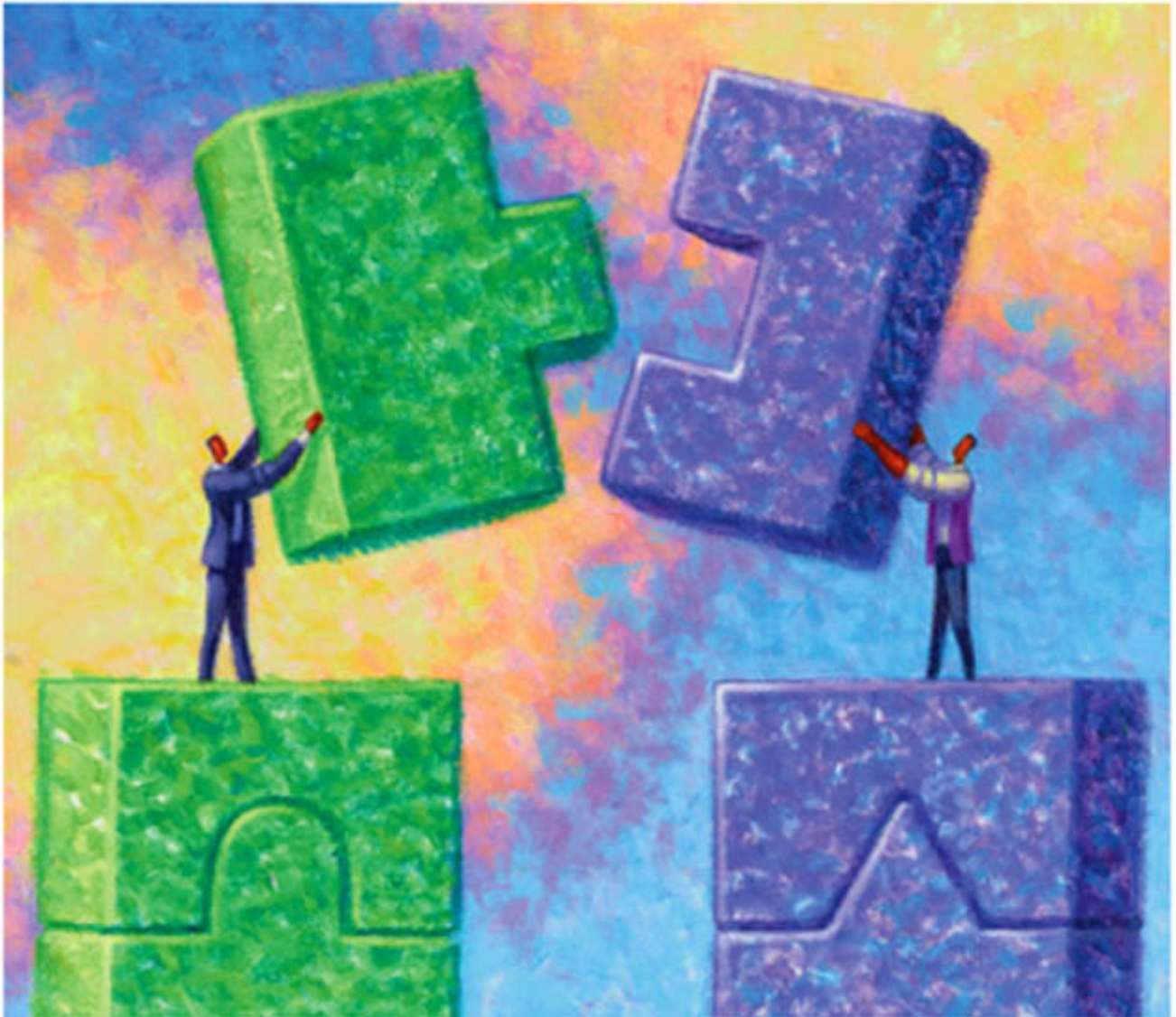# HELPING

HOW TO OFFER, GIVE, AND RECEIVE HELP

Understanding Effective Dynamics in One-to-One, Group, and Organizational Relationships

EDGAR H. SCHEIN

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HOW TO OFFER, GIVE, AND RECEIVE HELP

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Helping

To my late wife, Mary,
who taught me everything I know about helping

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contents

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preface

Helping is a fundamental human relationship: A mother feeds her infant, a lover, friend, or spouse helps to make something happen, a group member plays his or her role to help the group succeed, a therapist helps a patient, an organizational consultant or coach helps to improve individual, group, or organizational functioning. *Helping* is a basic relationship that moves things forward. We take helping so much for granted in our ordinary daily life that the word itself often comes up only when someone is said to have "not been helpful" in a situation where help was taken for granted. Yet, as common as helping is in our daily life, it is paradoxical that we know relatively little about the emotional dynamics of that relationship.

A great deal has been written about formal help of the sort that is provided by psychotherapists, social workers, and other human services professionals, but not much is understood about what goes on and what goes wrong when I try to help a friend and find myself rudely rebuffed. How is it possible that the person jumping in to save the drowning man ends up getting sued for dislocating the man's shoulder in the rescue attempt? Why do so many consulting reports to management end up in

the circular file? Why do doctors complain about patients not taking the pills that have been prescribed?

We understand both intuitively and from experience that to provide formal help, there must be both a degree of *understanding* and a degree of *trust* between the helper and the "client," the general term I will use for the person or persons being helped. Understanding is needed for the helper to know when to offer help and what would be helpful if asked for help. Trust is needed for the client to reveal what is the real problem, to be able to accept what is offered, and to implement whatever resolution might come out of the conversation with the helper.

In books on therapy a great deal of attention is given to building that trust, but in the day-to-day routines of giving and receiving help, the question of how one builds it, how one knows it is there, and how one maintains it are not well understood. In particular, most of these helping situations occur quickly, without warning, and are time limited. When a spouse asks for help in picking a suit for tonight's crucial meeting with the boss, we do not sit down and engage in the kind of inquiry that a therapist might use in starting with a new patient. When we offer to walk a blind person across a busy intersection, we do not think about building a trusting relationship before we grab his or her arm and move forward. Yet even there, we sometimes find the blind person saying, "No thank you" and pushing off on his or her own, leaving us wondering whether we have offended or whether the blind person is taking unnecessary risks in rejecting our help. How would we know?

A general theory of helping can only be useful if it explains the difference between effective and ineffective help in *all* situations, including the simplest ones, such as offering directions to someone who asks for help on the street corner. To develop elements of such a theory requires us to analyze what any relationship involves and what trust really means.

We must begin with the proposition that all human relationships are about status positioning and what sociologists call "situational proprieties." It is human to want to be granted the status and position that we feel we deserve, no matter how high or low it might be, and we want to do what is situationally appropriate. We are either trying to get ahead or stay even, and we measure all interactions by how much we have lost or gained. A successful interaction, one that leaves us with a feeling of accomplishment, results when we have acted appropriately in terms of our goals. Ideally those goals involve some gain for everyone in the situation.

What distinguishes the helping situation is that we are consciously trying to help someone else to accomplish something. The helping relationship is one in which we invest time, emotions, ideas, and things; hence we expect a return, if only a thank you. When it works well, we both gain status. But alas, often it does not go well and we run the risk of losing status— not helping when help was needed, trying to help when help was not needed or wanted, giving the wrong kind of help, or not sustaining help when it is needed over a period of time.

In this book I analyze the dynamics of helping relationships, explain the importance of trust in helping relationships, illustrate what any would-be helper must do to ensure that help is actually provided, and what any recipient of help must do to facilitate the process. I have come to believe that the social and psychological dynamics of helping are the same whether we are talking about giving directions or coaching an organizational client or taking care of a sick spouse. I therefore use a broad range of examples that I have experienced in my own professional and personal life. I have been in therapy, have been coached in tennis, and in many other ways have received help. As a helper I have been a husband, a parent to three children, a grandparent to seven grandchildren, taught many classes, consulted with

individual and organizational clients, and have taken care of my wife during her years with breast cancer. It is through seeing the similarities in these many different kinds of situations that we can begin to build a more general theory of helping.

Intellectual Roots and How This Book Is Organized

I have written this book more in the style of an essay than an academic study. My training at Harvard's Department of Social Relations exposed me to a great deal of sociology and anthropology, and I have always felt that these two disciplines were underutilized in our social and psychological analyses of social phenomena. In particular, it is the Chicago School, which developed "symbolic interactionism," that is most pertinent to the analysis of helping. First formulated by Cooley (1922), Mead (1934), Hughes (1958), and Blumer (1971), it was brilliantly expanded upon in the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967), whose microanalyses of social behavior are enormously insightful. I worked closely with Goffman during my stint at the Walter Reed Institute of Research where he was a consultant from 1953 to 1956, and I continued to focus on this form of analysis in my collaborations with my sociological colleague John Van Maanen (1979).

A second and very powerful set of insights came from several decades of work with the National Training Labs (Bradford, 1974; Schein & Bennis, 1965), where I ran sensitivity groups and participated in the design of learning labs at Bethel, Maine. Apart from the personal learning in the groups, the influence of that generation of researchers in group dynamics and leadership was profound. I want to single out particularly Doug McGregor, Lee Bradford, Ken Benne, Ron and Gordon Lippitt,

Herbert Shepard, Warren Bennis, Jack Gibb, Chris Argyris, Edie and Charlie Seashore, and Dick Beckhard.

The exposure to this group and the workshops that we collectively evolved put the focus squarely on interpersonal processes. The process focus combined with symbolic interactionism helped me to develop my own consulting style, labeled "process consultation" (1969, 1999), and the insights derived from many consulting experiences led to the realization that helping was not only an important ingredient of what organizational consulting was all about, but was a core social process in its own right that needed analysis.

This book is an exercise in conceptualizing experiences with which we are all highly familiar. I have not tried to include all of the research that bears on helping, as this is not intended to be a scholarly treatise. Instead, what I am after is practical insight that might improve the reader's understanding and skill in helping. What the reader should realize is that most current analyses of helping, coaching, and consulting have focused on the psychological factors, such as temperament and personality. It is my view that as important as those factors are, the key to understanding a relationship such as helping is to look at it from a cultural and sociological view.

The humorist Stephen Potter (1950, 1951) used his thorough understanding of the social rules of interaction to write semi-seriously about how these rules can be taken advantage of if the protagonist wishes to gain status or put his counterpart down. Though the examples he cites in *Gamesmanship* and *One-upmanship* are clearly caricatures, they are almost always just minor variations of what we can observe going on around us all the time. And it is not accidental that these two titles have become common words in our daily life, reflecting the universality of status rituals on behalf of our social goals.

Helping is a special kind of relationship and one must therefore be mindful of its special characteristics. In that regard I have also been highly stimulated by the seminal writings of Ellen Langer, especially her book *Mindfulness* (1989) which explores internally what Goffman so effectively explores interpersonally.

My basic argument, that social life is partly economics and partly theater, of course rests on a long tradition of scholarship and philosophy. There are few cultural universals, but anthropologists agree that all societies are stratified and that all social behavior is reciprocal. My observations and assertions about the helping process are my own, but are built on those two sociological and anthropological premises. They are intended to enrich our understanding by taking a somewhat different view of social interaction and the role that helping plays in our daily life.

In chapter 1 I review the many forms of helping to illustrate how broad and deep the concept is. Chapter 2 shows how the language and imagery of economics and theater help us to understand some of the fundamentals of all human relationships. In chapter 3 these concepts are applied to the helping relationship and the argument is put forth that all such relationships are initially unbalanced and ambiguous. Chapter 4 describes three different kinds of helping roles and argues that helping relationships should always start with process consultation. How to begin the helping relationship with humble inquiry is the focus of chapter 5 and detailed examples are provided in chapter 6. In chapters 7 and 8 I show how this model of helping actually illuminates some of the essential aspects of teamwork, leadership, and organizational change management. Chapter 9 wraps up with some principles and tips for would-be helpers.

acknowledgments

I have given chapters of this book to many friends and colleagues. They were very helpful at all stages in validating or challenging some of the ideas I put forth. Special thanks go to Otto Scharmer, Lotte Bailyn, John Van Maanen, David Coghlan, Sue Lotz, Mary Jane Kornacki, and especially the reviewers from Berrett-Koehler who provided detailed feedback on the draft. Joan Gallos and Michael Arthur read over the finished draft and provided yet another layer of help, which enabled me to clarify several ideas further.

My wife passed away during the writing of this book, but the last six months of her final battle with breast cancer after a good twenty-five-year fight provided much food for thought about helping and caretaking. I thank her posthumously for the fifty-two wonderful years we had together and for providing the creative home atmosphere that always made my writing a pleasure rather than a chore.

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Cambridge, MA.
September 15, 2008

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1

What Is Help?

Helpful and Unhelpful Help

Helping is a complex phenomenon. There's helpful help and unhelpful help. This book is written to shed light on the difference between the two. In my career as a professor and sometimes consultant I often reflect on what is helpful and what is not, why some classes go well and others do not, why coaching and experiential learning are often more successful than formal lectures. When I am with organizational clients, why does it work better to focus on process rather than content, or how things are done rather than what is done? My goal in this book is to provide the reader with enough insight to be able to actually help when help is asked for or needed, and to be able to receive help when help is needed and offered. Neither is as easy as we often wish.

The other day, for example, a friend asked me for some advice on how to deal with a problem he was having with his wife. I offered a suggestion to which he replied huffily that not only had he already tried that and it didn't work, but he also implied that I was insensitive to have even made that sugges-

tion. It reminded me of many other situations I have witnessed where help was asked for or offered but the result felt unsuccessful and uncomfortable.

Then I was reminded of a case of helpful help. Outside my house a woman in her car drove up and asked me, "How do I get to Massachusetts Ave.?" I asked her where she was headed and learned that she wanted to go to downtown Boston. I then pointed out that the road she was on led directly to downtown and she did not need Mass. Ave. She thanked me profusely for not sending her to the street she had asked for.

The most common version of unhelpful help that I have experienced as both helper and client concerns the computer. When I call the help line I often don't even understand the diagnostic questions that the helper asks me in order to determine what help I need. When my computer coach tells me the several steps I need to take to solve the problem, I don't know how to interrupt to say, "Wait, I don't understand the first step." On the other hand, another computer coach I hired asked me what my personal goals were in learning to use the computer, elicited my desire to use it primarily for writing, and then showed me all the programs and tools that would make writing easier. That felt great. Yet when my wife asks me for help with the computer, I routinely fall into the same trap of telling her what I would do, which turns out to be more than she can handle, and we both end up frustrated.

Friends, editors, consultants, teachers, and coaches have often made suggestions and proposals that were quite irrelevant to my problem at the time. Even when I ignored them as gently as I could, my sometimes self-appointed helpers reminded me in an irritated tone that they were only trying to be helpful, implying that I was wrong in some way not to have been able to accept the help.

I remember one of my children asking me for help with her math homework. I interrupted my work, did the problem for her, only to find her sulking off without a thank you. What had I done wrong? On another occasion a child asked for homework help and I said, "Let's talk. . . ." I discovered that she wanted to talk about some serious social problems at school that had nothing to do with homework. We had a good talk and both felt better.

Doctors, therapists, social workers, and coaches of all sorts have had the experience of the best-intended help going wrong somehow. As a consultant and career coach to managers in various kinds of organizations, I have often figured out solutions to problems that they posed, and only later discovered that either my advice did not work or the client could not or would not implement what I had suggested. I also remember in my own consulting how often it happened that when I intervened to point out some dysfunctional behavior in a group meeting, I was thanked for being very helpful, only to find that the behavior did not change one iota.

Help is, of course, not limited to the one-on-one situation. Group effort and teamwork often hinge on the degree to which members perform their roles properly in accomplishing the group's task. We do not typically think of an effective team as being a group of people who really know how to help each other in the performance of a task, yet that is precisely what good teamwork is—successful reciprocal help. It is interesting to note, however, that the word "help" is only used in relation to teamwork when it does *not* occur, as when one group member says to another, "What you did was not helpful" or "Why didn't you help more?"

Helping in a team context is most obvious in team sports, where the ability of one player to score is entirely dependent