

Help & Support

Some Definitions

These two extremely simple concepts are, in a sense, the core of all of our work. As a matter of knowledge, they are so easily described that most six-year-olds grasp the ideas in about two minutes. (I am fond of saying that for the sophisticated adults with whom I work, it often takes a bit longer...)

When considered as a matter of skill however, it soon becomes clear that the behaviors associated with these concepts are so rich in complexity and subtlety as to provide challenges for years.

Help and *support* are simply two different approaches to providing assistance. Providing assistance is (almost without exception) a very good thing. Such behavior is central to all successful relationships, and, by extension, is central to the productive function of all group, and organizational life.

Help means doing something so that another person need not do it.

Support means doing something that contributes to someone's capacity, or ability.

Though these ideas have been central to my work for my entire career, I certainly do not wish to suggest that I

created them. No, indeed, these ideas are ancient. One source of these ideas that we have all probably heard is the parable of the fish: “Give someone a fish, and they eat for a day. Teach someone to fish, and they eat for a lifetime.” Giving the fish is an act of *help*. Teaching someone to fish enhances his or her capacity, and so, is an act of *support*.

Another place we find these ideas in ancient literature is in the work of Maimonides Rambam. This twelfth century philosopher taught that there were eight levels of the holiness of charity. The holiest charitable act was to “teach someone to do something so that they were no longer dependent upon you.” This, clearly, is a description of a significant act of *support*.

When do help and support succeed?

It is rather easy to provide help, and to assure its success. In order to provide successful help, one must understand the need, and have the ability and desire to meet it. When one receives help, there is little that is required to make it a successful event. Yes, custom dictates some expression of appreciation, but, in truth, even that is not necessary for the act of help to succeed.

But, clearly, not every attempt to provide *support* meets with success. There are many occasions in which people sincerely desire to provide high quality support, but, often for reasons that elude them, they fail. We can clearly see this in the behavior of caring parents, and teachers. Later in life, the same thing often happens to managers who are sincere in their desire to contribute to the capacities of their subordinates, but somehow fail to succeed in contributing to such growth.

In order for support to succeed, several conditions must be met.

Support must be “custom-built”

Not all people receive support in the same way. At a given moment in time, some people may require a gentle hand and comments offered in a tone that is soothing. Other people may require the figurative “kick in the pants” if the support is to succeed. It is interesting to note in this regard that their organizational subordinates often describe very talented managers in significantly different ways. Sometimes, the same person is described by two subordinates as “a real teddy bear” and “very tough, but fair.” Such seeming contradictions may be an indication that the manager has succeeded in *custom building* the support that he or she provides.

The provider must *know* the recipient

Because support must be built to match characteristics of the recipient, the provider of successful support must *know* the recipient. (Note, that to provide successful *help* one must know only the *need*.) This does not imply that the provider and the recipient must be life long friends or colleagues. It is just that to provide successful support one must have a sense of the behavioral characteristics of the person to whom the support is offered. Specifically, because support is that which contributes to the capacities of another, the provider must *understand something about the capacities* of the recipient. Generally, modest acts of support require modest knowledge of these characteristics while deeper,

(potentially life-changing) acts of support require a deeper relationship.

Support implies a “stretch”

Successful support requires a *stretch*, but that stretch must be reasonable. We often say that in this regard, people are rather like rubber bands. They all can be stretched, but they all have limits. An important support skill is that of accurately assessing the resiliency of those to whom we offer support. With such accurate assessment, we are more likely to present appropriate growthful opportunities to those we hope to support.

There must be trust

For support to succeed there must be a foundation of trust, and this trust must “go both ways.” The recipient of the support must trust the motivation of the provider. If the recipient senses that the provider is offering support for reasons of self-enhancement, or for any of that complex of motivations that, in organizational life, are called “political”, the attempt at support is likely to fail.

The provider of the support must also have trust in the motivations and capacities of the recipient. If the provider senses that the recipient may act in a reckless manner, the effort to provide support is likely to fail.

Support requires action

Receiving support requires active engagement with the provider of the support, and with the attempt to increase

one's own capacity. In contrast, receiving *help* is often passive. As we mentioned, the recipient of help might express appreciation, but even that is not necessary.

As a result, if support is to succeed, the recipient must be willing, ready, and able to accept it. The timing of one's offer of support is crucial.

Those who help, and those who support

It seems that there are people who are in the *habit* of giving help rather than support. Those who wish to (or who habitually) give help are likely to focus upon the needs or deficits of their intended recipients. In a sense, helpers are always looking for "trouble." It is not that they are looking for some difficulty in their relationship with the recipient of their help, but rather, they are looking for the "trouble" that the recipient is experiencing. Habitual *helpers* are curious about, and are drawn toward, the limitations, deficits, problems, or needs of others. In an organizational context, habitual *helpers* often get others in the organization focused on these (inevitable) aspects of their work experience.

People who wish to give *support* have a different focus. They are interested in, and are drawn toward the strengths, successes, and capacities of those to whom they wish to assist. In an organizational context, such focus has a profound effect on others.

With such a focus on the *positive* aspects of organizational life people are more likely to build upon and further extend their strengths rather than dwelling upon their limitations.

In this sense, we see that the mere *desire* to offer support has organizational benefit...

The material above is offered in our desire to share our thoughts with our many colleagues.

Of course, we sincerely value any reactions you might have.

If you wish to reach us, please call us at 866-659-3169, or send an email to downloads@soleassociates.com.

We thank you for your interest in our work...

Sole & Associates, Inc