Maintaining Perspective: A Leader's Responsibility – But how?

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Our last article discussed the Leadership perspective in today's world. The main point was the need for leaders to possess a high degree of self-discipline, to remain balanced, to exhibit patience, and keeping the company's mission the binding goal of all employees despite any of their personal beliefs. This issue will explore some of those skills and behaviors necessary to accomplish a balanced perspective. We will look at two we feel are keenly important: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving. Obviously we are taking a 30,000 foot look with a few dives down to the tree tops.

Critical Thinking

This is nothing new. "Socrates established the fact that one cannot depend upon those in "authority" to have sound knowledge and insight. ... His method of questioning is now known as "Socratic Questioning" and is the best known critical thinking teaching strategy. In his mode of questioning, Socrates highlighted the need in thinking for clarity and logical consistency."
The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Socrates established the importance of "seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, analyzing basic concepts, and tracing out implications not only of what is said but of what is done as well". His method of questioning is now known as "Socratic questioning" and is the best known critical thinking teaching strategy. In his mode of questioning, Socrates highlighted the need for thinking for clarity and logical consistency. He asked people questions to reveal their irrational thinking or lack of reliable knowledge. Socrates demonstrated that having authority does not ensure accurate knowledge. He established the method of questioning beliefs, closely inspecting assumptions and relying on evidence and sound rationale. Plato recorded Socrates' teachings

and carried on the tradition of critical thinking. Aristotle and subsequent Greek skeptics refined Socrates' teachings, using systematic thinking and asking questions to ascertain the true nature of reality beyond the way things appear from a glance.[8] on of critical thinking. Aristotle and subsequent Greek skeptics refined Socrates' teachings, using systematic thinking and asking questions to ascertain the true nature of reality beyond the way things appear from a glance.

Chiarini, Andrea; Found, Pauline; Rich, Nicholas (2015). Understanding the Lean Enterprise: Strategies, Methodologies, and Principles for a More Responsive Organization. Cham: Springer. p. 132. ISBN 978-3-319-19994-8.

^ "A Brief History of the Idea of Critical Thinking". www.criticalthinking.org. Retrieved 14 March 2018.

"Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference."
*Defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987*

We sum it up as being able to sort out the BS from the truth, realizing that is an over simplification. But at a 30,000 foot level we see four key leadership attributes or behaviors.

- Self-Directed
- Self-Disciplined
- Self-Monitored
- Self-Corrective

Summing this all up, we believe that people find it easier to react to a situation than to think it through critically. Reactivity tends to result in a lack of understanding, compassion and tolerance.

Pitfalls looming on the horizon for leaders include:

- Culture
- Self-interests
- Life experience
- Refusal to get all opposing perspectives
- Short sighted analysis
- Getting caught up in internet/media hysteria
- Believing what one wants to believe and ignoring facts
- Refusing to learn from history
- Yielding to pressure for quick solutions rather than correct solutions
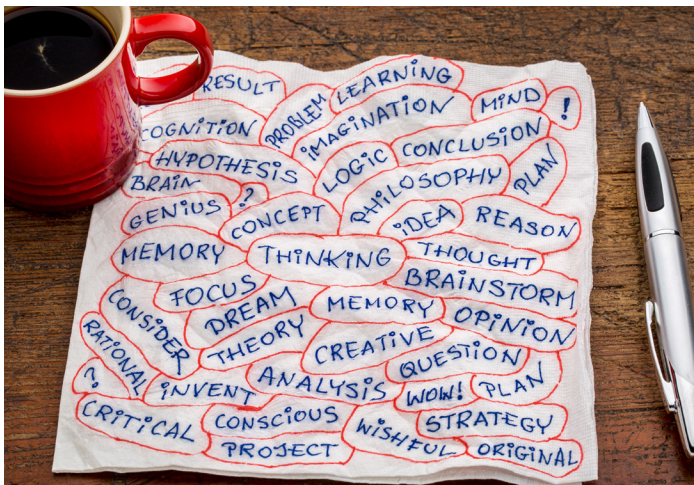
Problem Solving

We are confident the majority of our readers are familiar with basic problem solving steps. Different management gurus have espoused different approaches. Some may be 5 steps some 6 and some 8. They all follow the same basic philosophy:

Define the Problem – Be sure to clearly identify what the real problem really is. It is easy to see a different problem from the one actually causing distress if it is easier to deal with that different problem than dealing with the real problem

Analyze the Problem – Once defined, think about the problem from different perspectives to insure understanding of all the dimensions of the problem. Validate the problem definition to make sure that it still fits. It is not unusual to find that the problem needing solving, is different than the one initially identified.

Generate Objectives and Alternatives – What is the outcome to achieve as a result of solving the problem? Is this an agreed upon or singular objective (important question)?

Select an Approach and Develop an Action Plan – Which approach is the most likely to solve the problem for the long term; is the most realistic to accomplish for now? Are there sufficient resources? Are they affordable? Is there enough time to implement the approach? What is the extent of risk associated with each alternative?

Troubleshoot – What could go wrong here? What could be the side effects? What assurances do we have that this plan will work? Remember the law of unintended consequences.

Communicate – Getting information to the right people is key for achieving buy-in for the problem resolution

Implement – Involves identifying all the steps necessary to implement the selected plan.

Monitor and Verify – Ensures the effectiveness of the solution making sure it actually solves the problem.

These steps are a tried and true method, but not necessarily easy to apply in real life. It takes work to truly problem solve and it takes buy-in from all involved in the process. Those same pitfalls described above come to play among the problem solving participants. Human emotions and preconceived ideas can impact and even sink the problem solving activity. Often an independent facilitator is needed to guide the process.

There are a couple of different types of problems that need to be kept in mind during a problem solving effort.

Convergent Problems – Are problems such that the more you study them, the easier they appear to reach a solution. Several alternative solutions arise and one emerges as the most desirable. It is essential to study problems with some depth to find the real definition. These converge on the real problem.

Divergent Problems – Are problems such that the more you study them, the more complex and daunting they become. Analysis takes one farther and farther from an acceptable solution. Here studying the problem seems to take one further away from a possible solution.

Shift the Paradigm – The reason solving divergent problems are difficult is they become increasingly complex because we see them only in one way, what we perceive to be "the right way." Use care to balance perspective. Be careful that how you see the problem is 'the truth' -- not the-tip-of-the-iceberg issue.

So what we are suggesting here is the challenge for leaders in today's contentious world is to seek the truth. To instill the discipline of critical thinking and problem solving. The concept of Convergent and Divergent problems is huge. When people attempt to solve divergent problems as convergent problems things can go off the rails. There is no clarity, there is no path forward that is logical or desirable. This is when the Paradigm shift technique is essential. This is where truth is required and essential.
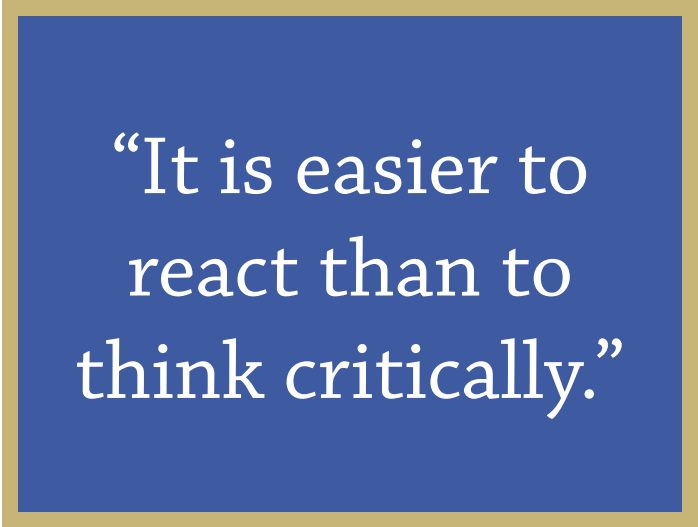
Recognizing divergent problems and being able to clearly define the problem and shift the paradigm are key skills for a leader, as well as the people surround him or her. Learning to recognize divergent problems takes both skill and practice. Our intent here is not to provide a Cliff Notes version of dealing with divergent problems but to point out the fact that such problems are not easy to solve and takes a lot of work. The work is definitely worthwhile but it requires a dedication to wanting to solve problems for the long-term and not just seeking a quick and dirty solution that might solve the problem today, but will not solve the problem long-term.

Summary
Hopefully, we've illustrated and indicated how important Critical Thinking and Problem Solving are to the success of an organization and to the leader. In our last issue we talked about the importance of the leader steering clear of debates and discourse, in the workplace, on hot button issues such as politics, environmental and social issues. That guidance still holds, but in this issue we are trying to provide a framework for leaders to make decisions and find solutions to problems impacting the functioning of the organization. It is one thing for a leader to stay away from hot button issues in the normal functioning of the organization, but any organization will have problems that need solving and a framework to critically think through problems, seek the truth and reach solutions, allowing for those hot button issues to not derail a legitimate effort to resolve issues and problems. It is difficult to imagine a situation where political and socially divergent views can be a part of finding a solution to an organizational problem. There are no hard and fast solutions and no easy way around ever present challenges, but employing a framework that is objective, factual and emotionally intelligent, ensures keeping the hot button issues out of the effort. If someone working on the solution can not keep such issues out of his/her thinking then they probably are not the right people to be involved in finding the solution.

The skills we discuss in this issue are not easy, but being a leader in an organization is not an easy job. It takes hard work and many more skills than these two but it can be so rewarding to see an organization succeed and grow.

"It is easier to react than to think critically."