



The Taboo of Help ~ what leaders need to know about help-seeking behaviour

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“Helping is the core of what we think of as teamwork and is an essential ingredient of organizational effectiveness. It is one of the most important things that leaders do and it is at the heart of change processes”

1. Introduction

Helping is an important aspect of organisations; we form organisations often because what needs doing cannot be achieved by one person alone and requires a group of people helping one another (Schein, 2011). Nonetheless, help is not always sought when it is needed, thus reducing organisational effectiveness. The main focus of this article is on what could be considered the **taboo of help**: why don't people ask for help when they need it? Several factors are covered that commonly prevent and deter **help-seeking**, including some discussion of cultural and gender differences. It is useful for leaders to be aware of these factors that might affect their employees' help-seeking behaviour. The final section details how **leadership style** affects helping behaviour of employees towards one another. Firstly, definitions of the key concepts of help and help-seeking are outlined.

2. Help

To help, as a verb, is “to make it possible or easier for someone to do something, by doing part of the work yourself or by providing

advice, money, support, etc” (Cambridge Dictionary online, 2018). Help as a noun refers to this action of helping. Helping is multifaceted, “a common yet complex process. It is an attitude, a set of behaviours, a skill, and an essential component of social life” (Schein, 2011:144). Helping relationships are “fundamentally human”, relationships that occur in all human cultures (Schein, 2011:ix). Given that most species engage in helping, it seems likely that it has a biological, evolutionary basis (Schein, 2011). Help relates to altruism, cooperation and collaboration – norms that allow organisations and society to function effectively (Egan, 2006).

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Most help we receive in day-to-day life comes from **informal helping relationships**, for instance friends, acquaintances, relatives and perhaps even strangers (Egan, 2006). There is a more **formal** type of helping relationship, however, that we seek from counsellors, coaches, psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on, what could be considered the **helping professions** (Egan, 2006).

Two main categories of help have been identified: **instrumental** and **emotional** (Bamberger, 2009). Instrumental help is that which is tangible in nature, such as providing equipment, money or other human resources. **Informational** help refers to helping in the form of providing information, and it is commonly grouped together as instrumental help. Bamberger (2009:79) states that “instrumental help-seeking is likely to yield beneficial performance effects in that conceptually, it is directly tied to the notions of learning, uncertainty reduction, and information elaboration.”

Emotional help assists with psychological wellbeing; it is intangible and is more personal in nature than instrumental help (Bamberger, 2009). It could be from formal sources such as counsellors or therapists, or informal sources such as family and friends. Seeking emotional help in the workplace has also been shown to improve job performance, but this depends on being able to build close and trusting relationships; these could be developed organically and/or through management initiatives such as peer-based helping (Bamberger, 2009).

3. Help-seeking

Help-seeking is “the explicit and deliberate expression of the need for external assistance with an emotional or behavioral problem”, involving “communicating with others to obtain understanding, advice, or support in response to a problem or to distress” (Levesque, 2014:1289). Help-seeking therefore relates to specific problems (which could be specified further as problem situations or problems with living [Egan,

2006]), it requires social interaction, and it is proactive (van der Rijt et al., 2012). Help-seeking can lead to several benefits for the seeker, such as making available information and knowledge currently unavailable; being able to avoid mistakes; increasing awareness of options; increasing confidence, skills, and problem solving; and building and developing social networks and support (van der Rijt et al. 2012).

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4. Categories of help-seeking

“Give a person a fish and they’ll eat for a day, but teach them to fish and they’ll eat for a lifetime.” Various terms have been used to represent this adage. A distinction has been made between a **negotiating style** of help-seeking, for example, where the focus is on the seeker taking responsibility themselves for the problem solution and learning how to deal with it longer term, and a **didactic style**, where the seeker just wants immediate help and instructions to solve the current problem (Bamberger, 2009).

The term **maladaptive** has been used to refer to an extent of help-seeking that is more than is socially acceptable. Maladaptive help-seeking can indicate a lack of confidence in one’s ability and/or a habitual reliance on others’ help, perhaps even if one is able to effectively solve the problem without help (Bamberger, 2009). On the other hand, maladaptive help-seeking is also when one is overly reluctant to seek help, even when help is needed and available (Bamberger, 2009).

It has therefore been proposed that three categories of help-seeking in this sense be identified: **autonomous**, **dependent** (intensive and overly frequent help-seeking) and **avoidant** (overly infrequent) (Bamberger, 2009). It has been argued that the autonomous style is a balanced and effective middle ground between the two extremes. Although this categorisation is presently largely theoretical, some empirical research has indicated that the autonomous style is the most effective for improving job performance (Bamberger, 2009).

5. The taboo of help: why don't people ask for help?

Despite its potential benefits, there are several factors that could deter or prevent help-seeking. **Time** and **effort** is usually involved, for example. And the necessary help could cost **money**.

There are also several **psychological costs** of help-seeking: "asking for help can be awkward and uncomfortable. Even a minor request can invite rejection, expose inadequacies, and make a help-seeker feel shy, embarrassed, and self-conscious" (Bohns & Flynn, 2010:402). If potential helpers are not aware of and appreciate the psychological costs that help-seekers feel, they might remain passive, thinking others do not need help and therefore not offering it (Bohns & Flynn, 2010). Indeed, people tend to *overestimate* the likelihood that others will ask them for help when it is needed (Bohns & Flynn, 2010).

Help-seeking could be a threat to one's **self-esteem** because it can imply, at least in the seeker's perception, **incompetence**, and thus

be a source of **embarrassment** (Tessler & Schwartz, 1997). This embarrassment could apply if help-seeking is one to one, but research has shown that people are less likely to ask for help if it is witnessed by others apart from the helper (Bamberger, 2009; Tessler & Schwartz, 1997). Help seekers might also have concern that their need for help might have adverse career impacts if the helper and/or witnesses mention it to leaders (Bamberger, 2009). **Ego-centric problems** are those that a person considers to reflect their own 'inadequacies' (Bamberger, 2009). People are less likely to feel embarrassed about asking for help when their problem is not ego-centric: when it is widely perceived as **difficult** and it can be attributed to **external factors** beyond their control (Tessler & Schwartz, 1997).

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Tessler and Schwartz's (1997) study found that participants were more likely to seek help if they have low rather than high self-esteem. This increased help could in fact mean that those with low self-esteem in some situations do a better job than those with high self-esteem (Bamberger, 2009). However, Bamberger (2009) found that those with higher self-esteem were more likely to ask for help than those with lower self-esteem when there was the chance to **reciprocate** help; he suggests this is because when able to reciprocate there is less long-term threat to self-image and therefore lower psychological costs (Bamberger, 2009).

Indeed, because of the prevalence of norms of reciprocity in society, help-seeking can create a feeling of **indebtedness** to the helper (Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971). People who think they will be unable to give something back to the helper are less likely to ask for help and will ask for less help when they are being helped (Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971). Therefore, it has been suggested, organisations would benefit from fostering norms of reciprocity to lessen the psychological costs of employees' help-seeking (Bamberger, 2009).

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Tessler and Schwartz (1997) also found that people with higher **achievement motivation** are more likely to ask for help, probably because help is often needed to meet goals, and goals are necessary for achievement. Nonetheless, the **gratification** felt from achievement is likely to be higher knowing that one has excelled individually rather than relied on or used the help of others, and this might deter help-seeking (Tessler & Schwartz, 1997). And people might be reluctant to ask for help if they think the **acknowledgment** for achievement will be dispersed rather than only for themselves (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). There is, however, still the influence of personality traits to consider: research by social psychologists shows that those with higher **altruism** personality traits are more likely to help, including helping coworkers, and *not* to expect reciprocation, reward or acknowledgement (Green et al., 2017).

Power motivation is “an individual’s concern for accruing and maintaining power” (Lee, 1997:340). Lee (1997) reported that power motivation was lessened in equal **status** relationships, such as between same-level colleagues rather than between colleagues and managers, because in these relationships people are less concerned with gaining/maintaining power and the impression of power. This might have implications for organisations, Lee suggests, in that **expertise** in organisations is generally held by **higher status** members, potentially leading to a reluctance to seek help; organisations might therefore benefit from distributing expertise downwards so that help can be sought from those with equal status, including teams with equal status, Lee advises.

Research by van de Rijt et al. (2012), however, indicates that employees are *more likely* to ask for help from those who have higher status – higher status is generally associated with expertise and therefore higher **quality** of help – and are also more likely to be happy with the help of those with higher status and ask for help more often from them. Indeed, when deciding whether to ask for help, help seekers usually take into account not just the likelihood that others *will* help but also the level of quality of the potential help (Newark et al., 2017).

As Newark et al. (2017:19) state, “unexpectedly poor-quality help might leave help-seekers regretting their decision to seek assistance, wishing instead that they had avoided the stresses, anxieties, and feelings of indebtedness often associated with asking for, and receiving, help.” (In this case,

however, politeness would usually prevent from expressing disappointment with the helper!)

Other considerations that help-seekers have are the **speed** with which the help will be provided and how much **effort** the helper is likely to give with the help (Tessler & Schwartz, 1997). Effort is, in general, although of course not always, correlated with quality of help (Newark et al., 2017). Furthermore, van der Rijt et al. (2012) found that employees were also more likely to ask for help from colleagues who are **accessible** and whom they **trust**; these results show the importance of making experts accessible and building strong and trusting relationships within organisations (van der Rijt et al., 2012).

“Lack of help-seeking is not necessarily because of lack of willingness to ask; it could be because of a lack of awareness that one has a problem or how to articulate it”

Problem/need recognition, as well as willingness to ask for help, is also important, so that the seeker knows what is needed from the helper or at least how to approach asking for help. Indeed, higher problem/need recognition is correlated with likelihood of asking for help (Bamberger, 2009). Lack of help-seeking is therefore not necessarily just because of lack of willingness to ask; it could be because of a lack of **awareness** that one has a problem or how to articulate it.

Organisational norms can also be a factor with help-seeking (Lee, 1997). People are less likely to ask for help in organisations that are based on **individualistic norms**, where the person is meant to rely primarily on themselves and where merit and achievement is established by standing out

from others, compared to organisations based on **collectivist norms**, where interdependence, team performance and social equality are valued (Lee, 1997).

As well as costs for the help seeker, there are also potential costs for the helper, including being inconvenienced of **time, effort** and **money**. Help-seekers might be concerned that such costs could create ill-feeling towards them that affects the helper's subsequent evaluation of and behaviour towards themselves (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). Indeed, research indicates that people tend to take into account how they will be **evaluated** by the helper for asking for help and are less likely to ask for help if they perceive high costs for the helper – possibly because they can empathise with the inconvenience of being asked for high-cost help, and/or think there is greater chance of their **request being denied** – and particularly if they see no chance to reciprocate (Bohns & Flynn, 2010).

Newark et al.'s (2017) research found that the main motivation why people agree to help others is that they **empathise** with the situation the help-seeker would be in if their help was not given. Their help-seeker participants also tended to underestimate the effort that helpers will put in to help them, because they (seekers) tended not to appreciate the negative feelings helpers experience from giving poor quality or inadequate help and the motivating impact this has on the helper (Newark et al., 2017).

It is important not just *whether* help is sought but also, of course, the **timeliness** of seeking help. A work problem could over time grow massively to become impossible to solve, when it could have been solved easily if help

was sought early on, for example. Timeliness of help-seeking is particularly important for health problems.

6. Culture and help-seeking

Most of the research of cultural differences and help-seeking has focused on Asian countries/cultures (researchers do not tend to include the middle east as Asia) and European American culture. There is a clear pattern of results showing that Asians and Asian Americans, compared to European Americans, tend to be more reluctant to ask for help, from both informal and formal sources (Kim et al., 2008). This pattern is consistent for various contexts, for instance academic, health and personal problems, and tends to be fairly consistent within the wide range of Asian countries/cultures (Kim et al., 2008).

In Asian countries/cultures, needing help is more likely to be seen as a sign of **personal weakness** (Kim et al., 2008). Seeking professional psychological help, for example, is more likely to have **stigma** and to be perceived as bringing **shame** on the family, because one's 'inadequacies' are considered part of the group's: "shame and **loss of face** goes beyond the individual" (Han, 2015:9). Another common influence in many Asian countries/cultures that might deter help-seeking is **Confucian philosophy**, which values stoicism and not showing personal 'weakness' (Han, 2015).

Other cultural factors researchers have studied are that a lack of trust in the dominant culture and experiences of **racism** might deter help-seeking among ethnic

minorities (Lindlinger-Sternart, 2015). In addition, people are more likely to seek help from people of the same cultural background, which would of course limit options for ethnic minority groups with, for instance, medical or psychological help (Twentyman et al., 2017).

7. Gender and help-seeking

Research consistently shows that women are more likely than men to ask for help, and this applies to most types of helping contexts, such as medical, psychological and educational (Bamberger, 2009). This is likely because of **socialised gender roles**, where males are typically socialised to value strength, power and independence more than women are, and women more to value interdependence and fostering close relationships (Bamberger, 2009).

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Males are more likely to perceive there to be a stigma attached to seeking emotional help in particular (Topkaya, 2014), and talking openly about emotions is in conflict with **masculine norms** (Lindlinger-Sternart, 2015). Females are also usually better at identifying when they need emotional help (Joa et al., 2017; Twentyman et al., 2017).

Given these factors, it makes sense that males are more likely to assess higher psychological costs of asking for help and therefore do so less frequently than females (Bamberger, 2009). Nevertheless, research also shows that gender differences with help-seeking are

more prominent with emotional help than with instrumental help – and it is instrumental help that is the most common form within the workplace (Bamberger, 2009).

8. Leadership, gender and help-seeking

Help-seeking is not a one-way process from leaders to employees; leaders could benefit from asking for the help of their employees. But perceptions of competence are key to the leadership role, and leaders asking for help from their employees could be perceived as weakness, vulnerability or incompetence (Rosette & Mueller, 2015). “Although help-seeking behaviors can facilitate a resource flow from subordinates to leaders”, write Rosette and Mueller (2015), “this resource flow runs counter to prototypical views of leaders as influencing followers, providing resources to followers, and having answers to problems.”

Gender is a key factor here: the unfortunate reality is that male leaders are generally judged more favourably than female leaders because there is congruity between the (stereotypical) expectations of leader and male roles, but not leader and female roles: “the **communal expectations** (e.g., kind, helpful, and warm) that comprise the female gender role diverge from the **agentic expectations** (e.g., assertive, independent, and decisive) that comprise the leadership role” (Rosette & Mueller, 2015:750).

This does, though, have some interesting implications for leaders’ help-seeking. Hopton (2016), for example, found that employees helping leaders led to increased

satisfaction with their relationship with the leader. But for male and not female leaders, their help-seeking also meant they were rated less competent as leaders by their employees (Hopton, 2016). Female leaders are judged negatively if they display agentic behaviours, however (Rosette & Mueller, 2015).

9. Leadership style and employees’ helping behaviour

Leadership style can have positive impacts on employees’ helping behaviour towards their coworkers and thus can encourage employees’ help-seeking, leading to positive impacts on organisational performance.

“Leadership style can have positive impacts on employees’ helping behaviour towards their coworkers”

As well as typically having a beneficial impact on task performance, job satisfaction, commitment and turnover, good **leader member exchange** (LMX) relationships – characterised by high levels of interaction, support, trust, and formal and informal rewards – tend to increase **organisational citizenship behaviour** (OCB): “in essence, subordinates in higher quality LMX relationships ‘pay back’ their leaders by engaging in citizenship (i.e., discretionary) behaviors that benefit the leader and others in the work setting” (Ilies et al. 2007:269). OCB has consistently been shown to make positive impacts on employees and organisations, and helping is a key aspect of OCB (Kalshoven, 2011).

Campbell et al. (2016) found that an organisational emphasis on **performance management** led to employees being less likely to engage in helping behaviour towards coworkers, possibly because they see them as rivals and/or do not consider helping to be part of their job if it is not specified in their performance targets. Helping behaviour was increased, however, by **transformational leadership**; this is unsurprising given that transformational leadership focuses on collective goals, whereas performance management focuses on individuals' task efficiency (Campbell et al., 2016).

“Transformational leadership has a positive impact on followers' behaviours, attitudes, performance, and interpersonal relationships, including their helping behaviour”

As well as encouraging a collectivist rather than individualistic organisational culture, transformational leadership aims to foster employees' creativity rather than forcing them to follow conventional methods and approaches, and to inspire employees by articulating a clear, ethical vision of the organisations. Research consistently shows that transformational leadership has a positive impact on followers' behaviours, attitudes, performance, and interpersonal relationships, including their helping behaviour (Zou et al. 2015a).

Transformational leaders also act as **role models** that serve as an example for followers to emulate; if, therefore, a leader is caring and helpful, employees are likely to imitate this behaviour towards coworkers (Zou et al.

2015a). Helping behaviour is subject to a **cascade of leadership**, or **trickle-down model**, where senior leaders pass on behaviours to followers several levels below (Hirst et al., 2016).

Thus, Hirst et al. (2016) advise, organisations could benefit from training top leaders in helping behaviours. Indeed, Schein (2011:144) states what he sees as the importance of helping to organisations, and to leaders in particular: helping is “the core of what we think of as teamwork and is an essential ingredient of organizational effectiveness. It is one of the most important things that leaders do and it is at the heart of change processes.”

Transformational leadership is often contrasted with **transactional leadership**, which focuses on using rewards and punishments to motivate employees, and on efficient working in the present rather than inspiring vision and creativity for the future. Although it can be effective in some situations, it tends not to have an impact on employees' helping behaviour (Campbell et al., 2016). Employees are also more likely to seek feedback from leaders when they perceive the leader to have a transformational rather than transactional style (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013).

Research has also looked at other leadership styles and helping behaviour. Some has shown that **charismatic leadership** tends to increase employees' helping behaviour, for example, and this is particularly the case if employees feel out of place or neglected by the group, when they feel a lack of **belongingness** (Hartog et al., 2007). **Servant leadership**, where the leader's focus is not on

personal power and prestige but on the benefits for employees, organisation and community, has also been shown to positively contribute to employee helping behaviour (Zou et al. 2015b).

Authentic leadership refers to where the “leader is aware of and exhibits a pattern of openness and clarity and is consistent in their disclosure and enactment of personal values, motives, and sentiments” (Hirst et al., 2016:486). Authentic leadership behaviour creates trust, and trust is conducive to helping relationships (Hirst et al., 2016).

Leaders who emphasise power-sharing and fairness, two key elements of **ethical leadership**, increase the helping behaviour of their employees (Kacmar et al., 2013). Employees’ effort at work, including helping behaviour, is increased when they perceive their leader/s as ethical (Kacmar et al., 2013). Indeed, Kacmar (2013) suggests, feedback-seeking by leaders from employees, which is better to be anonymous to increase honesty, can help leaders become aware of their reputation amongst employees and adjust as necessary to improve it.

“Leadership style affects employees’ wellbeing, and employees’ wellbeing in turn has an impact on their helping behaviour”

Job-related affective **wellbeing** is “the overall quality of an employee’s experience and functioning at work, and includes elements such as satisfaction, attachment, arousal, tension, and depression” (Kalshoven et al. 2012:61). Leadership style affects employees’ wellbeing, and employees’ wellbeing in turn has an impact on their helping behaviour

because they are more likely to ‘invest’ this extra resource (their wellbeing) back into the organization in the form of helping others (Kalshoven et al., 2012).

As would be expected, **abusive leadership** – referring to “subordinates’ perceptions of hostile verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors (excluding physical contact) acted by their supervisors” – has a negative impact on employees’ wellbeing and attitudes towards their jobs, organisation and leaders, and consequently on their willingness to help others in the organisation (Xia et al., 2017:2).

10. Conclusion

Everyone has experience of being a help-seeker and a helper and can therefore empathise, at least to some extent with being in each position. Despite this, however, there are several psychological costs that often deter or prevent people from help-seeking, and we tend to underestimate their impact; it is worth leaders keeping in mind, therefore, that employees are in general less likely to ask for help than we assume, even when they need it.

Research indicates that, as well as by improving the practicalities of help-seeking – such as facilitating access to the social networks that make suitable helpers and help available – leaders can take steps to increase the likelihood of employees help-seeking by reducing its psychological costs, for instance by developing norms of reciprocity within the organisation. And leadership style can play a part in encouraging helping behaviour among employees towards one another, particularly by using a transformational style.

Finally, although not the focus of this article, it needs emphasising that there are also potentially strong positive benefits to helping for the *helper*. As has been covered in IC Research paper 3 (June 2017), **prosocial** behaviours – behaviours aimed at helping others – have been shown to have numerous psychological and physical health benefits for the helper.

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