

Problems to profits

Michael Breen looks at how changing the mindsets of company decision makers can lead to better results.

Things don't happen quickly enough. Something crops up. The spark doesn't ignite. Suddenly your best-hatched plans collapse before eyes. What to do? Start the blame game – the duck-and-cover method in organisations? Convene a crisis meeting – “Pedal faster!” – or call in the consultants – Texas Chainsaw Management?

It's a task you will face repeatedly throughout your career – when ‘shepherding’ turns into ‘search and rescue’; ‘navigating’ into ‘hatch battening’ and ‘a walk in the woods’ transforms into ‘escape from the bog’.

In this article I'll share an idea to help you begin to turn things around more quickly for yourself, without having to call in expensive outsiders, and even start turning your pain-in-the-necks into profit positions.

The problem with problems

Bertrand Russell said: “The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts.”

We'll start with a paradox: I've found over the years that often the one thing standing in the way of effectively resolving organisational difficulties is the overwhelming urge to get rid of the offending issue.

People don't like the feeling of not knowing and when some apparent threat to self or well-being occurs, quite naturally, the search for a reason or an explanation arises. In the tension between imperatives to resolve the threat – often involving pressure of one kind or another – and the need to remove the unknown and resolve the bad feelings, unfortunate

effects can start to enter the situation. For example, settling for an explanation of what's wrong that sounds good but does nothing to resolve the fundamental issue at hand.

The urge for certainty can lead you astray

I was called in to assist the board of directors in a firm in the creative sector. A competitive issue was cropping up over and over. In competitive tenders for new business, they were repeatedly losing work to the same competitor. Naturally, this led to concern and, before I was called in, the managing director had begun pounding the table and issuing dark mutterings about the position of heads in relation to bodies.

The solution they had been pursuing was to improve the quality of their pitches, much energy and not a little cash had been spent in upgrading and improving every aspect of their tendering presentations process – right down to re-organising team structures. The problem was that they were still losing.

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When I entered the situation, they said they were very pleased with the “progress” they were making but needed “a little help”. I asked the question: “How do you know that the solution you've been pursuing will resolve the cause of your situation?”

A wonderfully detailed explanation ensued about what happens to them inside a tendering presentation. I asked: “What other causes had you considered relating to the situation outside the tendering presentation?” Two was the answer.

It turned out that they felt that they could do more about what happened inside the presentation than outside it, so that's where they decided to work. Like the proverbial drunk looking for his keys under a lamp post, they were looking for a solution where there was more light. But the reason they looked where they did was because of the perceived pressure to resolve the issue fast. In other words, they were looking for a quick-to-find cause rather than the real one.

As it turned out, when we re-opened the discussion, took apart the assumptions and started asking better questions, we were able to investigate appropriately and we learned that their competitor was consistently putting top, award-winning people into tendering teams, creating the impression with the prospective client that it cared more for the client's success.

Adding top people to each tendering team increased the team's successful bid rate immediately.

It's worth considering:

- Is your proposed solution set chosen because you think or imagine you can do something about it?

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- How do you know that your proposed solution set is the most appropriate one?
- Why are other specific possibilities not appropriate? Take a detective's approach and systematically exclude, on the basis of clear and concrete evidence, all other suspects.

A skeleton key

I want you to start having an easier time solving the issues that come up for you. If I could, I would give you the keys to problem-solving nirvana. Sadly, all panaceas live in the realm of dreams. What I can offer you is a way of looking and thinking that may act as a kind of skeleton key to start turning some of your problems into profits.

It's very simple, so I won't go into too much detail. For the moment: stop looking for what is 'wrong' with the situation and start looking for what had to happen in order for the situation in front of you to be the outcome. In other words if what is before you is the result; what were the necessary steps and processes for the situation to turn out the way it has?

A client once called me inviting a proposal for motivational training for 300 people who, they said, were "demotivated, disempowered and underperforming". Ordinarily a consultant hears "Chh-ching!" when such words are spoken but a little more information was required.

I asked: "What's the average length of service of these 300?"

The answer was seven years. Training suggests something needs to be learned so the obvious question was: "Did you hire these 300 people demotivated, disempowered and underperforming?" Of course, the answer was no.

My point being, there are many reasons for a large group to be demotivated, disempowered and underperforming, with 'not knowing how to motivate themselves' quite far down the list.

A little more enquiry revealed a catalogue of very good reasons including the usual suspects – too much middle management getting in the way, a new IT system and... oh yes... 15 per cent of the workforce having been laid off in a fairly brutal manner nine months previously.

Why did the company ask for training? The problem was thrown to the human resources and training department. Training is one of its primary frames of reference so a training 'solution' was proposed.

Once we figured out what needed to happen in order for 'demotivated, disempowered and underperforming' to be the correct response to the situation, we were able to begin solving the real issues – and more economically than had been first proposed.

You will spend your time more profitably by looking at what a situation is, rather than what you wish it were.

A little more time up front asking the right questions can lead you to more profitable solutions. ❖

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Biography



Michael Breen is a consultant and trainer who has worked for 14 years with CEOs from *The Times* Top 100 and Fortune 500 companies. He heads MBNLP, a business training and consultancy company and has worked with Richard Bandler and Paul McKenna in the design and delivery of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) training in the UK.

Further Information

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