

PROBLEM-SOLVING TALK

The Language of Situational Advice

PART TWO

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Even if we don't admit it, we *all* have problems to solve—or at least circumstances that could use improvement. In some cultures, people turn to their families or friends for help or comfort in difficult situations. In other places, it's common to talk things over with therapists or counselors—or to participate in self-help, support, or other kinds of discussion groups. There are even media talk shows that offer guests and callers advice. People appear on these shows or call in to talk about their problems. Then the hosts, guest psychologists or doctors or other “experts,” or even people in the audience or other callers, tell their opinions. Often, they try to give advice.

What's the most effective way to present a problem or describe a problematic situation? Usually, it's best to get right to the point—perhaps by telling the answers to questions like these:

1. What's the situation?
2. Why does this set of circumstances present a problem? (Tell a few relevant details.)
3. What possible solutions have you tried? Why haven't they worked?
4. What help or advice do you need?

To help someone who needs advice, we may have to ask that person questions until we are sure that we understand their circumstances.

In most cases, we ought to be gentle with our suggestions, avoiding negative criticism or “put downs.”

On the next page are some examples of phrases that are common in giving advice:

Where can we hear examples of Problem-Solving Talk?

- SELF-HELP AND SUPPORT GROUPS, where people discuss problems and try to help one another
- TELEVISION TALK SHOWS: where guests describe situations to get “advice from experts” or viewers
- RADIO TALK SHOWS: Callers tell problems. Hosts ask questions, give opinions—so do listeners.
- ONLINE COUNSELING: therapy by phone, chat, video

If I understand you correctly, you feel. . .	What do you mean by. . . ?	<i>What</i> was that?	Huh?
Could you tell me more about. . . ?	Please explain. . . .	And you consider <i>that</i> a problem?	
It seems as if you...	What about. . . ?	That's not right.	You're wrong!
Is there any possibility that. . . ?	How about. . . ?	Don't be ridiculous!	How stupid of you!
Have you ever considered...?	Maybe if you. . . .	I can't believe that you would ever...	
Some people have found that. . . .	Maybe you could. . . .	How could you do such a thing?	
What might happen if you. . . ?	What makes you think that. . . ?	So?	So what?
I need help in understanding. . . .	Do you really think so?	You shouldn't feel that way. . . .	
Perhaps. . . .	Do you think you might be able to. . . ?	Only an idiot would even consider. . . .	
Is it possible that. . . ?	What were your reasons for. . . ?	Why on earth would you. . . . ?	<i>What?!!</i>
If I were in your situation, I might. . . .	May I suggest. . . ?	I advise you to . . .	Just do what I say!
Something that has worked for me is. . . .	In my view, you should. . . .	Stop talking and get going!	
Another possibility is to. . . .	I may be wrong, but I think. . . .	I know what's best for you, so	
What often works in such situations is. . . .	I think you ought to. . . .	There's no other way but to. . . .	

Of course, the gentleness or unpleasantness of advice talk—and its usefulness or effectiveness—usually depend on factors other than words. The relationships among the participants in the conversation, the attitudes of the speakers, and the purpose of the talk all make a difference. Often when we ask or give advice, our tone of voice and body language are as important as the actual wording of our questions and suggestions. Skillful listening and thoughtful, caring responses are especially helpful. Here are some suggestions on how to communicate effectively in a problem-solving conversation:

- **PRESENT THE PROBLEM CLEARLY, HONESTLY, & BRIEFLY.** Unless the group has agreed that the conversation is just an emotional “gripe session,” we shouldn’t use it as an opportunity to blame, complain, whine, or try to get sympathy. We should describe the situation, give the necessary details, and ask directly for the help or advice we need.
- **USE ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS.** A good listener is quiet but not passive. To listen effectively to descriptions of problems—or to advice—we should try putting ourselves in each speaker’s place—to see things from that person’s point of view. To check that we are getting the point, we can make comments that begin with phrases like “Let me see if I understand so far...,” “If I understand you correctly, you mean that...” “As I hear it, the problem is...,” “It sounds like you...,” “You seem...,” and so on. Of course, we can ask questions, but they shouldn’t sound like a police interrogation.
- **CONVERSE FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE, POSITIVE PURPOSE.** If the group agrees that the objective of a talk is to (begin to) improve someone’s situation, then the conversation will be helpful to *everyone*—not just the person with the problem. On the other hand, if some of us are trying to “look good” or to impress, especially by criticizing others unfairly or unnecessarily harshly, our talk may *create* more difficulties than it takes care of. Problem-solving talk should help solve problems, better relationships, and improve situations!

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 2

FORM: *Asking & Giving Advice*

TOPIC: *Communication Difficulties*



My problem is language. English isn't my native language, so when I listen to people talking quickly, I miss a lot. I'm too shy to ask them to repeat or explain... , but I don't know what to answer because I didn't get their point. So... usually I just say *nothing*. I just *smile*. They must think I'm an idiot or something. But then if I *do* say something, they may not understand my pronunciation... or I will use the wrong word—or say something stupid or... So I feel more embarrassed than ever.

This is really a problem because I want to get along in this country. I have to get through school. I would like to get a good job and make friends. I want to... feel happy...

I have tried taking English classes, but they are mostly about grammar or reading or writing—not *speaking*. Do you have any suggestions about how to improve my English—when I try to listen or talk?

TAKUYA: Hmmmm... *How* did you say you feel when you try to converse?

GITI: Shy. And embarrassed... scared. I just want to get away...

AYUMI: What do you mean by that? I mean... why do you feel this way?

GITI: Well, I guess... because they look at me funny. I think they're laughing at me. I feel so stupid... so ashamed.

HELEN: So... as I understand it, you don't feel your English is good enough to get along well in this country. You feel too shy or embarrassed to talk to people. You don't want to seem foolish...

GITI: That's right. I just want to get away...

TAKUYA: And what happens if you *do* walk away—or just smile and stay silent?

GITI: They stop talking to me. And I can't make friends *that* way either!

AYUMI: Probably not... or get the job you want. Or do well in school. I can see that.

GITI: I guess they think I'm stupid anyway—if I don't say anything.



HELEN: So that isn't really an effective solution to your problem... is it? What I mean is... it doesn't help if you run away from the situation.

TAKUYA: You know, I don't see this as a *language* problem at all. It seems to me that it's about self-confidence—self-esteem.

AYUMI: Yeah... have you ever considered that you have unrealistic expectations of yourself? No one can be perfect... it takes *time* to learn a language—especially to really understand and to speak fluently.

GITI: O.K. ... thanks for your opinions. Could we do some brainstorming and think of some possible solutions? I will write down your suggestions.

TAKUYA: Right ... good idea! Well, to start, I'd say ... you could learn how to be more assertive ... less shy—to speak up for yourself.

GITI: Oh ... if I understand you correctly, you think I need to be more self-confident.

AYUMI: That sounds good to me. And something else ... some people have found that if they learn to *relax* when they converse, they will realize that their fears are a little silly. No one is going to walk away from you or get mad... or laugh at you. They know you are just learning English...

HELEN: How about asking them if they can speak *your* language—or some other language—and how long it took them to learn?

TAKUYA: Oh ... I've got it! What if you asked them to help you—to correct your mistakes? People in this country love to give advice—to feel smart or useful.

GITI: O.K. ... I'm writing all this down...

AYUMI: I'd say that you have to be honest about your fears—at least to yourself. Or you could talk about feeling shy... get your conversation partners on your side.

HELEN: Do you think you can show them how interested you are in them? That can be so flattering. And then they'll be eager to repeat or explain some more—and you will improve your English as the same time!

TAKUYA: And of course, maybe you could get more fluent in English on your own too. You could take a speaking course... You seem to need a lot of practice.

AYUMI: I'd suggest listening to a lot of spoken English—on TV and radio. Something that has worked for me is to tape shows. Then I listen—again and again. And I write down or repeat the useful expressions I hear....

HELEN: Or go to movies and lectures. Or listen to videotapes and audiotapes—and join groups!

TAKUYA: No way! I don't think there's any other way but to....

GITI: Well, thank you so much for your advice. I'm going to look over these suggestions, try one thing at a time, and tell you how it's going. This talk has really been very helpful to me.

AYUMI: Oh ... and by the way... your English sounds very good. You seem to understand, speak without mistakes, and communicate well. You are very fluent....

HELEN: Yeah, I agree. I wonder if you could help me with my English....



COMPREHENSION CHECK: Did you get the point of *Sample Conversation 2*? Then answer these questions:

1. What is the relationship among the speakers? (Are they family members, friends, colleagues, classmates, or what?)
2. What is the topic of the conversation? (What are they talking about?)
3. Who has "the problem?" Who is trying to help her solve it? How are they doing so?
4. What's the point of the exchange? (What can we listeners learn from it?)

MINI-SPEECH 2

FORM: *Presenting a Problematic Situation*

TOPICS: *Personal, Relationship, School, & Work Problems*



INSTRUCTIONS: Are you a skillful problem-solver? Can you explain your own difficulties clearly—so that your listeners can understand well enough to give useful advice? Can you listen actively to other people's problems and help to brainstorm possible solutions? To practice the language of situational advice—and possibly to solve some real dilemmas—follow these steps:

1. Prepare to present your situation by answering these questions—in notes or in your head: *What's the problem? Why is it a problem? Why haven't your attempted solutions worked so far? What help or advice do you want?*
2. If the class is large, divide into groups of about four to six participants each.
3. When it's your turn to present, describe or explain your dilemma to your group in less than two minutes. Then take part in a "brainstorming session" with these steps:
 - For about five minutes, everyone else in the group tells all the thoughts and suggestions that come to mind—even if they seem silly or unrealistic at the moment. During this step of "brainstorming," no one—including you—may criticize or argue about any ideas. Someone lists them on a board or paper.
 - The group crosses out the ideas that are repetitive and combines those that seem to belong together.
 - Now respond to the other suggestions one by one. Cross out the impossible ideas (and tell why they are unworkable). Put a question mark (?) after each of the real possibilities and circle the suggestions that seem most useful. With the group, number these remaining ideas in order—"1" before your choice of the best possible solution, "2" before the suggestion you want to try if the first idea doesn't work or isn't enough, "3" after the next most useful piece of advice, and so on.
4. Finally, thank the group for their advice. After you have tried some of the suggestions, tell your "advisors" what happened. Keep working on an effective solution!
5. Of course, do your best to help the other members of your group solve *their* problems or improve *their* situations. Listen actively, make sure you understand their circumstances, ask necessary questions and add helpful comments, and participate fully in the brainstorming session.

