

How to Approach Problems

Written by Doug Kruhm
Saturday, 27 April 2013 -

One of the interesting parts of growing into a leadership role is that I have to be official representative for the organization. This means I meet with people who represent a vendor not because we have anything to discuss really but because the organization I represent has signed some high dollar per year contract and just servicing the contract isn't enough.

The vendor wants to meet face to face throughout the year to *prove* that they are servicing the contract and try to show value.

It has really become one of my least favorite parts about growing up corporately. These meetings create so much noise and skews the way you think about problems that sometimes it's hard to even realize if the original problem is even being solved at all.

I have a VP friend who goes about solving problems in a very interesting way to me. When she has a need or a problem, her first instinct is to survey the marketplace and create some type of graph that ranks the features of the options. The resulting graph is marred with check marks and x's for the few that make the short list. Little bubble notes and exclamation points sprinkle the page like ornaments on a Christmas Tree.

The issue with going about fixing a problem this way is simple; it doesn't necessarily address your particular problem. So the problem is either half solved or the solution is merely a band aid to the real problem. In either case, gaps are left and problem continues on.

You may go about solving problems this way too. For example, you need a mass email marketing solution, so you survey the market and rank their features. After finally selecting one, you give it your best go at it. The solution doesn't work as expected. Why?

It's all about approach

It's all about how you approach the problem. If you want to solve, and I mean really solve, your problems, you're going to have to change the way you approach the problem. By resisting your initial gut reaction to find a solution right away will save you in both time and resources.

Define the problem

A problem is nothing more than pain. This pain is because something isn't working right or there's a void in the landscape that makes up the company or your life. At this point, do your best to emulate the fictional Sherlock Holmes and figuratively sit in a dark room and think about the problem. I actually pace back and forth, back and forth in a dimly light room by natural light but you get the idea. Ask yourself questions or better yet, if you have a friend to help you through the process ask them for an hour of their time.

Why is this happening? What is source cause of this, really? What action or event took place that brought this to my attention?

Often times, you'll find out that what you thought was the problem isn't really the problem at all but rather a symptom to the core issue.

So going back to our example, the original problem was a need for a mass email solution. After you go through defining the problem, you may find out the event that caused pain was that your clients told you that they never hear from you and as a result chose another agent. So the problem isn't needing a mass email solution, the problem is keeping in contact with your customers and email is only one way in which they communicate.

Find the opposite positive

If you asking these questions, it may come up that problem is a negative. For example, our clients are saying they never hear from us. That's only one way to look at it. Everything has an opposite and usually that opposite is a positive. Instead of focusing on what you don't want, state the positive of what you want. In our example, the positive of what you want is that you want your clients to hear from you on a regular basis.

Get a vision

The next step is so often overlooked I really believe that it's what separates the leaders from the managers. Here it is... get a vision of what you want. In other words, if the scenario could be anything where time, money and resources didn't matter, tell me what a solution would look like? How would it feel like? You need to catch a vision of the larger picture because all of our problems aren't in a vacuum, they are part of a larger portrait. Trying to solve the problem

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without taking account of the larger picture will often cause disruption in the larger picture.

List your features

List out on paper what you want. Take the vision from the previous step and try to solidify that to something tangible. So instead of looking at the features of the solutions, first you define the features you want.

I want the solution to be automatic. I want the solution to be regularly scheduled. I want everyone to be on their own schedule rather than putting everyone on the same schedule.

Putting it all together

See where this is different? If you go directly to the features of the option, it might be a good feature as in you like it but it isn't a feature you're looking for. It simply becomes noise. When you first define your features, you have a litmus test to measure the options by and it pulls you out of the feature race and it becomes easy to disqualify options that you thought were good or it allows you to consider options that normally you wouldn't.

So from our example, we're not looking for a mass email partner to fill a void, we're looking for a customer relationship management application in which mass emailing everyone is a feature.

Through this small example, I tried to show you how to approach and solve problems by defining the problem, finding the positive, catching a vision, listing your features and finally putting it all together.

When you do this, you'll be able to see a little clearer and people from the outside will recognize that you've really taken many factors into consideration. They'll appreciate the thought process and hopefully find the beauty in the solution.