



Helping a subordinate solve a problem

The challenge

Faced with certain problems, your subordinate may sometimes feel overwhelmed. As a manager, it is your job to help him or her. But how far should you go? Do you need to take the situation in hand or would it be better to give some advice and leave it to him/her to take inspiration from this advice to solve the problem? And what should you do to ensure your subordinate learns from this experience so that your help is less necessary next time a similar problem arises?

Different possible levels of intervention

Depending on your subordinate's level of skills, the type of difficulty encountered, or the degree of urgency of the situation, you might intervene in one or several of the following ways:

Help define the problem Your subordinate may find it difficult to reach a solution because his/her vision of the problem is too narrow or wrong. Helping better understand the stakes may be enough to point him/her in the right direction.	• Help him/her step back from his/her emotions. Is he/she minimizing the problems for reassurance? On the contrary, are emotions leading him/her to over-estimate the difficulties or the complexity of the situation? • Ask questions so as to open up thinking and develop a broader understanding of the problem, and help him/her take a step back from his/her immediate vision of the problem. E.g.: What is the context? How long has this situation lasted? Who is involved? Are there any other possible explanations? • Point out other aspects of the problem which may not have occurred to him/her.
Reassure about his/her ability to solve the problem The difficulties encountered are sometimes due to the simple fact that your employee wrongly believes he/she won't manage.	• Underline the points the present situation shares with others successfully managed in the past by your subordinate. In this way, you will show him/her that he/she is not in completely unknown territory. • Underline the qualities already shown elsewhere by your subordinate which can be used in the current situation. • Suggest periodic meetings: regular support will help provide reassurance.
Help generate solutions Due to lack of the necessary skills or creativity, your subordinate will sometimes need guidance to be able to imagine solutions.	• Invite your employee to formulate the problem in different ways as this exercise may provide hints of an answer. • Stimulate creativity. Underline the challenge to be met and ask your subordinate to express him/herself without too much heed to the feasibility of the potential solutions. Make parallels with known situations. E.g.: Have there already been attempts at solutions in the past? Why were they not successful? • Let your subordinate avail of your expertise. E.g.: Share your experience, suggest potential solutions to be explored.
Provide a method When your subordinate lacks experience – or when the situation is urgent – it is often better to be directive on the approach to adopt.	• Define an approach in stages and fix intermediary goals. E.g.: Explain in detail the strategy to be followed in a negotiation. • Set initial attainable objectives and evaluate the results obtained: you will encourage your subordinate and can adjust your advice as necessary. • Systematically underline the lessons learned after each stage so that your subordinate can use the method for him/herself more rapidly.
Help choose a solution When your employee cannot make a decision, you can guide him/her to choosing a solution.	• Help your employee draw up a grid to evaluate the possible solutions. E.g.: What are the main stakes? Which criteria would the ideal solution fulfill? • Encourage him/her to adopt a long-term approach. E.g.: What would be the consequences of applying such a solution? May some actors be opposed to this solution? • Clarify the conditions required to successfully implement the chosen solution and offer your support on the critical aspects.