



News Blog Article Archive

Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
February 21, 2013

Forbes

Why Smart People Can Be Stupid About Asking For Help

Have you ever seen a young child try to dress himself? For my four-year old grandson, the buttons are most difficult. He concentrates on each as though it's the world's most important problem and only he can solve it. And while his determination to do it himself is admirable, the result is often a late start to the day and a shirt with undone buttons.

It's easy to smile at a child who refuses to ask for help. But how do we deal with colleagues who exhibit the same behavior – who [insist on working alone](#) and resist help from others? Here's a quick example:

The senior vice president of a large financial services division was feeling overloaded by a superabundance of weekly data. To streamline this input, she asked her head of operations to simplify the weekly "data pack" that went to her and her unit heads. The operations VP gave this assignment to a member of his operations analysis team who spent two weeks assessing recent data packs. The analyst then developed recommendations for consolidating some of the reports, along with additional information about trends and comparisons between units.

The operations analyst did a thorough job, except he neglected to get input from anyone else (including his boss or the SVP) about the nature of the issue or the possible fixes. Just like the four-year-old, he wanted to do this assignment on his own. Not surprisingly, his solution didn't respond to the senior vice president's needs for more focused information, and the project was passed on to someone else.

In my experience, there are plenty of people who prefer to work on their own without input, help, or even interaction with others. [Sometimes it's appropriate](#), particularly when subject matter expertise is required or the assignment is meant as training or a testing exercise. However, most of the time, [working in isolation just doesn't work](#).

So why do so many smart people still try to go it alone? There are at least two (usually unconscious) reasons. The first is the [need to show people in authority](#) how brilliant they are. Working with colleagues waters down this demonstration. If others are involved in developing a solution, each person's individual contribution is less clear. The second reason is that it's easier to work in isolation. You don't have to incorporate other's ideas, argue about the right course of action, or adjust your analysis to fit the



News Blog Article Archive

situation. Instead, when working alone you can treat the assignment as a theoretical exercise, like a B-school case study to turn in to the professor. Reality is messy – and it's always easier to focus on only your perspective rather than include multiple ones.

What can you do when you find someone (or yourself) acting like a four-year old? Although there is no magic answer, let me suggest one basic guideline: **Whether you are commissioning or receiving the work, spend extra time shaping an assignment at the beginning.** Extensively discuss the intentions, goals, timeframe, context, and other people who might need to be engaged. Forcing this initial dialogue can head off a narrowly-defined and overly-isolated response. In the case above, the SVP could have communicated more with her head of operations and then had a follow-up session with the analyst. Alternatively, the head of operations might have had a real work session with the analyst to shape his plan, which then might have included interviews with the SVP and her other direct reports.

Given the unconscious insecurity issues, early dialogue certainly won't prevent someone from going off on her own, but it can increase the likelihood that at least some other people will be engaged – which may lead to a better final product.

What's your experience with people who work in isolation?

[Ron Ashkenas'](#) blog post on Forbes

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ronashkenas/2013/02/21/why-smart-people-can-be-stupid-about-asking-for-help/>

Editor's Note: A [version of this blog](#) was cross-posted on HBR.org.