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Solving Problems or Puzzles?

Looking at Problem Solving Through a New Lens

Oh, the lazy days of summer. Time for vacation and relaxation. I recently had an opportunity to spend a quiet weekend with my family at a lake house. No phone, no television, no internet. Just a few board games and a couple 1,000 piece puzzles. Seizing the opportunity of time with few outside distractions, we dove in as a family, tackling the first and then the second puzzle. I had forgotten how much fun and rewarding solving a puzzle could be.

It got me thinking. What if we approached solving problems with the same enthusiasm as we do solving puzzles? After all, our clients look to us as leaders every day to help them solve their most vexing problems effectively.

And yet, some view problem solving negatively, as situations to avoid, rather than as opportunities to seize. When faced with an unexpected challenge, they either freeze, believing it is too difficult to overcome, or do the opposite, diving in without a strategy or plan.

On the other hand, great leaders believe that problem solving can be a positive and beneficial experience, providing an opportunity to learn, connect with others and grow in the process. And effective problem solvers are able to identify and define problems in a conscientious, disciplined and systematic way. They embrace the challenge rather than avoid it.

Which approach is yours?

Imagine this scenario. You get the phone call. Your boss or a significant client asks you and your team to address a complex challenge. You hang up the phone. Do you:

- A. Silently (or loudly) freak out and freeze. There's no way you can fix this.
- B. Afraid to pause, you immediately begin "doing." You know the answer and can handle the situation yourself.
- C. Hang up the phone, and take a deep breath. You think through your next steps, identify available resources and define the challenge. You are excited to get started.



How did you answer?

The Puzzle Approach

Actually, in the dictionary, a synonym for “problem” is puzzle. And the definition of “puzzle” is *“a problem designed to amuse by presenting difficulties to be solved by ingenuity or patient effort.”* Ingenuity and patient effort, the cornerstones of effective problem solving.

Back to that phone call. Picture the situation as a puzzle to solve. Just as I experienced at the lake house, completing a puzzle can be challenging yet fun. And you wouldn't think of beginning a puzzle by just diving in. In fact, effective problem solving and completing a jigsaw puzzle have many steps in common.

1. Define the challenge.

According to master puzzle experts, you don't begin the puzzle without first looking at the picture on the box, and then by completing the edges. In effective problem solving the first step is to define the current problem, as accurately and realistically as possible.

2. Gather the facts.

Completing a jigsaw puzzle effectively includes sifting through all the pieces, for example, dividing them into colors. When problem solving, try breaking up the problem into smaller pieces, putting information you know in similar buckets and continuing to add additional information as you gather it.

3. Generate solutions.

Work the puzzle, filling in various missing pieces. Bring in others to help complete the puzzle. For the most effective problem solving, use the skills and depth of your team to brainstorm possible solutions from different points of view. Delegate tasks to generate the most timely and effective results.

4. Choose the best option.

No one can predict the success or failure of a given course of action with 100% certainty. But building effective problem-solving skills through sound investigating and a thorough process can better ensure that your solutions will be successful more often than not.



5. Implement the solution.

Take action and give your chosen strategy a chance to work. Success solving both puzzles and problems takes time, effort and determination.

6. Evaluate the outcome.

Is the puzzle complete? Does that last puzzle piece fit into that last remaining spot? Has the chosen solution solved the problem? Are you ready to move on?

Unlike a jigsaw puzzle, however, our problems do not always have only one defined solution. But the more skilled you become at approaching problems with a systematic and thorough process, the more comfortable you will be taking on increasingly complex problems. Your confidence will continue to build.

Remember that sense of accomplishment you feel when you successfully complete a puzzle? Building on your success will encourage you to no longer look at problems as negative situations to avoid but as opportunities and challenges to seize. Further, involving your team in the solution rather than beginning by “doing” on your own, will create not only more effective solutions but will provide opportunities to display your skills as a team leader.

So, bring it on. Seize the opportunity to be the master puzzle expert for your team and in your organization.

For more information on building your skills in problem solving or other leadership skills, contact me at Mary@wernercoaching.com.

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