

Exponential Consulting Leadership Topic

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Problem Solving

By Stephen Billing

The Problem with Problem Solving

I have a problem with the term “problem solving.” Somehow I don’t think of really think of myself as solving problems. Perhaps it’s due to years of being told to see problems as opportunities or challenges and suchlike positive thinking. I find it hard to think of what I am doing when I am problem solving, and yet I can certainly think of how I resolve things I worry about such as deadlines for articles and I can easily think of how I approach challenging situations such as facilitating groups where conflict is present.

Perhaps I am stuck on the implication that every problem has a solution. It makes it sound like where there is a problem there is also its opposite - a solution. “Problem solved.” It sounds so perfect, like something from an ideal world.

Many of the situations that we face, particularly those involving other people, do not really seem to have solutions in the way that “problem solving” implies. I have a friend with a son who has become addicted to drugs. She cannot have him in her house because he steals from her whenever he is around – the solution in the problem solving sense is some form of rehabilitation programme for the son to reduce his dependence on the drugs and the thoughts and habits associated with the addiction. But in the absence of his willingness to undertake such a programme, this kind of situation does not really have a “solution” as such. For my friend, it has become more about how to survive and how to cope with this situation.

While the situations that you face as a manager are not usually as dramatic as that example, nevertheless difficult situations like people who are constantly late or have bad behaviour, are in conflict with others or who are not performing, often are the result of multiple complex factors that defy “solution.”

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Exponential Consulting Ltd

☎ Mobile 027 4802 164

sbilling@exponential-consulting.com ☎ PO Box 803 Wellington

Reflect on the Situation Before Coming Up with the Solution

That being said, one of the common faults that managers have is that as soon as they identify a situation (or are presented with a problem) they go immediately to solution mode. In the same breath that the problem is mentioned (or 'defined' as the literature calls it) the solution is also articulated. What's wrong with that? Well, there is no opportunity to engage brain and that's what's wrong with that. When there is no pause between identifying the problem and coming up with the solution, subtleties in terms of the dynamics of the factors that have brought about the situation are easily missed. Key players ("stakeholders") may inadvertently be ignored, leading to problems down the track when it comes to implementing the solution.

One of the reasons managers tend to go straight for solutions is actually a result of misdirection in the literature that exhorts managers to be action oriented and places great emphasis on the future. According to this literature, managers are expected to be results-driven and when coupled with being short on time, this leads to an impatience which gets in the way of adequate thinking about the dynamics of the situations you are facing. In other words, when one of your people raises with you a problem, it feels productive to come up with a solution quickly. Or, if you are thinking about the development of the other person and your own effectiveness as a manager, you may be getting them to come up with a solution quickly. It is commonly thought that managers should be thinking about solutions more than problems.

I beg to differ. I think that we don't spend enough time reflecting on our situations and the dynamics in which they exist – elements such as power relating, politics, gossip, conflict, emotions and past history. These dynamics all have such a bearing on how people experience the situation, and consequently, how they will respond to the solutions that are proposed and implemented.

Analysis Paralysis

On the other hand lies the danger of analysis paralysis – where the quest to understand and analyse the situation to get a perfect analysis leads to absence of action and prevents any solution from being implemented. Those who are perfectionists are particularly prone to this. The solution to analysis paralysis is to move when you are 80% ready. This idea that I borrowed from Alan Weiss has been very helpful for those situations when you feel that you don't quite have enough information. The reality is that you will never have all the information and so at some stage you have to make a judgment call as to when you have enough information and analysis to make a decision to move.

However, when I say that we don't spend enough time reflecting on our situations, I am not suggesting that you need to wait till you have all the information and risk succumbing to analysis paralysis. What I am saying is that too often the solution is chosen without any consideration at all of the various factors involved. If you notice that the performance of one of your people is not up to standard, it is very relevant to ask yourself a couple of questions rather than assuming the solution is to tell the person off (or otherwise discipline them) or encourage them to perform better. Your approach will be far more effective if you have thought through questions like the following:

- What specifically is the behaviour that is at fault, and under what circumstances does it arise? For example, perhaps they are late on Monday mornings, or come back late from lunch but not from tea breaks.
- When did this behaviour become apparent - have they performed adequately before - if so, under what conditions?

It also helps if you don't assume the other person is damaged and instead treat them like a fully functioning human being. There is a logical reason in their minds why they are doing the behaviour and so asking them to take you through the situation from their point of view is a great step in helping you to come up with a resolution to the situation, one that is actually likely to work.

General Problem Solving Process

A general problem solving approach that is a useful starting point for any problem situation you find is to go through the following four steps:

1. Understand the difference between the situation you've got and what you desire. This is commonly known as gap analysis.
2. Identify possible causes and verify them.
3. Consider three potential solutions before picking one.
4. Take action and refine based on the feedback you get.

I think that steps 1, 3 and 4 are the most important. In many cases it will be unclear what the causes are, and it can be unfruitful to spend too much time on this. But reflecting on what you would like compared to what you have got is very valuable in terms of helping you to create some thinking space between becoming aware of the problem and taking action.

You could do worse than adopting the rule of thinking of three solutions before choosing one. If you find it hard to generate possible solutions, here is the rule of thumb that I use. One possible solution or action is always to do nothing. What would happen if you did nothing? Perhaps no action is required. At the other extreme you could spend unlimited resources on doing everything possible to resolve the situation - what might you do if you had unlimited resources? And the third solution might be somewhere in the middle, a compromise or middle ground solution. If you consider your problem situation from these three points of view you

will have no problem generating three or more possible solutions before you pick one.

The fourth step I listed above is taking action and refining as you go. This is important when you consider my earlier advice to move when you are 80% ready. The final 20% is usually not valued by the others involved, and you can refine that 20% as you go, as long as you are looking out for feedback with an open mind, and willing to adjust your approach based on the feedback.

For example, I often convene focus groups of different people in organisations to identify and resolve complex organisational issues. I get the dates organised and we identify in general terms who should attend and I provide some briefing information for participants. As we go along, inevitably dates have to move and we also find that there are additional groups of people who have relevant information that we initially overlooked, or some people we initially identified who are not interested or who raise issues that were not originally on our agenda. I have learnt to get going with the dates, get people involved, get some activity happening and then to adjust as we go. People are amazed with the flexibility of this approach and we always get the good information that we need.

Helping Others to Solve Problems

Helping others to solve problems is one of the key responsibilities you have as a manager. Helping people to face the situations they are in and come up with creative ideas for handling them is the ne plus ultra of being a manager. Each situation where you are helping someone to solve problems contains so much opportunity and potential for development of that person's own capabilities, for coaching, for improving performance to the highest level and for good relationships between you and your team. As a manager, you are not a counselor or therapist but these professional fields provide some useful tips for managers who are helping others to solve problems.

If you are helping someone to resolve a situation they are facing, then consider not giving them any advice at all, but instead taking them through a process. Customise it according to your situation, but consider the following four steps or questions to go through.

1. Ask the person whose problem it is.
2. Ask, what is the worst thing that could happen if you do nothing.
3. Who needs to take the next action?
4. What are the options? Try to get them to identify at least three options before they decide on one.

If you find that personal or health issues are at the root of the problem, then you need to engage appropriate professionals such as your employee assistance programme – notify your own manager if this arises.

Conclusion

I started out by saying that I have a problem with the term problem solving because it seems too pat, implying that all problems have solutions that leave them nicely tied up like a Christmas present. I went on to say that there is too much orientation to solutions and it comes at the expense of taking time to reflect on the situations that managers face in their working lives. I suggest that you spend more time reflecting on your situation and that you come up with three options before deciding on one.

While it can be hard to create the space to do this in the busy world of a results-driven manager, their results orientation itself can lead managers to sow the seeds of their own destruction.

I suggest that having reflected thoroughly on the situation, you take action when you are 80% ready, fine tuning as you go.

But the most important problem solving activity you undertake as a manager is when you help your direct reports to work through their own problems. Instead of concentrating on providing advice, concentrate on helping them work through a process such as the four steps I outline above. Perhaps you may need to give them some advice and that is fine. Just make sure that you try everything to get them to come up with their own solutions first.