

## **Advice and Guidance Assembly.**

"The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself." Oscar Wilde

I am not sure that anyone really wishes to be given advice. However, we all do it all the time. It is a vice inherent in the very essence of schoolmastering to wish to give advice. Teachers can't help themselves. After all, most of us have been around the block several times already. Whatever the situation, we have probably seen it before. Teachers know what works and what doesn't work. We want the best for you and are motivated by time pressures to try to achieve that end in the shortest time possible. And so we give advice.

However, we have introduced a new concept to the school over the course of this year, which runs counter to this long tradition of teachers giving advice. This new idea is called coaching. It works on the assumption that the person with a dilemma already knows the best solution to their own problem. The coach, instead of giving advice, can only ask questions. Over the course of the conversation, through the art of thoughtful questioning, the best possible solution emerges. It is an interesting idea, and one that we are exploring further as a school. Indeed, you may have already experienced it through discussions with your tutor. I certainly hope you will in the near future, as we hope you will have the opportunity to try out some coaching techniques with your tutor when you undertake your self review in the next few weeks. I hope it will be a positive experience. The world needs more people willing to question and more careful listening to the answers.

Giving advice is the opposite of coaching. When we give advice, we talk; when we coach, we listen. We all want to give advice, but too often it falls upon deaf ears. However, of course there are times when careful questioning is not helpful. If you approach me in distress and say, "Mr Everson, where is the nearest Accident and Emergency unit?" it would not be helpful for me to reply, "That's interesting, where do you *think* the nearest Accident and Emergency unit might be?" In such moments, the right thing to do is give a clear and crisp piece of advice.

Health and safety warnings would seem to me to fall into the same category. In circumstances where harm can occur, it is in everyone's interest for a clear and direct statement to be made. That way, fewer people get hurt. However, it seems that even here the advice given can be bizarre and unwanted.

Today is the first week of term, so let's have a little fun sharing some extraordinary pieces of advice, offered as health and safety warnings or as instructions on products.

Let's start with instructions. What could be more clear than this instruction for puzzled users holding a packet of airline peanuts. "Open packet. Eat contents." Or how about this advice, written on the side of a bag of cat biscuits, "Simply pour the biscuits into a bowl and allow the cat to eat when it wants." One wonders who the target audience was for this instruction on the side of a coffeemaker, "The appliance is switched on by setting the on/off switch to the 'on' position."

These are instructions intended for the truly challenged. But advice given on some products is little better.

One wonders what the person who wrote these words in an information booklet was thinking: "Do not use the product if you cannot see clearly to read the information in the information booklet." Why would it be necessary to put these words on the side of a bottle of shampoo for dogs? "Caution: the contents of this bottle should not be fed to fish."

Some situations do not bear thinking about. I hate to speculate upon the set of circumstances which led lawyers to decide that it was essential to put these words on the side of an electric power drill "This product not intended for use as a dental drill." Similarly, the warning on a laser pointer is equally disturbing. Purchasers of the laser are advised: "Do not look into laser with remaining eye." I will offer a final, chilling, example of this kind of advice.

Try not to think about it too hard. In the manual for a Swedish chainsaw is found a simple but horrifying piece of guidance: "Do not attempt to stop the blade with your hand."

On the other hand, (perhaps quite literally, given the previous advice) some warnings really do not need to be made. If you buy a product called 'rubber band shooter' it is probably unnecessary to sell it with the warning "Caution: shoots rubber bands." Equally, if you are selling a sharpening stone, which can only be used to sharpen knives, why would you

feel the need to add this advice on its packaging: "Warning: knives are sharp!"

And so we enter the world of the bizarre. Each of these is like a brief prompt for a particularly brutal short story.

"Do not use for drying pets." -- *In the manual for a microwave oven.*

"Fragile. Do not drop." -- *Posted on a Boeing 757.*

"May be harmful if swallowed." -- *On a shipment of hammers.*

"Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly." -- *On a child sized Superman costume.*

In the context of some of the guidance and advice we have heard this morning, this final example takes on a wider, almost more cosmic meaning. It has the certainty of truth, the tone of a Zen koan, and almost acts as a metaphor for any aspect of life.

The advice was placed on the side of a package of peanuts. It read simply: "Warning: May contain nuts."

I imagine we will never stop advising each other. However, I hope we are more and more able to add the important coaching skills of careful questioning and focused listening to our mental toolkit. You will have many more chances to have a go in the months and years ahead.

I hope you enjoyed these examples of misplaced guidance, instruction and advice. And I hope you enjoy a great term to come.