



talking about...

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... designing better relationships for better outcomes

The Problem Solving Leader

"Unrest of the spirit is a mark of life; one problem after another presents itself and in the solving of them we can find our greatest pleasure."

... Karl A. Menninger (1893-1990) US psychiatrist

One thing that is clear as we explore the human condition is that our basic beliefs about the world lie at the core of how we see and act in the world. For some time, I have asked people in leadership roles a simple question; "tell me in three words, what is your role?" Although on the surface, this may seem like an easy question to answer, the people asked often struggle to find an easy answer. The reason that I am asking this question in the first place is to seek to establish at a basic level just what people in leadership roles think they are doing; and the answers are illuminating.

Interestingly enough, only one person I have asked has said that "they lead people". The more common answers fall into one of two broad categories – they either manage or run organisations or solve problems. These responses are telling and, more often than not, point to beliefs that are barely recognised by those who hold them and almost certainly are not seen as connected to the breakdowns associated with their leadership style and their organisation's culture.

For example, let us look at organisational leaders who see themselves as problem solvers. This is a common story held by people in many fields, particularly where critical thinking has a strong hold. To see the possible breakdowns associated with this basic belief, we can begin by thinking about what it means to have a problem. Problems are generally seen as something not working as it should or that something is lacking. The focus is on what is wrong rather than what people want to create. Therefore if someone gets their sense of satisfaction and achievement from solving problems, they have to be constantly searching for things that are wrong. This is particularly concerning where it relates to people, as I have not yet met anyone who likes to be seen as a "problem".

Another aspect of problems is that they generally show up when they show up. We do not plan problems, they just appear. Hence one of the hallmarks of a "problem solving leader" is they tend to be reactive, jumping from issue to issue. What happens to the people who report to such a leader? They have to jump with them. They become reactive to their boss being reactive. As problem solving also often involves an aspect of retribution against those who are perceived to have created the problem, this need to be reactive quickly tends to become defensiveness. These reactive tendencies show up in organisational cultures that become increasingly defensiveness as you go deeper into the hierarchy. Most organisational leaders will not see the link between their problem solving style and the defensive culture. They will not see that they have to change their beliefs and approach, believing that the "problem" lies with others and so the situation is perpetuated.

The challenge for organisational leaders who seek transformational

change is, at some point, they will need to uncover their basic beliefs and understand the impacts these beliefs are having on those around them. They will then have to redefine those beliefs to align with the culture they are seeking to create. Anything less will just largely perpetuate the status quo.

"The real problem is what to do with problem solvers after the problem is solved."

... Gay Talese (b.1932) US novelist and journalist

The Final Exam

A little bit of humour to brighten your day! ...

It was the final examination for an introductory English course at the local university. The examination was two hours long, and exam booklets were provided. The professor was very strict and told the class that any exam that was not on his desk in exactly two hours would not be accepted and the student would fail. A half hour into the exam, a student came rushing in and asked the professor for an exam booklet.

"You're not going to have time to finish this," the professor stated sarcastically as he handed the student a booklet.

"Yes I will," replied the student. He then took a seat and began writing. After two hours, the professor

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called for the exams, and the students filed up and handed them in. All except the late student, who continued writing. Half an hour later, the last student came up to the professor who was sitting at his desk preparing for his next class. He attempted to put his exam on the stack of exam booklets already there.

"No you don't, I'm not going to accept that. It's late." The student looked incredulous and angry.

"Do you know WHO I am?"

"No, as a matter of fact I don't," replied the professor.

"DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?" the student asked again.

"No, and I don't care." replied the professor with an air of superiority.

"Good," replied the student, who quickly lifted the stack of completed exams, stuffed his in the middle, and walked out of the room.

"He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe; is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.

... Albert Einstein (1879-1955) Swiss-German-US physicist

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