

PROBING/PROBLEM SOLVING

Discussion:

It might surprise you that probing and problem-solving are grouped together here. After all “probing” has to do with “checking things out by asking questions.” Problem-solving is . . . well, problem solving. What does one have to do with the other?

They have everything to do with each other. Problem-solving begins, develops, and ends with probing. How can you know if there is a problem needing to be solved? Well, you can experience an unexpected result, or someone can tell you about one, or your plans may point to a problem. But beyond that, how can you know if it really is a problem . . . or how big it is . . . or what its true nature is? The only way to know is to investigate. Good investigators are good probers. They know when it’s time to ask a question. They also know how to ask questions.

People who get “surprised” a lot are people who don’t know when to ask questions . . . often times, you can prevent problems from occurring by asking timely questions. The best problem-solving is problem-prevention. However, once a problem has arisen, probing helps to clarify the problems. Probing well at onset of a problem prevents you from painting yourself into a corner with a poorly targeted solution. It’s one thing to paint yourself into a corner It’s quite another to enter an unpainted room, walk straight to the farthest corner and proceed to paint yourself into it without having painted the rest of the floor. “Solving” the “wrong problem” with the “wrong solution,” is just like that.

Don’t assume. . . check it out. Organizational life is complicated . . . you can count on the fact that whatever you think is going on, there is MORE going on. What you don’t know can hurt you, and the people you work with. Always ask more questions than you think you need to. It’s not being paranoid. Paranoia is “wondering whether something’s up.” Probing cures “wondering” and yields “knowing.”

Problem solving also develops with probing. Asking questions helps to define the problem, but even more importantly, opens up avenues of exploration. From a distance, a person’s skin looks smooth and impenetrable. However, up close or magnified, you can see millions of pores in it. To a bacteria (if they could see) it looks like a field of “canyons” easy to penetrate. Problems are like that. At first glance, they look “impenetrable” probing gets you close enough so you can see the “avenues of entry” into the problem. Probing makes the problem easy to “penetrate.” Probing reveals the details that you can exploit to solve the problem. The famous architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe once said, “God is in the details.” How right he was. We might paraphrase him and say, “the solution is in the details.”

Problem solving begins and develops with probing. It also ends with probing. Once a solution is suggested, probing helps determine whether it is in fact, a solution at all. If it turns out to be the solution, and is implemented, probing helps to examine the results of the solution, and, even more

important, whether the new solution has created a new problem of its own. Henry Kissinger is noted for having said, “every solution is a ticket to a new crisis.” Better to check it out than to be surprised. Getting surprised can be uncomfortable, and can cost you “points” with those you work with. They won’t appreciate surprises either.

Of course, probing isn’t all there is to problem solving. The other main component is “alternative generation.” This is the part where you create “solution candidates.” Don’t make the mistake so many people make of locking onto the first answer that pops into your mind. The first couple of ideas are almost never the best alternatives.

Experience and research both show that the best solutions arise late in the problem solving process. Ideas arise, grow, transform, rearrange, etc. These things take time. Invest enough time for your ideas to grow and mature. Let your ideas “get out of diapers” before you “put them to work.”

And probe. Yes, bring others into the solution creation process. The Bible says, “plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors, they succeed.” Access your “advisors,” probe them, bring out their genius and you’ll look like one too.

The more alternatives you can generate the better your solution will be. Practice expanding your set of alternatives. It’s a creative process you’ll get better at. One technique you can try is private brainstorming. Just jot down (or record) as many wild ideas as you can imagine. Then examine them for more ideas they provoke. As you practice, you’ll get better and quicker. Since so few people do this, just a little improvement can earn you a reputation for being a “sharp and savvy” problem-solver. Everyone needs a good problem-solver.

Probing comes in two basic flavors. The first, and most familiar, is the lateral probe, or survey. A lateral probe is when you ask one single question, listen to the answer, and then change topics with a new question. Example:

Step 1: “Have you used a word processor?”

Step 2: (answer) “Yes”

Step 3: “How about spreadsheets?”

This can be good for getting the “lay of the land” quickly. However, it’s pretty superficial. Besides, it’s the more difficult of the two varieties of probing because you have to be knowledgeable and creative enough to think of a new topic to ask about.

The second variety is the vertical probe. Vertical probing works this way: First you ask a question. Second, you listen to the answer (not rocket science so far I grant you). Then third, you ask a question about that answer. Listen to that answer, and ask a question about it. For example:

Step 1: “Have you ever used a word processor?”

Step 2: (answer) “Yes”

Step 3: “Which one?”

- Step 4: (answer) “WordPerfect”
Step 5: “Which version?”
Step 6: (answer) “Version 6.1 for Windows”
Step 7: “What do you like best about 6.1 for Windows”
Step 8: (answer) “I like the macro feature.”
Step 9: “What’s a macro?” or “Why macros?” or “What do you use macros for” etc.

Vertical probing gets to the heart of the issues very quickly, and . . . its easier. You don’t have to know a lot, because their answer gives you your next question. Simple and powerful.

Probing can even become an excellent and empowering leadership style. . . but that’s another discussion. Practice, practice, practice. What is awkward at first becomes easy with practice. Pretty soon you won’t get “surprised” anymore, and that will “surprise” everybody.

Prescription:

1. “. . . there’s always more going on “so probe, even when you think you don’t need to.
2. Practice vertical probing.
3. Practice solo-brainstorming . . . it’ll help you find better solutions and it’ll improve your ability to do lateral probing by enhancing your ability to think up new topics to ask about.
4. Read some of the excellent books on problem-solving and creativity that are available at your bookstore. One great book for developing creativity is:

“Thinkertoys” by Michael Michalko. Ten Speed Press,
Berkeley CA. 1991 ISBN 0-89815-408-1