



# Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

November 2008

Home

Mission

Services

Testimonials

Clients

About

## Solving the Right Problem

[“It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and then do your best.”](#) So said W. Edwards Deming, the father of modern quality control and the man who helped launch the total quality management movement begun in Japan in the 1950s. Deming’s quote gets to the heart of why many “solutions” fail; they fail because they address the wrong problem.

Trying to fix the wrong problem is deceptively easy in our fast-paced society. We celebrate quick decisions and action more than thoughtful contemplation; this is especially true in business. Nevertheless, good leaders resist the reactive urge to “Do something now!” and instead ask, “What are we trying to accomplish?” When you begin a problem solving exercise by clarifying the end result, or what outcome is desired, a broader range of possibilities unfolds.

Consider the saying, “When you’re up to your armpits in alligators, it’s easy to forget the original goal was to drain the swamp.” But why did we want to drain the swamp in the first place? Suppose the reason was to improve traffic flow from Point A to Point B. Okay, but is draining the swamp to build an at-grade roadway the only, or even the best, solution? Would expanding an existing road accomplish the same result? What about a bridge across the swamp? Is there a Plan B in case conditions turn out to be radically different than expected and draining the swamp becomes impractical? The point I’m making is to begin by considering the widest number of choices and then remain flexible and willing to change tactics along the way if necessary.

For example, consider the following hypothetical situation. Addams Construction Co. had been steadily growing and was spending a proportionately greater amount on specialized tools each year. Even so, delays occurred when a specialized tool was not at a jobsite when needed. Two solutions to this problem were proposed. The general superintendent suggested buying more tools and distributing them among major jobsites, while the purchasing manager wanted a larger centralized tool cage to allow more tools to be kept on hand at the company’s shop facility. However, neither of these proposed solutions focused on what was really desired: having the right tool at

the right place when it was needed. The optimum solution for Addams Construction Co. was a tool tracking and inventory management system. Project managers determined in advance when and where a tool would be needed, and then planned accordingly. When conflicts arose in scheduling, multiple solutions – including buying a new tool – were considered. This solution was less costly than either of the initial two proposals *and* reduced construction delays.

Effective leaders involve the people who will be affected by changes in the problem solving process. Using a cross-functional team also reduces the risk of a solution that “looks good on paper” but is impractical to carry out. In addition to increasing the potential options, engaging those who will implement new procedures in the solution

process builds buy-in for whatever choice is ultimately made.

Finally, when considering solutions ask, "What's the purpose of that?" Continue this questioning (in spite of people's eye rolls or looks that imply, "Are you dense?") until you reach a final situation that identifies the desired result.

*Tom Wagner*

We help our clients accelerate profitable growth with  
Executive coaching, Strategic planning, & Employee development

[www.wagnercg.com](http://www.wagnercg.com)

Call us at 800 422-1374 to learn more

If you do not want to receive this newsletter, reply to this e-mail with REMOVE in the Subject field.