

“Can I pick your brain?”

Five words that make up the most thoughtless, irritating and generic way to ask for advice — and any person who is a rock star in their industry has heard it more than a dozen times.

The phrase, while well-intentioned, is overused, vague and way too open-ended. When conversations start this way, there's no telling where it'll go or how long it'll take.

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for giving — and receiving — advice. Offering advice is a sign of good leadership, and asking for advice is a sign of intelligence. If the exchange goes well, both parties benefit.

“The whole interaction is a subtle and intricate art. It requires emotional intelligence, self-awareness, restraint, diplomacy and patience,” Harvard Business School professors Joshua D. Margolis and David A. Garvin wrote in a 2015 Harvard Business Review article.

But the process can derail in many ways. It can quickly lead to “frustration, decision gridlock, subpar solutions, frayed relationships and thwarted personal development,” according to Margolis and Garvin.

To avoid those consequences, here's some guidance on how to ask for advice without annoying the other person: