

# Advise

## By the Book

### Looking for a good advising book

The Advise voice is almost certainly the easiest of the nine to represent through a book. With experts writing on almost every conceivable topic and self-help a massive literary genre in its own right, there is an abundance of choice when it comes to selecting a book to illustrate Advising in action.

For this piece I am torn between two old favourites. *Presence*, by drama and voice coach Patsy Rodenburg, is a wonderful book which unpacks and offers a feast of practical tips on how to achieve a state in which energy ‘moves in both directions: taking in and giving out.’ It’s a great piece of work and I strongly recommend it. I’ll tell you later why I didn’t opt for it here.

The book I have chosen has been around for even longer. *Getting to Yes*, by Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project was first published in 1981. The fact that it is still in print is itself testimony to some of the qualities that distinguish good advice from bad: it’s well-researched, it’s pertinent, it’s easy to comprehend, it’s easy to apply in practice, and it delivers the outcomes that it promises.

So much for my Advocate voice on the book’s behalf. The purpose of this piece is to illustrate what the Advise voice sounds like. And the easiest way to do that is to cite directly from the text. Here’s how the structure of the book - and its suggested approach to negotiating - is presented on the Contents page.

- 1 Don’t bargain over positions
- 2 Separate the people from the problem
- 3 Focus on interests, not positions
- 4 Invent options for mutual gain
- 5 Insist on using objective criteria
- 6 What if they are more powerful? (Develop your best alternative to a negotiated agreement)
- 7 What if they won’t play? (Use negotiation jujitsu)
- 8 What if they use dirty tricks? (Taming the hard bargainer)

It’s a how-to book and it uses how-to language. That’s very apparent in the first five points, which present the authors’ advice in the form of guiding principles. The final three points are slightly subtler. They recognise that there are occasions when even sound principles will encounter obstacles. The what ifs are acknowledgements of this reality and pointers, headline guidance, on where to go in the book to find the detailed advice on how to deal with these contingencies.

### The difference between the Direct voice and the Advise voice

You may be asking yourself at this point, ‘What then is the difference between the Advise voice and the Direct voice? Surely they’re both concerned with telling people what they should be doing?’

The difference is partly to do with the implicit relationship between the speaker and the receiver, and mostly to do with how the utterance is delivered and perceived. Direct and Advise land differently. Direct is a telling voice; it brooks no disagreement. Advise is a suggesting voice; it tacitly recognises that the other party can choose whether or not to accept the advice that is being offered. Direct does not offer; it imposes.

So far so conceptual. We need to go beyond abstractions and explain the differences more tangibly, first in terms of the words that are used. And let’s start with a phrase that can cause confusion between the two voices. It’s widely used, but paradoxically it can be too ambiguous, when it comes to distinguishing between a directive and a recommendation. ‘*You should...*’

It's not clear merely from the words 'You should...' whether the intention is to Direct or to Advise. 'You should have done what was expected of you...' is very different from 'You should consider what to do in that situation.'

A much clearer distinction between Direct and Advise is achieved when the wording of the former becomes harder and the wording of the latter becomes softer. 'What you have to do in that situation is...' versus 'What you might consider in that situation is...' 'Have to' removes choice. 'Might' presents choice.

The harder vs softer distinction also applies to the tone of voice (and the associated posture and gestures) used to deliver the words. Direct is firmer, inflexible, non-negotiable, while taking care not to become antagonisingly harsh. Advise is less formal, more expansive, still open to discussion. It's a proposal rather than an instruction.

Throughout Getting to Yes Fisher and Ury elaborate on their advice by explaining the reasoning behind it as well as the steps to be taken. In advising us to 'focus on interests, not positions' for instance, they explain. 'There are two reasons why reconciling interests rather than positions tends to work: 1. Because for every interest there are usually several possible positions that could satisfy it; 2. Because behind opposed positions lie many more shared and compatible interests than conflicting ones.'

Incidentally, this passage illustrates beautifully the bigger message embedded in Getting to Yes, which is that it is the use of the Exploring voices rather than the Positioning voices which makes for effective negotiating, and productive relationships more generally.

### **Calibrating how far to go**

The difficulty when using the Advise voice is to know how much elaboration is appropriate and how much is too much. There can be a thin skin - the listener's - between the functional form that is welcome and the unwelcome form that feels patronising.

With a book little significant damage is likely to ensue, if that line is crossed. As a reader, you might wince at sentences like 'the cheapest concession you can make is to let them know they've been heard' or 'freed from the burden of unexpected emotions, people will become more likely to work on the problem.' Conversely, you might read advice like this and think, 'Good point; I'll try to remember that.' Whether you put the book down at those moments or read avidly on, it's book sales rather than a real-time working relationship that is affected.

And this brings me back briefly to my earlier promised to explain why I haven't used Patsy Rotenburg's Presence for this Voices by the Book piece. It's because I recoil at the hype of its sub-title - possibly her publisher's words rather than her own - 'How to use positive energy for success in every occasion.' When the Advise voice is over-inflated, or feels as if it underestimates our own intelligence - then it offends rather than assists.

So person-to-person Advising needs to be done sensitively, with in-the-moment awareness of how ones suggestions are landing. We have lots of evidence from exploring people's sensitivities in practice that those who have a lot of experience or expertise in a particular domain, who are either highly educated or highly trained, tend to be especially sensitive, if advise sounds patronising. We also know that people's reaction to feeling patronised is most commonly to switch off, occasionally to push back, and only very infrequently to remain open to exploring possibilities.

So we have to watch how our Advise voice is landing. That is of course sound advice for any and all of the voices, but there seems to be something particularly offensive about feeling patronised. It insults our capability.

So by way of conclusion, here are three brief suggestions for monitoring and managing how we use our Advising voice.

First, offer advice with some evident humility. *'I don't know if this is helpful, but let me suggest...'* It is the receiver, the potential user, who has to be the judge of whether to accept advice or not.

Secondly, start with too little rather than too much, and invite the other person to say how much more they want to hear. *'Here's a headline for how you might want to take this forward... Would you like me to elaborate?'*

Thirdly, invite the hearer to become actively involved in considering and developing the suggestion. As Fisher and Ury put it in their chapter *'If they won't play' - 'Don't defend your idea. Invite criticism and advice. It invites them to confront your half of the problem. Rework your ideas in the light of what you learn from them.'*

In my opinion, that sounds like good advice for any relationship.

*Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*  
by Roger Fisher and William Fry  
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