



# How to Adopt an Advisory Mindset

## MOVING BEYOND COMPLIANCE

The accounting profession is evolving, and the role of accountants is shifting from that of historians to trusted advisors. Clients no longer see value solely in the numbers—they want proactive insights, strategic advice, and a partner who can help them navigate their business challenges. Moving from compliance to advisory requires a significant shift in mindset. It's about focusing on client needs, listening actively, understanding broader business contexts, and providing forward-thinking guidance. This article offers practical steps firms can take to foster an advisory mindset, ultimately positioning themselves as true business partners.

## From Historian to Advisor: A Shift in Focus

The accounting profession has historically prided itself on being exceptional at client service. However, excellent client service is now a baseline expectation—what great clients want is an advisor who can help them navigate the complexities of running a business. The shift from historian to advisor is about moving beyond reporting what has happened to using that historical data to provide insights into what should happen next. It's about transforming numbers into narratives that inform decision-making.

**Consider this:** Are you closer to the point where your clients receive proactive insights and advice from you, or are you still simply recording the past? The truth is that accountants are among the best advisors in the business world, yet there's a perception that clients aren't receiving proactive advice. To change this perception, we must actively shift our approach.



**Focus on the future,  
not just the past.**

## **The Mindset Shift: What Does It Take?**

To adopt an advisory mindset, accountants must focus on moving away from the comfort of their technical expertise and embrace a broader, client-centric perspective. Here are the critical elements of making this shift:

### **1. Focus on the Future, Not Just the Past**

An advisor's role is not to dwell on the past but to use it to inform the future. When speaking with clients, avoid simply reporting historical data. Instead, ask yourself: "What do these numbers mean for my client's future?" This shift allows you to position yourself as someone who helps clients achieve their goals rather than just providing a historical record.

Imagine you're working with a client during a quarterly meeting. Instead of focusing solely on the numbers and financials, consider how to use that data to provide insights that will help the client in the coming months. Frame your conversations around what the numbers mean for the future and what your client could do differently to achieve their goals.

### **2. Create a Culture of Proactivity**

Many accountants are more reactive than proactive, engaging with clients only when the service calendar requires it. True advisors reach out before issues arise, not just when the next deliverable is due. Create a proactive client service plan that focuses on your clients' most pressing needs—their accounting needs and their broader business challenges.

Consider scheduling extra meetings outside of the traditional busy seasons. These meetings don't need to be focused on compliance—they should be fact-finding opportunities to learn more about what keeps your clients up at night, what they hope to achieve, and how you can help them get there.

### **3. Move Beyond Exceptional Client Service**

Exceptional client service is no longer a differentiator—clients expect it. As an advisor, your value lies in the experience you create for your clients. This means being there when they need you, no matter the issue. Your role as an advisor is to care deeply about your clients and help them reach their objectives, even if it means connecting them with someone outside your firm.

This approach increases loyalty, which in turn leads to greater profitability. It's about building multiple touchpoints with your clients and ensuring they experience support beyond transactional services. Advisors create a sense of partnership, supporting the client at every stage of their journey.

### **4. Ask the Right Questions and Be a Better Listener**

Clients often ask questions that reflect the challenges they're aware of, but those aren't always the real issues. Advisors need to look beyond the initial questions and explore the reasons behind them. Asking questions like, "Why is this issue important to you?" or "What are you really trying to achieve?" allows you to uncover your clients' actual challenges.

Active listening is critical. Practice listening with the intent to understand, not just to respond. Take detailed notes, show empathy, and be genuinely curious about your clients' goals and challenges. This will help you better understand their needs and identify opportunities to help them.

### **5. Delegate the Historian Work**

For partners to serve as effective advisors, they must delegate the historian work. Most compliance tasks do not need to be done by partners—freeing up time for them to focus on relationship building and being an advisor.

The most valuable relationships with clients are built when they see you as a strategic partner who can help them navigate change, not just someone who handles compliance work. Delegating allows partners to focus on long-term value creation and relationship building.



# Every Interaction is an Opportunity to Learn.

## Practical Steps for Firms to Foster an Advisory Mindset

- **Allocate Time for Being an Advisor:** Shifting to an advisory role requires dedicated time. You won't simply "find the time"—you must create it. Start by allocating a portion of your schedule specifically for acting as an advisor to your clients. This might mean scheduling proactive check-ins or developing customized client service plans.
- **Adopt a Fact-Finding Mindset:** Every interaction with your clients is an opportunity to learn. Treat each meeting as a fact-finding mission—learn more about their business, personal goals, and challenges. This will enable you to identify ways to add value beyond compliance.
- **Stop Monetizing Every Interaction:** To position yourself as an advisor, you must build trust. Turn the meter off during meetings with your best clients and tell them you're not charging for your time. This helps clients see that you genuinely care about them and are invested in their success.
- **Collaborate Within and Beyond Your Firm:** Serving as a solo advisor limits your impact. Collaborate with others—within your firm and across your network. Bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise helps you provide better advice to clients, creating a comprehensive approach that benefits them.

## Overcoming Challenges

The biggest challenge in adopting an advisory mindset is overcoming the perception that clients care as much about your deliverables as you do. Clients need to see that you care about them beyond their tax returns or financials. Be intentional about reaching out, especially outside of compliance deadlines, and take the time to understand what's most important to them.



## Conclusion

The accounting profession is evolving, and the expectations placed on accountants continues to change. Moving from a historian to an advisor role is crucial for firms that want to remain competitive and create lasting value for their clients. Adopting an advisory mindset is no longer optional—it is the foundation of a dynamic, high-performing firm. By embracing this mindset, you can ensure that your clients see you as an integral partner in their journey toward success.

At Upstream Academy, we are committed to helping accounting firms navigate this transformation. Our programs are designed to guide your firm and its leaders on the journey to high performance. We provide the tools, training, and insights needed to align individual performance with firm success, ensuring that you and your partners are equipped to excel today and in the future.



**Jeremy Clopton**  
*Managing Director*

The journey from historian to advisor is not easy. It requires a fundamental shift in how you think, interact with, and add value to clients. You must move beyond technical skills and genuinely invest in your clients' personal and professional success.

Begin with small steps. Identify a few clients for whom you can make the shift, and start by asking deeper questions, listening actively, and providing proactive insights. Make it your goal to be the advisor your clients turn to not just for accounting but also for guidance on their biggest challenges.

Remember, every interaction with your clients is an opportunity to learn and serve better. It's time to start rowing together toward a future where you are seen as a trusted partner in your clients' success—not just an accountant.

**Are you ready to adopt an advisory mindset?**  
**CONTACT US** to learn more.



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