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Are You Solving the Right Problems?

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Clearing up a nagging issue at work may depend less on creativity and more on asking the right questions. These three examples show why.

Most organizational leaders are at least adequate problem solvers. They regularly make decisions to meet the daily challenges of their industries and are able to navigate changing markets, regulations and conditions. When they fail and call in a consultant, it is less often from the lack of creative solutions and more often from the lack of properly identifying the problem. In short, they are trying to solve the wrong problems. Because of this, many consultants have learned through experience to ask for the desired result rather than the perceived problem when defining the scope of a project.

Among our recent clients, this phenomenon is largely due to two factors, the first of which is a focus on results. Managers, especially those from the MBO (Management by Objectives) days, tend to view their jobs in terms of results. When desired results are not achieved, *that* is the problem in their estimation. They assume that the problem is precisely what got their attention: the desired result was not achieved.

In reality, the root issue is often not the "what" but the "why" or "why not." There is a reason why the results are not being achieved, and fixing that reason is very often the solution to the problem. Defining the problem in terms of results causes many leaders to try the proverbial "wag the dog" kind of solutions which have high failure rates. Simply deciding on which result you would prefer does not necessarily mean that everyone will magically know how to produce that result.

The second common causal factor most often encountered is simply a tendency toward dichotomous thinking. This also often springs from jumping to solutions rather than analyzing problems. When there is a problem, many leaders are asked to make a decision about how to proceed. Making that decision without thorough analysis is often tempting for the sake of saving time and staying on track. After all, if path A did not work let's try path B and see if that doesn't fix the problem. Such trial-and-error approaches often fail because the true choice was not A or B, but M or nothing. Lack of analysis often leaves leaders choosing one of two paths when choosing a destination. In many of these instances consultants don't offer solutions, but simply ask leaders the right questions and help them determine what their choices truly are and the potential results and consequences of each choice.

The following three examples demonstrate these types of problems, how they arise, and their solutions:

Example 1: A client asked us to analyze a fabricating process and make suggestions to improve efficiency, quality and safety. We discovered after substantial analysis that the process produced some scrap pieces of very valuable metal. The company had no use for these small pieces and decided to offer them for sale to other companies that fabricated smaller parts from the same metal. They estimated the costs of the metal per volume and decided that the scrap pieces cost them approximately $2.79 each. They asked their leader to decide if they should offer them for the amount they actually cost to recoup their investment or mark them up to $3.00 and make a modest profit. The leader chose to offer them for $3.00, but no one purchased any, so they sold them for scrap at the equivalent of $0.39 each.

We discovered that several other fabricators sold larger scrap pieces for $2.50 each, but the pieces they offered for $3.00 would actually take less modification to turn them into a finished part. We found three companies who would take all the scrap pieces they could get for $2.50 to replace the pieces that took more modification. The company leader thought his choice was to sell for $2.79 or $3.00 when, in fact, his choice was to sell for $2.50 or $0.39.

Example 2: We were asked to assess the safety culture of an organization and determine why certain safety rules were not being followed. When we interviewed employees, they told us about several rules, instituted after accidents, that they viewed as ridiculous, total overkill and treating workers like children. When we brought these findings to the safety leader who had instituted the rules, he asked us, "Well, isn't it better to be too safe than not safe enough?"

In his zeal to prevent accidents, he made rules he thought would completely eliminate risks, but failed to consider how hard it would be to get workers to buy-in and go to these lengths. The safety leader thought the choice was to be too safe or not safe enough, when the true choice was to either develop a practical solution that workers would understand and support or to alienate them with an autocratic, overkill solution. Often, overkill rules damage the respect for all the other safety rules as well.

Effective Communicator or Ineffective Dictator?

Example 3: An organizational leader asked us to help him improve his communication effectiveness and his image with his associates. He had alienated most of his direct reports with his blunt command-and-control style and his tendency to bark orders rather than confer with his advisors. His first comment to defend his actions was, "I have been told I should try to be their leader rather than try to be their friend. The board of directors thinks they need a parent and not an accomplice."

After interviewing each of his direct reports, we found a great willingness to follow directions if they were simply explained along with the rationale and big-picture plan of where they were designed to take the organization. The leader was ineffective because the followers did not know where he was trying to lead them. They weren't questioning his orders; they were just trying to understand where they were going. The new leader thought the choice was between leader and friend, when the true choice was between effective communicator and ineffective dictator.

There is ultimately nothing wrong with a results orientation or dichotomous decisions as long as they lead to an understanding of the true choices and their consequences. It is easier for leaders to make the right choice when they ask the right questions. Results come from processes. Processes involve technology, conditions, people, and interfaces. When processes fail to produce the desired results, you must look at these aspects and find which one or combination of them is failing. Once the problem is truly defined, the solution often finds itself.

Terry L. Mathis, the coauthor of STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence and founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, was named one of "The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS" for the third consecutive time in 2013 by EHS Today. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.

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