

The REAL problem

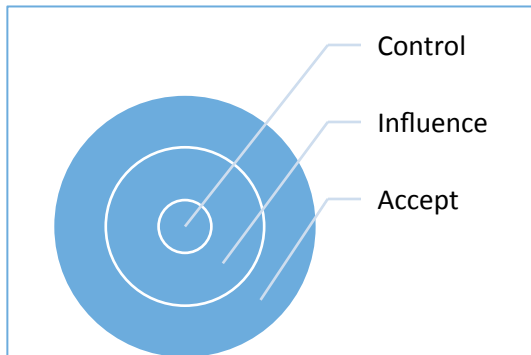
How Deep?

In Action Learning sessions we always try to get our teams to identify the real problem. Recently, I was asked “How do we know when we are there?”

I’ve had a lot of time to think about this recently as I am dealing with the consequences of not looking for the deeper problem. About eight years ago I realized I was losing the hearing in my left ear. I started seeing an ENT (Ear Nose Throat) specialist. After several appointments he concluded I must have had a virus that killed the cilia and I would just need to get used to it. As the hearing loss got worse I decided a second opinion was in order. This ENT decided the hearing loss was the symptom of something deeper and had me go for an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). Long story short they discovered a benign brain tumor. The tumor was bigger than a golf ball. I’ve had 2 surgeries and they haven’t been able to completely remove it. Had the first ENT taken a deeper look years ago – I’d still have my hearing and removal likely would have been easier.

When looking for the REAL problem, take the time to peak and see if there is something deeper.

CIA (Control, Influence, Accept)



One of the factors in determining if we have gone deep enough is – can we do anything about it?

Ideally, the problem is directly within the control of the team to do something about it; at a minimum the team needs to be able to influence the outcome.

I worked with a team that got to the place that the real problem was World Hunger. World Hunger is a

real problem, but not in their realm of control or influence. This team needed to come back up to get to the real problem they could do something about.

Other teams will jump to the corporate or personal issue rather than the portion of it they own. For instance,

Example 1 –

“the institute has a culture of fear”, rather than “Problem Presenter is afraid to approach his boss about ...”

Example 2 –

“Joe is not a team player”, rather than “Problem Presenter doesn’t know how to have the difficult conversation with Joe about his behavior”

As we are deciding if this is the real problem the team needs to ask itself what part of the problem the team or the problem presenter owns.

The Problem Presenter

Too often Action Learning teams believe the problem presenter knows the problem and work to match the problem presenter’s definition. In reality the problem presenter is too close to see the real problem. The problem presenter will need help peeling back the problem to get to the real problem. With my hearing loss I never considered the possibility of a brain tumor. It took someone else asking the question –what might this be a symptom of and how can we test it?

The other challenge with problem presenters is they already have a solution in mind. Even with preparing the problem presenter ahead of time to ensure they are open to other problems and solutions emerging they will tend to gravitate to what they previously concluded. This seems to be particularly challenging in sponsored problems for leadership development. The challenge is twofold as the team wants to please the problem presenter so tends to gravitate that way.

Leadership Development

Problems used as projects for leadership development bring a host of challenges. Senior leaders don’t like admitting they have problems – I sometimes use the word challenge instead. Action Learning works equally well on opportunities. The problem needs to be big and juicy enough to entice the team, but needs to be doable. Keep in mind the team members have day jobs that must be dealt with, but make it clear this is a real challenge needing a real result. Consistently, remind the team of the need to identify the real problem. Look below what’s presented.

Remember the problem presenter is likely too close to know the real problem. The real problem must be within the problem presenter’s control or influence. Get to the real problem and ultimately a breakthrough solution.

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