Turn Problems Into Solutions [1]

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Many managers are not fully aware of the impact of their behaviors on people who report to them. Still operating out of the early 20th century command and control style of management, these managers see their job as directing and controlling people. When things go wrong, their first impulse is to determine *who* is at fault. Point fingers. Find someone to blame.

This style has unfortunate consequences for the people they manage. People soon learn that making mistakes will get them in trouble. In an effort to protect themselves, they either cover up their mistakes or find other people to blame. "I didn't do it!" "I'm not responsible!" "It's not my fault!" "It's *his* fault!" It becomes easier to blame others, rather than to take responsibility themselves. It is safer.

Spreading to the departmental level, this behavior then leads to turf protection throughout the organization, with each department or section looking out for itself. The entire organizational culture becomes a defensive, self-protective culture in which people work as adversaries, rather than working as one organization-wide team.

In this kind of culture, managers are punitive when employees make mistakes. They believe they must discipline people making mistakes. They must punish them so that they will never make the same mistakes again.

Experts call this "playing the Blame Game." This kind of managerial behavior stunts employee growth—people become more self-protective and do not really learn from their mistakes. Problems often do not get solved with any efficiency or with any long-range success.

Turning problems into solutions, instead of finding blame is much more fruitful in the long run. More employees end up better trained, taking ownership over what they do, and feeling better about the organization. As a result, customers end up happier and more satisfied. Profitability increases.

To *turn a problem into a solution*, it is helpful to look at the problem situation from three points of view: (1) Events; (2) Actions; and (3) People. Following are a few examples drawn from my work with several automobile dealerships.

Events

Look carefully at the problem event. Exactly what happened? Search for ways of preventing the event from occurring in the future.

Example: Salespeople are noticing that there has not been very much customer traffic during the past several weekends. Why? Is it tax time and people don't want to spend money? Has our advertising changed? What could we do to bring in more customers on weekends?

Example: Not enough customers are mailing in their customer surveys after purchasing a vehicle. Why? Is our survey too long or too difficult to complete? Are we not emphasizing how important their feedback is to us when we give it to them? What can we do about this? Is there some kind incentive program we can use to bring in more returns?

Actions

Look carefully at the actions taken—particularly those that could account for why the problem occurred. What actions should we stop? What new actions could we take to prevent the problem from occurring in the future?

Example: Parts Department personnel are not efficiently notifying Service Advisors when a needed part arrives. As a result, customers become impatient because the repairs they need are taking too long. Carefully examine the communication processes between the Parts and Service Departments and build steps into it to prevent this problem from happening in the future.

Example: In spite of the Dealer's instruction that all newly purchased vehicles be given to customers in spotless condition, they are being delivered unclean and/or with minor defects. What can be changed in the new vehicle delivery process to prevent this from occurring in the future?

People

Look at the knowledge and/or skills of the personnel involved in a problem situation that might account for why the problem occurred. Determine whether they lack the proper training.

Example: Some salespeople are not doing a good job of establishing rapport with customers, resulting in their failure to close deals. Emphasize the importance of establishing rapport when making a sale. Train the salespeople. Teach them techniques for establishing rapport. Mentor and coach them afterwards.

Example: The Service Department manager discovers that vehicle repairs completed by a particular technician are not being done correctly. Why? What kind of special training can he be given to make sure he does it right in the future? Or, if he is unable to be trained, are there other kinds of repairs he can be assigned to for which he has the right capabilities?

TURN PROBLEMS INTO SOLUTIONS
BY TREATING EVERY MISTAKE
AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

WHAT HAPPENED? → WHAT CAN BE DONE? → SOLVE THE PROBLEM →