

Bring Me Problems, not Solutions

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“If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions”

Albert Einstein

ABSTRACT: Historically, mitigating employee complaints followed the adage “don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions.” Today, leaders are gravitating toward the opposite paradigm; “bring me problems, not solutions.” There are many reasons for this transformation in management philosophy. To optimize solutions and outcomes, we must consider diverse perspectives in dealing with a specific problem. Groups can accomplish much more together than any individual can on their own – regardless of their wisdom. Finding solutions to problems should not be a solo sport.

KEYWORDS: cognitive diversity, leadership, inclusion

Historically, the *modus operandi* for *old-school* managers seeking to mitigate employee complaints has been following the mantra, “don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions.” Today, we recognize this to be a misguided strategy. Modern thought leaders prefer the converse thought process, “bring me problems, not solutions.”

Why the paradigm shift away from the classic philosophy? There are several important reasons: 1) very few complex problems have a straightforward solution; 2) simply focusing on solutions creates a culture of advocacy where everyone enters the situation focused on their own way of solving a problem; lobbying for their own solution rather than inquiring about the best possible solution [1]; 3) someone other than the individual who found and brought a problem may be better suited for the challenge of solving it. Due to a problem’s size or scope, not everyone can solve all the problems they face [2]. In addition, the “bring me a solution” approach can be intimidating to employees that should otherwise be encouraged to bring up problems without fear of reprisal. This approach prevents problems from surfacing early, before they have developed into crises. In these cultures, bad news is at risk of getting covered up and being swept under the rug. With the “bring me a problem” approach, people feel safe to deliver bad news early, allowing time to act and avert crises.

Of course, it is important to differentiate productively communicating a problem from simply complaining. Problems are stated constructively and objectively. They examine the problem’s underlying root causes and reveal everyone’s role in creating it. Presenters acknowledge their own part, so you know they’re open to being part of solution, rather than simply blaming others. Complaints on the other hand are shallow, and abstract. They are worded with absolutes (“always” and “never”), they lack accountability, and they place blame on others [2].

It is also important to consider the effect of *Action Bias*. This describes our tendency to do something, anything, in the face of stress or uncertainty. We are compelled to act. We tend to endorse the first proposed solution. We scan a few alternatives quickly while overlooking the big picture. Under the influence of action bias, we think value comes from action rather than waiting to make a rational decision. We seek to look active, even if doesn’t really achieve anything. In our former hunter-gatherer times, survival was more dependent on fast reactions than on reflection and deliberation. We have evolved to valuing contemplation and decisiveness; but not inaction (3).

Every choice and every decision can be approached from more than one perspective. The benefit of different perspectives is that they lead us away from stale assumptions and toward deeper thinking (4). Innovation requires broadly exploring a problem and its myriad possible solutions. Complex issues are best tackled by group collaborations and identifying the right person or people to solve a specific issue. Tapping into the wisdom of crowds doesn’t require consensus. Instead of fostering an exchange of conflicting ideas, consensus-driven groups trade in the familiar and squelch provocative debate. Ideally, teams comprised of talented individuals will work together via open discussion to approach a problem from their own unique and broadly diverse viewpoints [5].

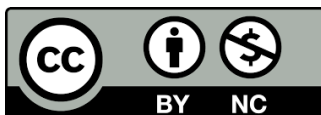
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To optimize outcomes, leaders should diligently and thoughtfully consider diverse options and perspectives in their quest to select a best possible solution to a given problem. Leaders should create an environment where any employee encountering a problem is empowered to raise it [2]. While true empowerment is rare (finding a problem and coming up with a solution, without having to tell anyone or ask permission), leaders must remain welcoming, empathetic, and approachable. When appropriate, a compromise in the spectrum of empowerment may take the form of, “if you can’t solve it yourself, come to me and we’ll solve it together” [6].

Because we know that “*you don't know what you don't know*” [7], we understand that groups are able to accomplish more together than any individual superstar can on their own [8]. Or, as Harvard Business School professor Frances Frei so eloquently opined, “*identifying problems can be a solo sport, but finding solutions rarely is*” [9].

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