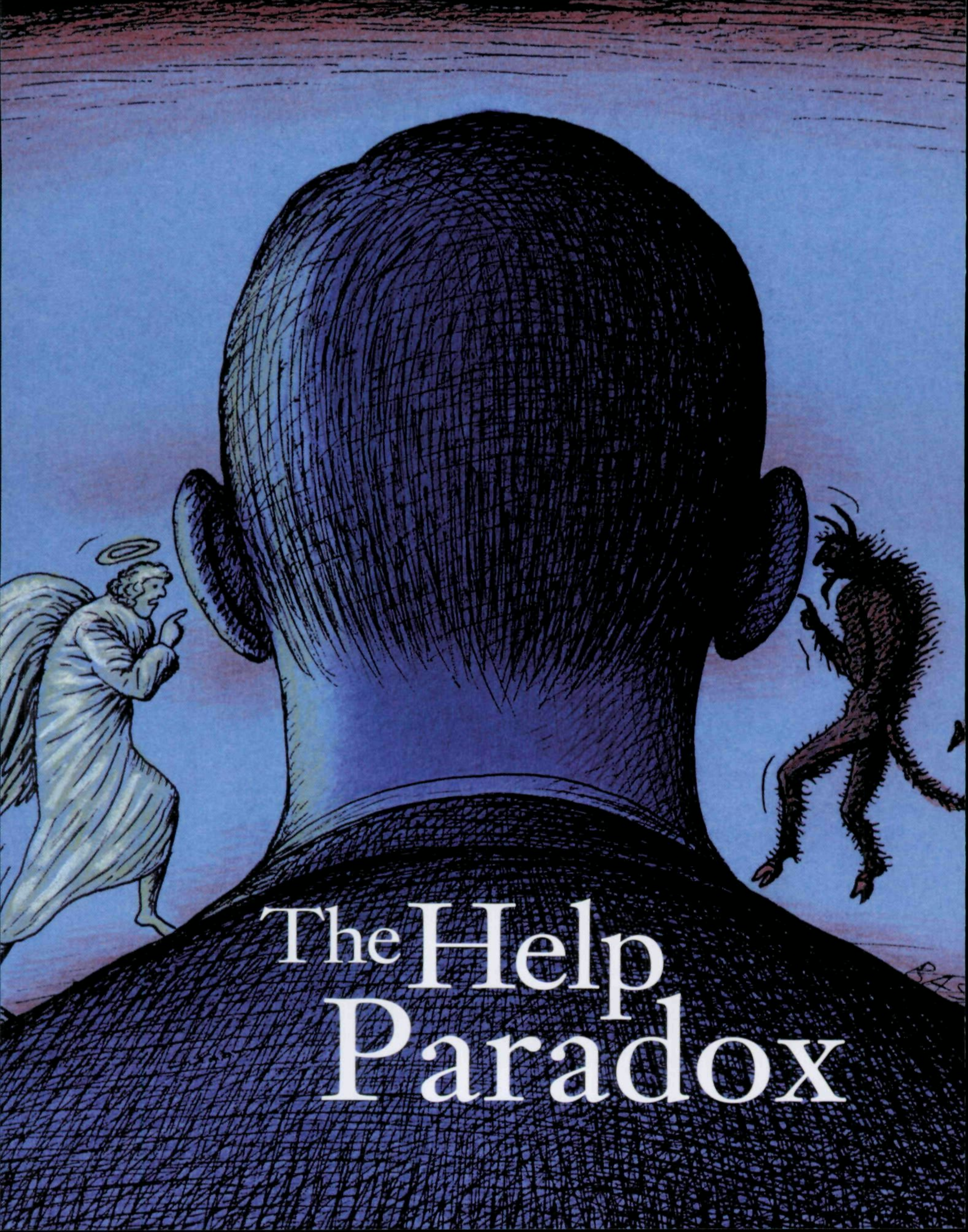
Too often, we ask the wrong people for advice—
or ask the right people but fail to listen.

# The Help Paradox



By Dan Ciampa

In complex situations, no corporate leader—even one who has successfully led his company to new heights—has the objectivity to know what to do and how to do it all the time, and also to ensure that the managers who report to him do the same in their units. No one is knowledgeable, smart, tough, and experienced enough to consistently do what is necessary in these situations all alone.

The leader's time is usually taken up with plotting the future and running the organization day to day. He must figure out and control the components of the change agenda and often convince employees and others of their value, while also handling normal day-to-day managerial tasks and occasional crises. Because he has much to do in a limited time, help is often needed to assess how prepared his key people are for change. Experienced leaders' needs for help are different but just as urgent as those of new leaders.

Over the years, I've spoken to many corporate leaders. The more I listened to them, the more apparent the similarities in their situations became. Their specific circumstances were always unique, and their individual leadership styles and philosophies varied greatly, but both groups faced new situations for which their experiences had not fully prepared them. In each case, the stakes were high. A new leader who failed would sustain damage and set back the company in its attempts to improve. If an established leader failed to sustain success, the accomplishments he and others had worked hard to win would be threatened along with his legacy.

Most of the leaders with whom I spoke had in fact sought out help. Some talked informally with former bosses who had retired. Some approached professors they had known in business school. Others made overtures to senior-level partners at consulting or law firms they were using for other tasks. Advice also came from board members, colleagues, subordinates, spouses, and friends.

At first blush, it seemed that each group could be helpful. The retired executives knew the organization's capabilities and limits and had faced similar challenges themselves. Board members were familiar with both the organization and the leader. Headquarters staffers were in a position to see both the big-picture connections between organizational components and the details of how their function affected field or operating units. Spouses and friends were those to whom the leaders opened up and revealed their frustrations as well as their hopes. Attorneys and consultants, who were paid to help, could contribute analytical capability, objectivity, and knowledge of how others in similar situations had dealt with the same challenges.

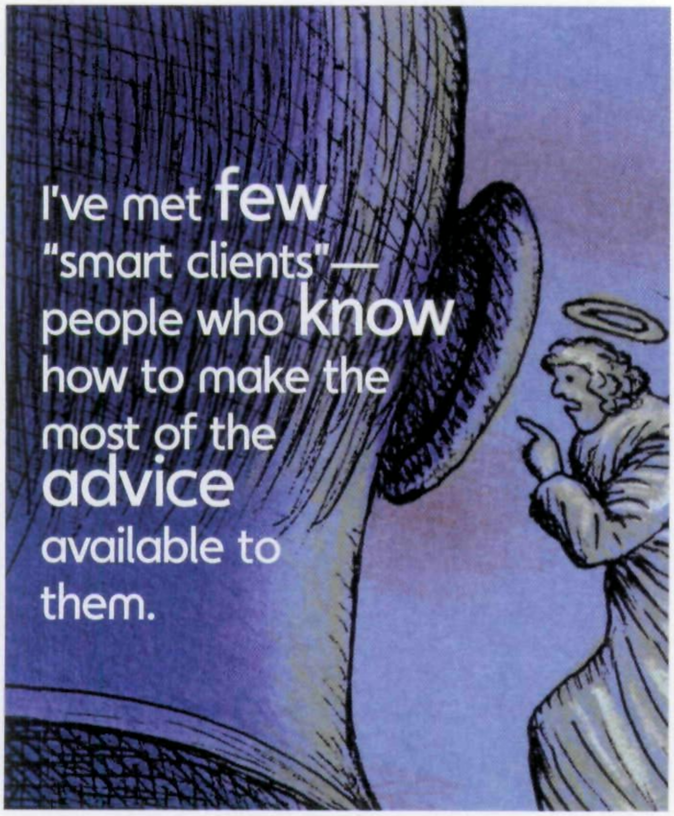
But these leaders were largely unsatisfied with the help they received. Previous bosses acted as if they were still in charge. Academics offered simplistic theoretical answers to complicated questions. Colleagues turned out to be closet competitors. Board members lacked pertinent experience and weren't close enough to the organization to assess what was needed operationally. Trusted friends offered sympathy but were too remote from the leader's situation to be effective sounding boards. Consultants and lawyers were married to a particular methodology, or made recommendations that were not quite practical enough, or were better at offering marketing and selling tips than advice. Some depended on their experience and were not analytical enough to help in complex or intricate situations they hadn't seen before. Others had more educational credentials than experience and relied on analytical models to the exclusion of human and political realities that defy rational analysis. Some did more telling than listening and came across as too prescriptive; others listened well but offered few actionable remedies.

I gradually began to recognize and credit the existence of a help paradox. Though many sources of help were available to those senior executives—including more professionals, whose advice cost more than ever before—they were not getting the help they needed.

This help paradox will not be resolved until the professionals on the supply side of the equation do a better job. The conditions aren't yet in place for management consulting to be an effective and reliable source of great advice. There exists no industrywide consensus on standards for providing help, no proven model that distinguishes excellent from average advice-giving, no certification process, no required training programs, and few organized mentoring efforts.

But as demoralizing as it was to hear how seriously the supply side had let these leaders down, I began asking myself

*Dan Ciampa is an adviser to senior leaders and boards of directors during CEO transitions and as they seek operations and technical improvement that require the culture to change. He can be reached via www.danciampa.com. Adapted from his latest book,* Taking Advice: How Leaders Get Good Counsel and Use It Wisely *(Harvard Business School). ©2006*




whether that was the only reason that advice had not been helpful. Over time, it became increasingly clear that the answer is: not exactly. The advice business has glaring weaknesses, but what it provides will not change until its clients change. The right help is difficult to come by because of inadequacies on the demand side as well as on the supply side. In short, executives who want to receive better, more actionable help must become better advice takers.

I've been on the advice-giving side of the help equation for forty years and have offered advice to many people who are very smart. But I've met few "smart clients"—people who know how to make the most of the advice available to them. And for a dozen years as a chairman and CEO, I had a firsthand view of how complicated it can be to find and make the most of the right advice. Consider two different cases in which accomplished and competent managers in successful companies proved to be less-than-adequate advice-takers.

## "We have smart people"

The CEO had heard about the benefits of continuous improvement and a lean-enterprise mindset while serving as an outside director to the board of a thriving large manufacturer. He decided to launch a similar effort in his own organization and tapped the longtime executive vice president of operations to run it. The EVP had spent his whole career in the company and had no firsthand experience with the techniques he had been asked to implement. But he agreed with the CEO that if the techniques could produce the same results as at the manufacturer, it was worth a try.

Over the next two months, the EVP researched these techniques, in particular with the company where the CEO served as a director. He met several times with his counterpart there and with people who had been more closely involved with implementation. Along with details of their program, the manufacturer's executives stressed two key success factors: First, each company should tailor an approach that fits its particular needs and culture; and, second, use of outside experts with experience at implementing such efforts was necessary in the early stages of a change effort.

In spite of these warnings and in order to save time and money, the EVP decided to import the exact education and training programs used by the other company rather than invest in a custom-tailored one. He also decided to use no outside experts, instead depending entirely on longtime managers to plan and launch the improvement effort. During a review of plans to launch the program, the CEO wondered if what had worked in the other company would be successful in theirs and whether it would be better to hire a few people who had managed such efforts elsewhere. The EVP convinced him that neither would be needed. As he put it later, "I told [the CEO] that it would work because we've implemented a lot of new programs and we have smart people who know what works in our company better than any outsider."

A year later, the CEO pulled the improvement effort from the EVP and reassigned it, frustrated that little progress had been made. He also conducted a lessons-learned review to pinpoint what had gone wrong or not happened. It became apparent that the EVP and the other longtime managers had never fully grasped what was necessary to make continuous improvement and lean-enterprise thinking a success in their culture—in particular, the importance of creating new attitudes and behavior. While the EVP had heard many people emphasize that faster decisions required pushing responsibility to lower levels, he never involved mid-managers and supervisors. And while he acknowledged that getting the most from new statistical analytical tools required both intense education as well as on-the-job coaching, he never invested either in coaching-development programs or in training. As a result, when subordinates saw their bosses talking about the need for change but behaving in the same ways they always had, motivation to change evaporated.

What are the lessons about taking advice here? The EVP's mistakes began with the assumption that a plug-and-play approach would work, underestimating the ease with which people could change their behavior, and that the managers in his organization could figure out on their own how to make these new approaches successful. They were compounded by ignoring the advice offered by people who had had direct experience with implementing these techniques, including managers at the company he chose to emulate. The CEO's mistake was not following up carefully enough to ensure that the basis for implementation had been well-thought through, and that the EVP took seriously tips offered by people with more experience. Perhaps most damaging was that the CEO failed to find his own sources of advice in leaders from other companies.

Rejecting help is one way that even the best executives let down their companies. Another is when they decide on the wrong help for the problems they face.

## "But they did that other program so well"

Shortly after a friend took over a financial-services company, it became apparent that its IT and financial-controls systems were out of date and inadequate to meet projected growth. He brought in a consulting firm that specialized in that area. After six months on the job, he concluded that teamwork problems were blocking successful implementation of improvements that crossed department lines. Fearing that it would cause his growth strategy to stall, he looked for help. Then he made his biggest mistake when he asked the same IT consultants to add a culture-change effort to their work.

A year and a half later, things were worse. Though the consultants used the same approaches that experts in culture change might have, lack of experience led to ignoring subtle factors important to success in that area; one involved diagnosing the corporate culture through a survey. The consultants inadvertently introduced it in a way that raised suspicions of employees about the purpose of the survey and whether their responses would remain confidential. As a result, the information was contradictory and the analysis incomplete.

Another opportunity surfaced as the consultants pointed out that many mid-level managers, on whom the bulk of the change effort depended, were unclear about what the CEO expected them to do differently to improve information timeliness and financial management. They recommended a "vision clarification" project. Not a bad idea—except that to implement it, they urged that the CEO explain in greater detail the long-range plan that he and the senior managers had formulated. At large town-hall meetings, the CEO and CFO explained the markets to be penetrated, the financial benefits of doing so, new regulatory constraints to which they had to conform, and, in general, the need for better information systems. From feedback forms filled out by attendees, though, the CEO began to worry that the expensive, time-consuming meetings had missed the mark. Typical was one manager's comment that "the detail was OK but I read most of it in the strat plan, I thought the objective was to make it more clear what you want us to do more of and less of. I'm still not sure I know what you expect me to *do* differently when I get back on Monday."

While the CEO and the consultants correctly read the uncertainty about the leader's vision, what eluded them all was the nature of the managers' uncertainty. They did not need to know more about the strategic plan or to be sold on the need for a new information system. In particular, they failed to understand that a leader's vision is not the same as the company's long-range plan. Rather, it is an image the leader sees with his mind's eye of how people will act once the long-range plan is realized.

The CEO and the consultants aimed in the right direction and often asked the right questions, but they largely squandered the chance to rally people and prepare them for change. They wasted valuable time in the change effort and risked damaging the credibility of the CEO and his senior managers.

The mistake the consulting firm made was to assume it could enter an area outside its expertise and improvise adequate solutions to serious and complex issues. But the CEO bears primary responsibility here. He assumed that expertise is fungible and that advisers expert in one area can be equally helpful in another.

## Rules of Advice-Taking

- Keep an open mind and pay close attention to the advice of people who may be more objective than you are. Make sure you grasp fully what they perceive and you may have overlooked.
- Never make an important decision on the basis of how it might affect your status in others' eyes. Doing so often leads to misreading or underestimating what it takes to succeed.
- Put together a balanced advice network. Avoid relying overmuch on the kinds of advice with which you feel most comfortable, at the expense of help mastering new abilities.
- When help is available, use it. Never allow pride or shame to get in the way.
- When a goal is so important that you are willing to risk a lot to achieve it, pay particular heed to the advice of the people whose support you need.

—D.C.

Few leaders have developed the mindset or the capabilities necessary to be great advice-takers. They have not clarified and categorized their advice-taking requirements in preparation for seeking the types of advice that can be most helpful. Nor have they mastered the skills that will equip them to get the most out of the advice they find. As a result, finding and utilizing the right advice continues to be a hit-or-miss game of chance.

The people who ask for help must better articulate what they need and know how to judge whether they are receiving it. They should also become more aware of how their own attitudes and behavior impact their ability to take in and apply advice. In other words, they must become smarter in how they prepare for and learn from the help they solicit.