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ARTICLE
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by Ron Carucci

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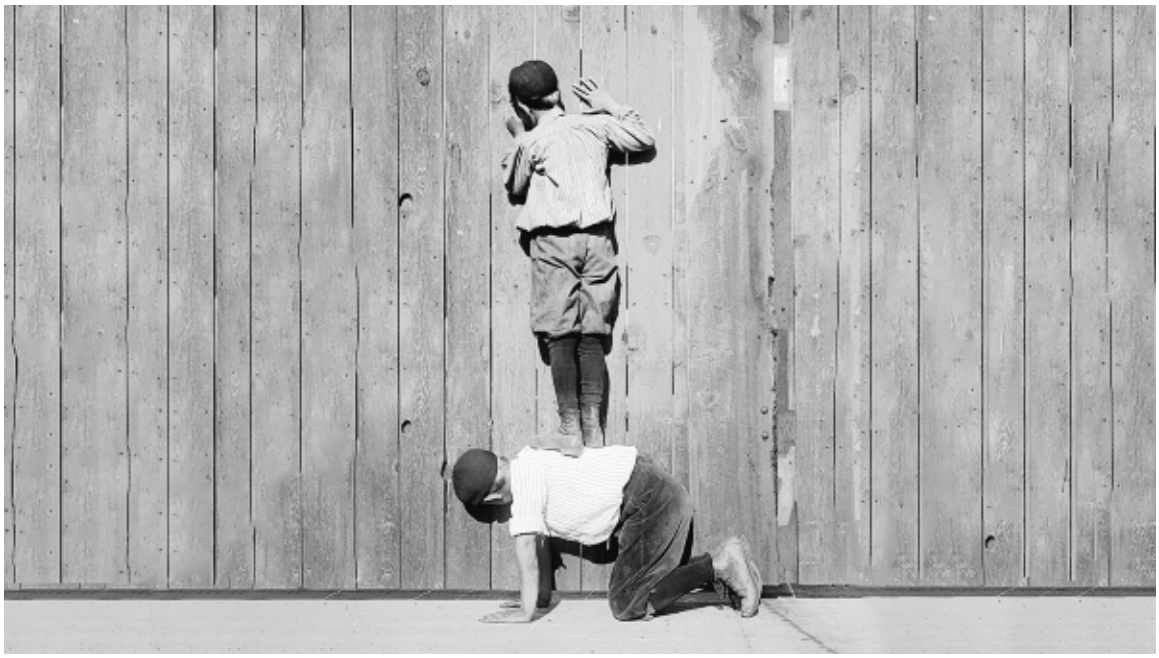

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There has arguably never been a better time for employees seeking professional guidance. With the rapid increase of coaches, consultants, and advisors in the workplace, as well as the popular, and growing, trend of "the leader as a coach," getting access to help (for most) is no longer challenging. Those who work with coaches are often viewed as admirable, and leaders who bear the title themselves do so like a badge of honor — despite the fact that, just a few years ago, even asking for help was considered weak.

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There are many benefits to this unfolding shift in organizational culture. Most notably, it will allow people to admit limitations without fear, and make learning both safe and expected. But could having so much help also have a dark side?

Recently, I overheard someone exclaim, "I'm just a coaching addict! I love watching people have breakthroughs." It turns out, this sentiment is not a unique one. Despite our many good intentions, it is indeed possible for coaches and leaders to over-help those seeking advice. In his book, *The Advice Trap,* author Michael Bungay Stanier explores our inherent obsession with giving advice. He says, "As soon as someone starts talking, our Advice Monster looms out of our subconscious, rubbing its hands and declaring, 'I'm about to add some value to this conversation!' The dangerous core belief underneath our Advice Monster is, 'You're better than the other person.'"

Behavioral experts agree that "helping" does indeed have the potential to become an addiction. When we help others, our brains emit three chemicals, often referred to as the happiness trifecta:

- Serotonin (produces intense feelings of wellbeing)
- Dopamine (intensifies motivation)
- Oxytocin (increases a sense of connection to others)

The "feel good" outcome of this combination naturally makes us want to repeat it. But when our need to help becomes so insatiable that our sense of purpose is tied directly to others, specifically, them needing our guidance, it is no longer other people that we are helping. It is ourselves.

Psychologists refer to this particular problem as agency addiction, or The White Knight Syndrome. It is defined as a need to rescue others through helping — with our advice, coaching, or ideas — in order to bolster our feelings of self-importance. Whereas those with a healthy sense of agency are just as gratified by helping others succeed as they are seeing them succeed on their own.

This phenomenon could perhaps be a consequence of working in a knowledge economy. This kind of ever-changing, highly innovative environment can intensify our need to feel useful. For many employees today, contribution is measured in adopted ideas, insightful analyses, or answers to hard questions. What we produce is inseparably tied to who we are. At one firm I consulted with, this was true to a precarious extent. A partner at the firm was so bright, generous, and willing to help anyone that his colleagues referred to him as "the answer ATM." His motto was, "You're only as good as your last idea." Privately, however, he suffered with depression and anxiety, unable to separate his sense of value from the help he offered those around him.

If you have ever wondered whether your genuine enjoyment of helping others teeters on over-indulgence, there a few things you can to do overcome agency addiction, or avoid it altogether.

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Monitor your internal narratives.

The best way to test whether or not you have an inclination to over-help is to turn inward and take a hard look at your own mind. Ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly:

1. When I'm not helping others, do I feel anxious or aimless?
2. Do I offer others unsolicited advice, even in casual social settings, under the guise of "just trying to be helpful?"
3. Do I feel defensive or dismissive when I learn that the people I helped have found another's advice helpful, or that they didn't consult me on a problem?
4. Do I imagine helping others with life-changing advice, visualizing how my help could be vital to their success?
5. Do I feel insecure when someone I help questions or doesn't take my advice?
6. Do I fish for praise after giving advice, or need the other person to acknowledge that I was helpful?
7. Do I feel taken advantage of, like I've made a sacrifice, after a stressful period of helping?

Answering yes to a few of the above doesn't necessarily confirm you over-help, but it could indicate that it is something you should watch out for. If you answered yes to all of the above, or feel concerned about this topic, you may need to consider doing some deeper work to identify where and how you might have fused your sense of identity with giving others help in the first place.

Commit to being an equal partner, and not a savior.

The greatest helpers set clear expectations from the outset. One of the first boundaries I set with clients is, "I will never care about your success more than you do." A telling sign of over-helping is when you find yourself doing more to help others than they do for themselves. If a coach or leader routinely reminds clients or direct-reports of commitments they've made, accepts excuses when those commitments are missed, and even steps in to do some of the work for them, then the partnership is not equal. And if that coach or leader finds the superlative expressions of gratitude privately satiating ("I can't thank you enough — you really saved me!"), their inner white knight has been activated. To be a great helper, you must be willing to let those you help suffer the consequences of their own choices when they fall short. Adhering to clear, mutual accountabilities makes success a shared outcome.

Avoid dependency by measuring improvement.

The consulting and coaching professions have been appropriately criticized for having economic models that incent extending revenue streams after clients no longer need them. Similarly, leaders often feel insecure about the talents of those they lead surpassing them. But the fundamental reason behind any coaching relationship is to help the other person realize improvement. The greatness of a coach can be measured by their ability to help someone grow to a point of no longer needing them. Similarly, the greatness of a leader can be measured by their willingness to let others outshine them. Cultivating dependency only makes the other person weaker, even if it temporarily makes you feel powerful.

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To avoid this, helpers should measure progress against defined objectives for improvement. For example, if a coach is working with a leader to improve their ability to delegate, they should track progress on delegation opportunities to ensure they don't rehash old ground. While it's reasonable for new needs or opportunities for help to arise, continuing to be "needed" for the same issue for too long is a clear sign that the lack of progress has become what is gratifying to both the helper and the one being helped (it's often safer to stay helpless and keep relying on the helper to be rescued).

Apply the right amount of pressure.

One of the common complaints leaders share with me is, "My coach didn't really push me that hard. We just talked during our sessions, but I didn't feel challenged." Many in advisory professions fear putting their relationships at risk by being "too honest" about issues that must be addressed. Likewise, many leaders avoid giving hard feedback to dodge conflict. I've heard coaches and consultants justify pulling their punches with statements like, "I'm not sure they're ready to hear that." I've heard leaders avoid addressing underperformance with, "Let's give them one more quarter to turn this around." While it's prudent to thoughtfully prepare leaders to hear tough news, it's equally important to be honest about whose interest you are serving by delaying it. A coach or consultant's greatest value to a client is their ability to see and offer the unvarnished truth, no matter how difficult it is to hear. Followers trust leaders that deliver hard messages in respectful, caring ways.

On the other end of the spectrum, I've seen bullying coaches and leaders whose bluntness borders on abusive, leading to the loss of confidence and commitment on the part of those being helped. They speak in condescending dogma and bark declarations. Both avoidant and bully helpers reach the same outcome — keeping those they help in need of them. To become great, leaders and coaches must learn to determine the right degree of pressure to apply — it should be enough to sustain confidence and commitment while making tangible progress.

Contributing to others' success is a sacrosanct privilege. "First, do no harm" applies as much to us as it does to physicians. It's a wonderful feeling to know others rely on our help. But when our desire for impact contorts into a need to be indispensable and pivotal to others' achievement, we've started our decent to the very insignificance we fear. Because when those we help figure out we are serving our egos instead of them, they back away. In a world where who we are and what we do have become so closely connected, it's especially critical for helpers to keep a healthy separation between them. Great help is what you give, it's not who you are.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change for their organizations, leaders, and industries. He is the best-selling author of eight books, including the recent Amazon #1 *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Twitter at @RonCarucci; download his free e-book on Leading Transformation.

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