BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE PROBLEM-SOLVING CULTURE

"Through constant questioning, we see more clearly just who we really are, and what remarkable resources we have access to. We will also see more clearly what is really facing us, and we will become more capable of accepting and responding to change."
Professor Reg Revans

The Covid-19 global pandemic is showing no signs of abating, half a year after the virus first reared its ugly head in China before spreading rapidly to literally every corner of the world.

The resulting deep recession presents an existential threat to many companies and leaders need to rally their people to help their organisations face difficult months and years that lie ahead. In this process of fighting for survival and recovery, organisations need to make problem solving a way of life to respond to both internal and external challenges. These challenges confronting many organisations now are unprecedented and with no fixed solutions. The nature of the problems also shifts constantly as a result of the dynamic external environment. Before the problem can be solved, it may have already evolved into another form. Hence the solution requires constant adaptation and the collective and proactive problem solving capacity of the team is more important than one brilliant person (a single leader or expert) with a brilliant solution. When leaders involve their people in daily problem solving, they will be more engaged and more motivated to do their jobs better, and as a result, the organisation's performance improves.

So how can leaders tap into the innate problem-solving capacity within their organisation? In this article, we look at eight key ingredients to build a sustainable problem solving culture in organisations.

1. Process

There are many processes established in organisations to help in its smooth functioning. Processes can cover anything from HR, customer service, strategic planning, etc. Similarly, leaders need to identify and establish a problem solving process in their organisations. A process is important for culture change because it ensures

common understanding among your people on the resources required, how it is done and the expected outcomes.

A problem solving process should be simple enough for everyone in the organisation to follow easily. It should not require onerous certification before one can use the process. In the face of broad challenges faced by organisations, the problem solving process should be one that can stimulate team members to let go of old mental models, challenge existing assumptions, generate fresh ideas, experiment with alternatives, and consider diverse perspectives, before collectively making decision. For example, Action Learning is a simple but dynamic problem solving process with only two ground rules and six components. It involves a group of four to eight people from diverse backgrounds working on a real problem at hand.

2. Results-oriented

Unless a problem has urgency and importance, those tasked with solving it will devote limited energy or creativity to it. People are motivated when they see results from their efforts in working on a real problem without any known solutions. Hence, actions and results should be an expected output from a robust problem solving process. This will minimise the chance of a problem solving session becoming a chitchat session without any returns on the time and effort invested. In the case of Action Learning, to keep the team focussed, each session must end with an agreed set of committed actions to be implemented by the team before meeting for the next session. The team should also be empowered to take action on the strategies developed so that they see the results of their actions.

3. Open to Everyone

Problem solving should be a democratic process that is open to everyone in the organisation. It should not be the responsibility of a single department in the company and neither should it be reserved only for a privileged few as a result of their position or special training. Besides, people respect their leaders more if they're given opportunities to solve problems. The traditional way of problem solving where a few senior leaders hunker down behind closed doors will not be effective or sufficient anymore. By sharing leadership, it does not only foster trust and encourage vulnerability, it gives leaders much needed feedback on how individual team members respond to stress and how they like to be motivated. At the same time, when employees are offered a seat at the table and empowered to make decisions, they become more engaged as they can expand their

network and skills. Leveraging team diversity in problem solving has an added benefit of discouraging group thinking and allowing different perspectives to surface, thereby increasing the probability of innovative solutions.

4. Baby Steps

It is important to remember that changing the culture of an organisation is notoriously difficult. It is not uncommon to hear stories of companies starting initiatives and then quietly abandoning it. Culture change takes time to implement and leaders will not see overnight success. It takes courage, commitment, and discipline from all stakeholders to implement a problem solving culture successfully. For problem solving culture to take root, organisations need to first focus on critical shifts in behaviours. These behaviours could be as simple as not attributing blame whenever something goes wrong, but instead dive deeper to uncover the root cause. It is also important to start small with pilot projects so that your team can experience the benefits of a problem solving culture with minimal effort. Once your people are reaping the rewards of the small change, they will be more motivated to work towards larger changes and share their experience with others, thereby creating a ripple effect. Teams will have varying degrees of success, which is normal. But by reflecting on their successes and failures at every step, they find opportunities to learn and make positive adjustments. It is also important for leaders to publicly appreciate the contributions from those who step up to serve in problem solving teams. Everyday progress—even a small win—ought to be celebrated as it can make all the difference in how team members feel and perform. Regular communication to share successes with others is also key for culture change. Everyone wants to play on a winning team. So leaders should build a problem solving culture that continuously foster success.

5. Leadership

When it comes to driving cultural change, leaders play a pivotal role in using their behaviour to set the tone for what's acceptable within a company. If leaders want to make change happen, your team has to see it happen from top down. Leaders must themselves change and they can start from respecting the expertise of the people on their team and focussing on finding ways to support them in problem solving instead of being the heroic leader. Leadership team needs to adopt the problem solving process and also to role model behavioural shifts. For example, the Action Learning process involves asking thought-provoking questions of one another that gets to the heart of the matter rather than expressing opinions and debating about solutions. Hence, team members will be observing leaders if they are modelling curiosity and asking more questions when working together. Leaders also need to demonstrate vulnerability. There is compelling evidence that leaders who are prepared to show their

vulnerability more easily gain the trust of others. By reframing vulnerability as a strength, leaders stop worrying about having every answer and realise it's okay to be wrong. To be a catalyst in problem solving, leaders should invest efforts in ensuring teams are given enough time and resources to devote to problem solving. At the end of the day, leaders carry the responsibility of modelling behaviours conducive for problem-solving and ensuring it is adopted at all levels of the organisation.

6. Experiential Learning

Solving complex problems require team members to constantly learn new skills and develop new knowledge to meet the changing demands. More often than not, it is a situation where what you know is less relevant than what you may learn, and knowing the answer to questions is less critical than having the ability to ask the right questions in the first place. The ability to reflect and learn from every problem solving session will ensure the team is better equipped to solve the next problem they will be confronted with. An effective problem solving process should require individuals to act and learn from their experience at the same time. Hence, an important ingredient of a problem solving culture is the focus on learning. Most of us will know that learning cannot be accomplished solely in a classroom environment.

The best learning happens when people work on finding sustainable solutions to real time burning issues that matters to them at the workplace. Most employees crave for learning opportunities. By creating a learning environment that helps them develop new skills and grow professionally and personally, it will help in entrenching the problem solving culture in the organisation. While the Action Learning process may seem deceptively simple, the reason why it is effective for learning is because it embodies the principles of adult learning. Experience also shows that unless there is a person dedicated to learning, the tendency is for a group to devote all or most of its time and energies on what they consider to be urgent (the problem). Hence, one of the six components of Action Learning is a coach whose role in the process is not to teach, but to design and enable conditions out of which people can help one other to learn.

7. Meaning

Finding a sense of purpose in working on the problem and finding solution is important in building problem solving culture. Employees yearn to contribute in meaningful ways and giving them an opportunity to work on the problems your organisation is facing is a great way to engage them. This means that leaders need to help problem solving teams draw the link between the problem they are working on and the organisation's purpose. Purpose is your organisation's reason for being and the difference you make

in the world. In order to feel inspired to invest time and energy to solve a particular problem, employees need to see how the problem is connected to your company's purpose and understand how its resolution do contribute to it. When leaders can articulate clearly this connection, employees will be motivated to solve the problem with their heart, mind, and soul.

8. Safety

For problem solving culture to flourish, leaders need to nurture a safe environment for team members to work together. Here we are not referring to physical safety but psychological safety. It is about creating a setting in which team members feel secure, and so able to review their mental models, recognize the need for change and see the impact of their actions on real problems. In a team with high psychological safety, individuals feel safe to take risks around their team members without being seen as ignorant, incompetent, or disruptive. They feel confident that no one on the problem solving team will embarrass or punish anyone for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea. There will be understanding that when a problem is properly defined by the team, the root cause usually turns out to be not a particular group or individual to be fixed but an underlying factor that the organisation can address, such as a poor communication, lack of transparency, misaligned processes, or inadequate training. This also means that leaders should see problems as something to be desired, instead of buried. Indeed, the open discussion of problems is critical to the success of every organisation.

The Covid-10 pandemic has amplified the need for organisations to build a problem solving culture that lasts. The organisational imperative is to create a safe environment and empower teams to consistently seek out and solve their problems.

The ingredients to build such a culture is embedded in the eight letters of the word **P-R-O-B-L-E-M-S**. This requires a change in mindset and behaviours from both leaders and employees. Companies with well-established problem solving culture will benefit from the strength of the collective wisdom of people and the engagement and enthusiasm they bring to their work. These give organisations the means to not only tackle their immediate challenges brought about by the economic fallout, but also the momentum to sustain their performance in a post Covid-19 world.

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