

THE FIX-IT TRAP FIELD CARD

Five Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Give the Answer

In Chapter 1 I tell the story of Marcus, a young manager who couldn't get his team working as one. I could see the problem — or I thought I could. So I gave him my answer: how I'd handle the team, what he should do. He resisted. The more I pushed, the less it worked, and the problem never got solved. I'd confused having experience with knowing the answer.

That's the Fix-It Trap. You see a problem, you have the experience, you want to help — so you fix it. Except you don't fix it. You take the problem away from the person who needed to learn how to solve it. In a family business, that's how you end up with a next generation that can run the plant only while you're standing in it.

Keep this card where you'll see it — on your desk, in your notebook, on the wall by the office door. When someone walks in with a problem, run through these five questions before you open your mouth.

QUESTION 1: IS ANYONE AT RISK IF I WAIT?

Safety, a customer shipment, real money. If the answer is yes, fix it. Nobody learns anything from a lost finger or a lost account. This card is for everything else — which is most of what walks through your door.

Ask yourself: Is this urgent, or does it just feel urgent because I already know what to do?

QUESTION 2: DO I UNDERSTAND THEIR SITUATION — OR AM I ASSUMING MINE?

Years on the floor give you a library of old problems. The danger is matching the new one to an old one too fast. With Marcus I never asked what was actually going on inside his team — who the people were, what the history was. I just assumed my pattern fit.

Ask yourself: Have I heard the whole situation, or did I stop listening when it started to sound familiar?

QUESTION 3: AM I HANDING OVER MY REASONING — OR JUST MY METHOD?

How you would do it was built on your personality, your authority, your team, your years. None of that transfers. If you give them your method, they get a copy that doesn't fit. If you help them think it through, they get judgment they can use again.

Ask yourself: Am I explaining why — or just telling them what I'd do?



QUESTION 4: AM I TRYING TO SAVE THEM FROM THE STRUGGLE?

It's tempting to spare someone the trial and error you already went through. But the struggle is where the learning happens. Let them work through it — badly at first, if that's how it goes — and they'll understand their own situation in a way no handed-down answer can teach.

Ask yourself: If I fix this now, will they be able to handle the next one without me — or will they call me?

QUESTION 5: AM I FIXING IT BECAUSE IT'S FASTER FOR ME?

The honest one. Letting someone work it out takes longer today. It always does. Fixing it yourself saves you ten minutes and costs you ten years of being the only person who can.

Ask yourself: Am I doing this for their development — or for my schedule, and my own need to be the one with the answer?

THEN ASK THEM — IN THIS ORDER

#	QUESTION
1	What do you see?
2	What have you tried?
3	What do you think is causing it?
4	What options do you have?
5	What are you going to do?

Then let them act. Afterward, talk through what happened — what they learned, what surprised them, what they'd do differently. That's where the development happens. My job as a mentor isn't to create another version of me. It's to help someone become better at being themselves.

WHEN THEY WAIT FOR YOUR ANSWER OUT OF RESPECT

In high-hierarchy cultures — much of Asia, the Middle East, and many traditional family businesses everywhere — a junior person may not offer an idea to someone senior until they're invited to. Silence isn't a lack of ideas. It's good manners. So say it plainly: “I want your answer first. I'll give you mine after.” You may have to say it more than once before they believe you mean it.

*For the full story, read Chapter 1 of *The Multiplying Mentor*. For when to guide and when to step back, read Chapter 4. If you notice you're doing most of the work in a mentoring relationship, see Problem 22 in the free toolkit (F.5).*