

## Leading in Problem Solving Part 2

Perhaps the very definition of a “good leader” is that of someone who can solve problems. Historically the best leaders are those who triumphed over great issues that affected large populations. With this as the backdrop let’s consider how we can be better problem solvers.

When small issues turn into a malignant problem the quicker the diagnosis the better. You can do this by looking for the tangible impacts on your organization. The presence of a negative scenario or disruptive behavior that has measurable results such as injuries, cost expansions or employee retention are real problems. Sometimes we focus on the mere absence of a desired asset or an un-attained goal as a problem. If they do not produce any “pain” then temper your amount of attention to them. Save the leadership trust you have built for problems that are correctable and worth fighting for your department.

Getting started.

Separate the facts from any opinions and contrast the facts with the rules and customs that apply. Consider the perspective of those who may be defending the problem and why. Most people who are “the problem” are motivated by the thought of loss of status, pay, or influence. Dealing with them personally and directly can have immediate results as long as they choose to change for the better. Some plans of attack are not as simple and you may need to consider a process of investigation to get to the root cause of the issue. An internal committee or even an outside group may be used if internal opinions cannot be separated from facts. The fire service has done this for many years under collective bargaining and the use of an arbitrator.

Solutions to be considered are important enough to be written and listed for future reference. The more complicated the problem, the more likely that the first solution is too simple to fix it. Considering all of the unintended consequences is key to developing a long lasting solution. To do this you will need feedback from some or all levels of the organization. The solution should also remain consistent with the department’s policies so you can keep your credibility. Documenting what the solution will look like, or result in will provide a goal to work for. The finish line will be drawn and everyone will know when that problem has been satisfied.

When performance IS the problem!

Poor performance is a very difficult problem to address due to its systemic nature. Most performance failures are due to a poor leader that dropped the ball on any one of the following: They never communicated the expectations, provided the resources, taught the skills, or provided the time to develop the work force. The other contributing factor of sub-par performance is on the employees. If the staff is not held accountable for their professional behavior then there is not much hope for improvement. If there is little to no personal interest in the work effort then the organization will suffer the reputation as such. No amount of monetary or equipment resources can make up for people who do not care for what they are doing. The best case scenario is to change the attitudes and behaviors to be more in line with the department's goals and mission. Doing so takes a commitment from both the leadership and the work force. For a successful mission the leadership needs to give what is necessary to improve the climate, and the employees must adapt to the mission or find another line of work. Great fire departments are so only because of the blue shirts making it so. The framework of leadership is needed but it is the work that is the most important!

Improving individual performance must be documented, goal orientated and short in time range. We should as leaders be teaching the skills, coaching for performance and then counsel against any poor results. Your duties as a problem solver are very similar to operating on the scene of an emergency.

- Distribute the work by setting priorities (assign the companies)
- Monitor performance by promoting quality and safety (training and reviewing past experiences)
- Provide feedback to enhance performance and getting personally involved is sometimes warranted to show the way. (putting on the gear and getting dirty)

These steps all use a model of communication that develops a personal relationship of interdependence and respect.

Start with you.

Your responsibilities begin with yourself. You must maintain your personal integrity, positive attitude, and above all control how stress affects your behavior. Stress can be framed into a scale of complete control to no control at all. We should try to apply our energy to the things we have total control first. Those things which we can somewhat control should have a long term plan of influence. Those things which we cannot control should be recognized as things we have to adapt to and deal with. Nobody said this was going to be easy!

As a titled leader you will be expected to change things while being watched closely by both subordinates and supervisors. You are literally in the middle and are expected to absorb the pressure by walking the talk. If you are wondering if your attitude is not what it should be, ask yourself “Did I earn this position today?”

Understanding the bad attitude.

Body language is the most understandable of all forms of communications. Without a word we decide many things about another person’s intentions. Behavior is the result of our thinking. Negative thinking is how we start down the bath of a bad attitude. The pillars of a negative attitude are selfishness, low self-worth, a weak moral baseline, the inability to adapt, fearing the loss of control or status, and only considering our own perception. An attitude adjustment takes a lot of energy. Most times a troubled person needs more than professional influence to change the way they are thinking, feeling or what they focused on. Bad attitudes require larger efforts like developing better habits, associating with positive people and above all, having a desire to change. We as supervisors can do some of these things by holding our ground on what is expected from everyone under our command. Re-establish the focus, teach, coach and monitor for progress. Follow through with reward and recognition if warranted. The objective should be clearly communicated to the person with the problem. If someone’s behavior is resulting in negative consequences for the group then a real solution is needed. A documented and structured discipline procedure is crucial. These procedures should list the expectations for the work force which should include a positive attitude and team work.

Keep the problems at bay.

To ward off the spread of a bad attitude we should lead by example. By participating in the intentional disrespecting of anyone, you have condoned the bad attitudes. Sure, we all use some shades of dark humor and sarcasm to deal with this job, but that comes with the trust that our intentions are not to personally damage anyone. Especially our brethren! If you are a company or chief officer and have aired doubts or even insults about someone that was not in the room at the time, you have some work to do. Most of the people listening to you realize that it is only a matter of time before you pile on them, and no longer trust you. Without personal trust you cannot be a leader, just an in-effective manager with title only.

Promote the attitude that succeeds. Offer solutions to complaints and call out the negativity as it happens. Most people will re-consider how they are thinking about an issue if their initial negative statements are challenged. Focus on making a positive impact on others and the organization. It's quite simple; treat others as you would want to be treated and expect excellence.