



People Are the Problem

October 2006

Volume 5 Issue 9

People are praised when they achieve great things – often revered and idolized. Just as frequently, people are blamed when things go wrong and, every bit as likely, denigrated and despised. People are of course, the reason great things happen in business and yet within any human endeavor, it is because of people that the issues at hand, and businesses themselves, fail.

The Technical Problem

In our own case, with a history of solving over 500 corporate problems (with a 100% success rate) we have observed the truth of the phrase ‘People are problems every time’. For example, working with a high tech company in Ottawa we faced an extremely complex problem related to the manufacture of microchips, which was defined with pages of graphs, schedules, tables, etc. – purely a technical issue we were apprised. A problem-solving team was assembled made up of company staff involving all the key affected people. Sometimes tempers flared and blame was continually trotted out as the reason for the breakdown at point A or point B. If we were to let it continue that way, we would never have reached a satisfactory solution. First, this illustrates the people issue. Secondly to arrive at a solution, something has to be done about the presence of destructive human conflict; it is not tolerable – which we will touch on later. The overall point, however, is that it certainly appeared that people were the root of the problem. And it has become unmistakably, clear to us after solving 500 difficult issues that people are at the root of all problems.

Management

So, if people are at the root of all problems, what direction do we need to take if we are to solve the problems before us? More fundamental is the realization of what finding solutions to problems is really about. It is about management. If there were no problems there would be no need for management and no need for managers. Things would just carry on as they are without a need for outside intervention. But what drives problems in the first place? Change does. If

there were no changes, there would be no problems. That is, if the road were straight and never veered in a different direction, the driving would be very nice indeed. We could leave well enough alone. However, if change arrives – a curve in the road, a huge rock on the highway or a deer, we have a problem to which we must react and find a solution to that particular revised set of circumstances. This allows us to bring forth our definition of management. Management is arriving at solutions to problems caused by change. We are all change managers!

The Problem Solving Direction

To solve problems successfully our consulting group arrived at a 56-step process, but underlying any problem-solving method are just three imperatives. They are:

We must appreciate what drives people and what differentiates one person from another – and leads to misunderstanding.

A means to constructively handle conflict must be available.

Attaching blame to a person will always lead away from a satisfactory solution.

Let’s address each one in turn.

Different Personalities and Conflict

With the help of Hippocrates in 350 B.C. and his four personality types, assumed at that time to be connected to the body fluids, all of today’s modern psychological assessments evolved. Our own business slant on this ancient theme is: P (Producer) an active, impatient, get-things-



William E. Caswell

Bill Caswell is an experienced coach of CEOs and senior executives and the author of *The Respect Revolution*, a 12-book series written by a CEO for CEOs as a guide to getting companies to **Excellence**



The Respect Revolution

This 12-volume book series guides a business to **Excellence** and keeps it there.

Get your copy now, available at your local bookstore or at www.respectrevolution.com

Do you have topic ideas? Comments or questions?

Contact Upkar Bilkhu
CCCC

190 Bronson Ave. Suite 201
Ottawa, ON K1R 6H4
Tel: (613) 233-0700

Email:
ubilkhuc@caswellccc.com

www.caswellccc.com



done-now, kind of person; A (Analyzer) a carefully thorough, detailed-oriented, logical individual; V (Visionary) who is curious, full of ideas on how to improve things, willing and wanting to be different; and F (Friend) who seeks peace and cooperation among people, is empathetic and helpful.

Each of us has some of all four types, but usually we are particularly strong in one or two but not the others. In fact, none of us has a full deck of cards; i.e. strong in all four characteristics. If we are a strong P, results-oriented and urgent, we will naturally lack the F characteristics of taking our time to ensure everyone involved is on board and satisfied before we proceed. If we are a strong A, who likes things organized and well planned out, we will naturally dislike chaos and be risk adverse. Being intelligent and disciplined we can successfully perform these 'unnatural-to-us' tasks, but we will never thrill at them. Success among people occurs when we focus on our strengths, not on shoring up our weaknesses.

The point is that all four personality-types are in conflict with each other. Looking at every possible P, A, V, F pairing, we have: P wants the job done and isn't fussy about the details; A wants the job done right. P has a simple view of things (black or white); V, however, focuses on the complexity of the big picture. P is direct, to the point, and insensitive to peoples' feelings, whereas F rarely acts without considering everyone's feelings first. A likes order while V flits from one thing to another, chaotically. A is fact-oriented and logical, while F is emotional and disdains cold facts. V forges ahead creatively whereas F bases direction on how other people feel about the issues.

All of P, A, V and F are needed to make proper decisions because P corresponds to 'what', A corresponds to 'how', V corresponds to 'why' and F corresponds to 'who', all of which are needed for balanced decision making. Since all of PAV and F are needed and since every one of them is in conflict with the other, balanced decision-making results in conflict – lots of conflict. That is, conflict is a natural outcome of balanced decision-making; it is inescapable.

Handling Conflict Constructively

With everyone in conflict, we are set up to have trouble resolving issues satisfactorily. That, unfortunately, is the norm, unless we can figure out how to handle conflict constructively rather than destructively. Conflict can be harnessed constructively by approaching the resolution of issues applying two principles. The first is to inject a system that ensures tolerance for people who think differently from us. The P, the lone ranger in a hurry has to have tolerance for F, the groupie who seems to dawdle. How? By installing a system of respect for those who are different and capitalizing on what each person brings to the table.

(Remember, for example, A brings 'details' to the table while V brings 'ideas' and the converse is true: A usually lacks new ideas and V often lacks attention to detail.)

The second principle is to inject a means to defuse emotions, for it is defensive emotions that start the conflict and then promote its escalation. As emotions grow, the issue at hand falls to the wayside because the focus shifts to personality differences - the 'unreasonableness' of the other. While defusing of emotions can take another paper in itself to describe, the key is to NOT LET SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM BECOME OUR PROBLEM. Just because someone says something personal or inappropriate to us, we do not have to rise to the bait, but instead accept that "John seems to have a problem now; I'll not respond to the personal jab because it has nothing to do with the real challenge before us." Applying respect and defusing emotions are handled formally by having a referee at any problem-solving session whose role is similar to a hockey referee – maintaining the rules of the game and avoiding the escalation of emotions.

Blame as a Barrier to Solutions

Assigning blame for a problem to a person is a cop-out strategy. It is saying: (i) 'I myself am innocent', and, (ii) 'the answer is simply Doris' incompetence'. Both prevent discovery of the real issue. Once you assign blame you escalate the emotion of the person who is being blamed (people do not like to be blamed unless they blame themselves). And escalating emotions will lead away from resolving the issue, as stated above. As well, if this person is really to blame you have removed a key player from helping to resolve the issue – so how can you expect to resolve it now? All people affected usually have some contribution to the difficulty, no matter how small. If you claim total innocence by blaming others, how can we get to your contribution to the problem? We can't. The point is: if you want to solve an issue, do not lay blame; if you blame you will NEVER solve the issue satisfactorily.

Conclusion

We must understand people because people are at the centre of all problems. These personality differences mean people introduce inherent, automatic, conflict. The ways to minimize or avoid conflict are to respect others, defuse emotions and avoid blaming. Easier said than done, but absolutely essential if progress is to be made. If we cannot resolve issues, the enterprise will not be able to sustain the greatness it had within its grasp.

W. E. Caswell