

Schools of thought

Colin Foster argues that receiving contradictory advice from colleagues is actually more helpful than it might initially seem...

Don't you hate it when you receive contradictory advice? You ask two colleagues for their opinion on some tricky teaching decision or situation, and they give you two opposing responses.

Let's say you have a class which always seems to be especially challenging whenever you do role play. One colleague advises that you need to do role play more often with that class, so that the students get used to working productively in that kind of mode.

Conversely, another colleague tells you that role play isn't going to work with every class – so if it clearly isn't a useful strategy with that particular class, just avoid it and focus on other approaches instead.

Who is right? What should you do? Is there any point asking for advice if well-meaning, experienced colleagues who seem to know what they're talking about can arrive at totally opposite conclusions?

Asking around

Of course, the simplest way to avoid receiving contradictory advice is never to ask for advice in the first place – at least not from more than one person on any one topic. But this is hardly an attractive option.

In schools we are surrounded every day by expertise of all kinds, and it would be an enormous missed opportunity to not seek any benefit from this. Teachers can easily become siloed in their classrooms – struggling alone with issues that the person in the classroom next

door might well have some valuable input and insight into, if only they were asked. Shunning all advice completely seems like a wasteful overreaction to the risk of receiving contradictory advice.

Similarly, putting all your eggs in one basket by asking just one person fails to fully utilise the resources available to you. No one has absolute wisdom on all things. We're all human, and simply doing our best to figure out how to operate within the complexities of a school environment.

If you want to maximise your opportunities for learning from your colleagues' wisdom, then getting a second, or even third opinion from someone

we receive. We've all encountered well-known proverbs which seem to contradict each other – *'Birds of a feather flock together'* telling us that similar people tend to associate, while *'Opposites attract'* asserts the reverse.

'Great minds think alike' holds that when people agree, they're probably right. On the other hand, we're also told that *'Fools seldom differ'*. It seems that whatever the circumstance, we can always find a proverb that will enable us to say, *'I told you so!'* In

directly contradict each other – but they can be useful in prompting us to think about extreme possibilities.

“We may sometimes receive contradictory advice because ‘the truth’ lies somewhere in the middle”

with different expertise and experience would seem to make sense.

It then falls to the person asking to synthesise the advice given and come up with a way forward – but how can we do that when, as so often seems to be the case, the advice received is at least partially, if not fully contradictory?

Different circumstances

Contradictory advice may not be as bad as it seems, and we should perhaps not be so surprised when this is what

circumstances like these, which one is right?

I think the answer is not 'either/or' but rather 'both/and'. In different circumstances, at different times and in different situations, either of those aforementioned proverb pairs might be correct. Which is different to concluding that all proverbs are useless and that we should ignore them completely.

On the face of it, they can't give us instantly applicable instructions about what we should do because they



The wisdom of extremes

When everyone turns up at a meeting being of one mind on some matter, thinking identically about what to do, we may indeed quip that *'Great minds think alike'*. But at the same time, we should also consider the perils of groupthink, and whether we might be operating from within a bubble that sees things the same way. We should question whether there might be some benefit in considering alternative approaches that don't come to mind so easily.

There is wisdom in considering both extremes before making a decision. It's sometimes said that one way to empower someone is to "Never give advice," but to rather "always give mutually contradictory suggestions."

The thinking behind this notion is that we must avoid usurping this

person's autonomy by 'telling them' what they must do. Instead, we should force them into actively making a choice. They have to select from at least two options, or else come up with a third option themselves.

Of course, there's also an added bonus in that not giving direct advice ourselves, but offering in its place the wisdom of extremes, protects us from being blamed if things don't turn out well...

The wisdom of compromises

Then again, we may sometimes receive what appears to be contradictory advice because 'the truth' lies somewhere in the middle. If we were to plot our colleagues' advice on a chart, we may occasionally find ourselves presented with an inverted U-shaped

curve containing a 'happy median' or 'sweet spot' somewhere in the middle. The contradictory advice, taken together, is essentially steering us away from both extremes and towards some kind of optimal middle.

That said, we could equally be looking at a visual representation of the saying, *'Different strokes for different folks'*. On some occasions, or for some students, Advice A will work. At other occasions, or with different students, Advice B will prove to be more effective. Having both avenues at their disposal will, if nothing else, at least empower the teacher by having more than one option to pursue which may or may not work.

The prospect of receiving contradictory advice is pretty much inevitable in any complex professional field where there are

multiple factors at play. Personal advice, and even research evidence will rarely tell us *'You must do this!'* More often than not, the conclusions will be nuanced, and require the application of our own craft, knowledge and judgment. Having multiple options available will equip us to make a confident choice, and then really go for the option selected – while still granting enough flexibility to adapt and switch things up if necessary.

Mixed motives

Contradictory advice may even be telling us that *either option is okay*, since both come with a good recommendation. What matters is that we enthusiastically opt for one of them.

Finally, it's worth bearing in mind that we can sometimes have mixed motives when asking others for advice – perhaps in the hope that we're recommended one course of action over another. Contradictory advice in this case lets us select whichever option we subconsciously want to hear and ignore potential challenges.

However, as the saying goes, good advice will often *'Disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.'* Many of us will sometimes want to escape being challenged, which is why it can be good practice to think carefully about both extremes before settling on a way forward.



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