

SOLUTIONS? NO PROBLEM

Traffic authorities in a city faced a problem typical of any busy city—a street choc-a-bloc with vehicles, bumper-to-bumper in ordinary parlance. It is evening time and harried office goers are returning home. Suddenly a pedestrian darts across the road, a car driver instantly swerves to the adjacent lane upsetting the car in that lane. The latter jams his brake and comes to a screeching halt even as he sets in motion a chain of near crashes. Very soon there is a massive traffic jam.

This happens almost daily on many of our arterial roads. The traffic authorities rope in a consultant—a problem analyst, who proceeds to study the “problem” from all angles. He then comes up with recommendations along the following lines—pedestrians to be fined for crossing the road, a fine on drivers who cross lanes, posting of policemen at various points in the road etc. Does this solve the problem? No way. The driver, for example, can hardly be blamed for swiftly changing lanes—after all his is only a reflex reaction to the pedestrians crossing the road. Besides there could be even stray animals, or dug up roads that could cause a driver to take evasive action.

It is in such situations that we need what is called a “solutions focus” which does not dwell on analyzing the problem but proceeds to solution finding through other means. In this case the creative approach would be to observe the periods when there is no traffic jam. This ‘no-problem’ situation happens when drivers have enough time and space to react to other road users, by braking or maneuvering without forcing the vehicle behind to take evasive action and precipitating a jam. This happens when the roads are quite or when traffic is moving slower and drivers have more time to react. The solution to the problem is to bring in **lower speed limits** at busy times which paradoxically allows more traffic along the road than faster speed limits!

Traditionally executives are trained to solve problems by analyzing the problem—identifying the root cause and then proceeding to eliminate the root cause—much like the way a doctor diagnosis the disease of a patient. While this approach—called the reductionist approach—is necessary and works quite well in many matters. Thus if a computer is down it makes sense to ascertain why it is not working and having identified the source of the problem we could then repair or replace a part for example and thus solve the problem.

However it does not quite work efficiently when we deal with systems, especially involving human beings.

If we are to approach a problem involving people, typically such an analytical approach to problem solving would mean that we would talk to the people and

- get them to tell us more about the problem
- Say what they feel is causing it
- Identify who is responsible
- Initiate steps to solve the problem

The analysis along these lines takes the form of an Inquisition, a Commission of Enquiry and ends up in blame fixing—counterproductive at the best of times.

The tacit assumption about such an approach is that if we knew more about the problem we would be better placed to fix it. My suggestion is exactly the opposite—if we know more about where it is going wrong we shall know more about what is going wrong, period. What is critical is to know more about *what is going right*. The more you talk about problems the more difficult the issue becomes.—leading to the well known phenomenon of “analysis paralysis”. A new and creative approach to problem solution is to adopt a solutions focus rather than a problem focus.

I was approached by a bank manager to help him solve the problem of customers closing their accounts in his branch. He showed me a questionnaire based study across hundred people who had closed their accounts and sought my advice on how to initiate action to stop the flight of business. I told him that the uncreative mind can spot wrong answers but it takes a creative mind to spot the wrong questions. I talked about the futility of studying the problem and advised him to conduct a study on what was it that the existing customers found *satisfying* in the branch that made them continue banking with him despite several options available. This study revealed several strengths in the branch. Building on these strengths was the strategy I recommended and to the amazement of the bank, business actually grew significantly!! The existing customers marketed the bank on behalf of the branch staff! The moral of the story—identify what works and do more of it.

A school headmaster approached me with a problem—he tried his best but failed to get parents and teachers together to form an association. I studied the issue and found that the ‘problem’ was the headmaster himself. Parents perceived him to be a person who communicated very well with children but could not do so with adults. Clearly the communications skills of the headmaster was the ‘problem’, the ‘underlying cause’, and the solution lay in training him in that skill. I adopted the ‘solutions focus’ approach and

sidestepped the problem. I advised the PT master to informally involve the parents in the conduct of the annual sports meet. The music teacher was roped in to involve parents in holding a cultural event. In two months a parent- teacher association came innocuously into existence! The moral of the story—sidestep the search for causes of problems and head straight to the solution.

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