

When the Problem is Not the Problem

My website home page has a slogan saying, "Learn how to solve the right problems today." A bit dated, perhaps, but still relevant. Solving the right problem begins with asking the right question, or – more often – asking the right *people* the right question. Herein lies the source of endless unresolved business problems.

Getting to the root cause of a problem has two elements: 1) Asking the right people, and 2) Redefinition of a presented problem to ensure focus is on the real issue. Since asking the right people is essential I'll begin with it.

Organizational leaders (the boss and senior managers) often presume they know what the problem is; after all, that's part of their jobs, is it not? The shortcoming with this mind-set is that leaders often don't have all the information needed to evaluate a problem. Information is filtered as it passes up the chain of command, distorted by personal biases or overactive egos, or just not part of the leader's experience. Realistically, how could any person be expected to grasp all the nuances of every situation that arises in the normal course of business?

Here's a typical example of a mishandled problem. A company was unable to retain talented young employees. Management determined that salaries were too low, affordable housing was scarce, and the young people wanted too much too soon. The leader accepted all these as valid reasons, addressed them, and . . . in two years the turnover rate was worse!

Finally, management brought in an outside consultant who interviewed current and former employees. The employees said: 1) They didn't get a

responsible assignment until they had been there over a year, 2) They did not receive job performance feedback from their supervisors, and 3) The first-line supervisors were under so much pressure they didn't have time to spend with new hires. In this case, the leader missed the real cause of turnover because he didn't ask the right people.

Now, to the other element of defining a root cause: redefinition of the problem. Often, the person presenting a problem defines the issue in terms that can obscure the root cause.

Redefinition of a problem begins with a clear and simple picture of the situation. Looking at what's really happening, not what we *imagine* people are thinking is the first step for clarity. Then, describe how the problem is currently being handled, including management styles, office politics, reward/punishment systems, and procedures. As this process unfolds, we gain clarity about the next steps to take and possible solutions.

The lesson here is to consider a wide range of possibilities and seek diverse input before narrowing focus on a specific solution.