

## Edgar Schein: Helping

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One of the most fundamental human interactions is helping. Yet, you would have a hard time finding a class on the subject in any high school or university. Luckily, a thinker I've long admired, Edgar Schein, has at last written a book with the simple title "[Helping: How to Offer, Give and Receive Help.](#)"

I spoke to Dr. Schein about his important—dare I say *helpful*—new book.

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### **DC: Why did you decide to write about helping?**

ES: It's a logical extension from process consultation, which I've been doing with clients since the 1960s. I learned there that what consulting should be is helping the clients, and helping is usually not giving recommendations but creating a relationship where they can figure out what they should do. In this book I extend those ideas of how a consultant helps an organization to all sorts of helping situations.

### **DC: Trying to help people can be very frustrating. Why is that?**

ES: Primarily it is because help is given before the client has indicated a willingness and ability to accept help. In their eagerness to be of assistance the helper has jumped the gun and then is surprised that the client is not ready to be helped. For example, a manager asks us to study a department and give a recommendation on what they should do.

Instead of saying "What's on your mind? What problems are you seeing" we think "Great project!" We interview everyone and find out that people think the boss who proposed the project is actually the primary problem. So we come back to the manager and say we've done the analysis and we recommend you re-examine your management style. He gets very annoyed and says "Wait a moment, that's not what I asked you for." He is not ready or willing to accept help so your effort has no effect.

In my day-to-day context this happens most with computer consultants. I say I want to improve my ability to do PowerPoint and the coach, right off the bat, tells me stuff far beyond where I am in my understanding of the software. I become resistant and he doesn't know why.

### **DC: If bad help is giving people help they are not yet willing or able to use, what does good help look like?**

ES: A good case recently happened right outside my house. I'm very near a big parkway that runs into Boston and one day a car pulled up and a lady asked me how to get to Massachusetts Avenue. For some reason instead of saying "Well you turn here, then here, then here," I asked "Where you are trying to go?" She said "I'm trying to get into Boston," at which point I had the helpful response "You don't need to go to Massachusetts Avenue, you just go on the parkway here and it will take you right in."

Had I answered the initial question I would have misdirected her badly.

Good help begins with finding out what the real problem is. The key point in the book is this thing I call humble inquiry: before you jump to give advice take a moment to ask some questions to find out what the client really wants.

**DC: Why doesn't the client just tell you what they want?**

ES: Sometimes they don't know. Other times they are testing you to see if you are responsive. If their real issue is a personal one, they may ask you something safe ( that isn't really the deep problem) just to see how you'll deal with it. If you get overexcited and respond to the fake problem you may never get to the real problem.

As a helper it's in your interest to say "Let's talk a little more. What do you think the problem is? What have you tried? What would you like to achieve?" These are all forms of humble inquiry.

**DC: The humble inquiry approach is gentle, but in business we like to see ourselves as the kind of person who asks pointed questions and quickly offers solutions.**

ES: You need to work from the assumption that the client is feeling "one down" because in our culture it's not entirely appropriate to ask for help—particularly for men. Anything I do other than humble inquiry puts the client further down, which makes them defensive. If they are defensive they are less likely to reveal the sort of help they need and less inclined to accept the help given. Humble inquiry builds the client

up by saying "I hear you, now tell me more." Once you've done this they will be more inclined to tell you what you need to know and listen to what you have to say.

The self image of helper as being a competent expert is a trap. Until you have uncovered what the client's problem really is how do you know whether or not you are an expert? If you walk into a situation thinking "I know how to do this stuff" you'll get into trouble because you'll apply knowledge that is irrelevant to the real issue. If your goal is truly to be helpful, then you have to establish a relationship where your discussion with the client will tell you what the problem really is.

**DC: In the book you mention the need to discover if a person is really asking for help or is simply asking for reassurance.**

ES: This sort of situation often happens in close personal relationships. The spouse who asks "Do you like what I'm wearing?" is probably not really asking for advice on what to wear. It may well pay to ask something like "How are you feeling about it?" or "Is it comfortable?" so that you get a bit more information before you say "Yes it's fine" because that may not be what the person is looking for.

**DC:– Not assuming that you know what help the person wants and needs seems to be at the heart of effective help.**

ES: Yes. For example, a son may go to a parent for help with a math problem, but if the parent just solves it for them then that might not be considered help at all;

they wanted to learn how to tackle it themselves. It may even be the case that the math problem was just a ruse and they really wanted to talk about something else altogether. The parent needs to have the patience to do some humble inquiry before providing assistance.

**DC: One last topic that is close to the heart of HR managers is change management. We have lots of ideas about change management but based on your work it appears change management is tied up with helping.**

ES: The idea that change management is tied up to these ideas about helping goes back to the original Kurt Lewin study of a pyjama factory. The management wanted more efficient ways to fold pyjamas and had scientists figure out the best way to do it. But they never got anywhere in implementing these new methods, employees always found something wrong with what they were being told to do.

Eventually, management recognized the problem was that they were ordering the people to do it. In effect, offering them help on how to fold pyjamas that the workers had neither requested nor wanted. So instead they told workers that productivity had to go up and they would help the workers find ways to improve productivity. Once the employees were involved they were open to helping managers improve productivity and open to being helped in finding better ways to fold pyjamas. Change management often means helping someone change, and it works best if the target of the change has become your client in requesting help to do things differently.

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Edgar Schein's *Helping* is a great book for everyone, and it would help everyone if more people read it.

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management. Learn more at [www.creelmanresearch.com](http://www.creelmanresearch.com)