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THE PROBLEM WITH PROBLEM-SOLVING LEADERS

Many employees long for leaders who can solve workplace problems—from flawed systems and procedures to inconsistent policies and managers. They want their leaders to see through the trees and attack forest-sized issues, with the discernment and authority to fix them one by one.

While this sounds great on the surface, employees who report to problem-solving leaders cite challenges that dwarf the problems themselves. Organizations typically benefit from resolved difficulties, but unsound methods or mindsets can exacerbate even the most mundane issues.

Troubleshooting leaders often have skeptical views and have a hard time trusting the workplace culture. They equate run-of-the-mill difficulties with threats to themselves and their companies, prompting over-analysis in their quest to find ideal remedies. Their problem-solving attempts can stymie operations and push people beyond their breaking points.

ARE YOU AN OBSESSIVE PROBLEM-SOLVER?

Problem solvers look at circumstances with a critical eye, never assuming systems work as well as they should. They're motivated by risk mitigation and view problems in procedures or systems as weaknesses that jeopardize their future.

Setbacks or glitches are acute sources of personal pain, according to Dr. Beatrice Chestnut, author of *The 9 Types of Leadership: Mastering the Art of People in the 21st Century Workplace* (Post Hill Press, 2017). Problem solvers persistently look for hazards and make every attempt to minimize, if not eliminate, them to improve workplace conditions.

A message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are you in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?

In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "what got you here may not get you there."

At Proffitt Management Solutions we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational and skills workshops, seminars may help you better answer those 5 questions and benefit you...

If you can relate to this description, you may have problem-solving tendencies that detrimentally affect your people. If your critical eye always focuses on what can go wrong, you're likely causing difficulty for others. You may be an obsessive problem solver if you cannot stop yourself from asking diagnostic questions and exhausting all troubleshooting options. You may feel uncomfortable until all uncertainties are eliminated. You cognitively understand that this is impossible, but you're nonetheless emotionally compelled to try.

MIXED OUTCOMES

When obsessing, troubleshooting leaders disrupt the normal pace of business and frustrate their people. They:

- Are deep thinkers who tend to perseverate over data, diverting their attention away from people and communication priorities.
- View circumstances with skepticism and need assurances that systems and products are at optimum states, which can drag down those around them.
- Taint their mindset by overstating negative and minimizing positive aspects, which leads to poor decisions.
- Are easily paralyzed by analysis and avoid making decisions, thereby blocking progress.
- Have little trust in processes and procedures, as well as those who adhere to them.
- Wear people down with endless questions as they seek complete resolutions or fixes.
- Tend to challenge authority by questioning their motives in supporting the status quo.
- Can invent negative outcomes to affirm their discomfort with ideas or methods, creating greater challenges.
- Lack flexibility and a willingness to accept new ideas.

At the same time, problem solvers have some positive traits that benefit their organizations. Leaders who focus on troubleshooting:

- Are great lessons-learned resources, full of advice on how to avoid past mistakes.
- Have excellent analytical and problem-spotting skills. They catch errors most people overlook, which reduces waste.
- Are prepared and calm when trouble arises, as they planned for it.
- Are unafraid to discuss the elephant in the room, tackling significant issues no one else wants to mention.

- React honestly, without hedging, grandstanding or bragging.

How many of these traits hit home?

Ideally, positive traits will outweigh their negative behaviors. Self-awareness can help them minimize damage to their organizations.

OUTWARD SIGNS

Certain observable behaviors expose a problem-solving leader. Taken to extremes, they can wreak organizational havoc.

Adamant troubleshooters have a reputation for being great problem solvers and often catch the CEO's eye. They may have earned approval by preventing a huge crisis or finding a way to solve a cost overrun. Their detail-oriented behaviors follow them into leadership roles, where their effects on people are more prominent.

Problem-solving leaders are visibly satisfied by troubleshooting. They're highly engaged as they calmly and systematically respond to challenges, approaching the process with a self-appointed sense of duty. Problem solvers probe situations with strings of questions, some of which seem irrelevant or exasperating.

Skeptical troubleshooters find fault with existing products or processes, believing it's incumbent upon them to offer solutions. They confront established viewpoints, assuming they have a noble purpose: to heroically correct problems that plague the organization. Their defiance rubs people the wrong way. Tensions flare when troubleshooters focus on perceived threats but ironically overlook the disunity they promote.

To make their case, problem-solving leaders overstate consequences and minimize advantages, which weaken their trustworthiness and credibility. Their critical perspective prevents them from making decisions, as their quest for ideal solutions is virtually unattainable.

Data-driven problem solvers value numbers over people. They're resistant to intuition and

gut feelings, searching for solutions that can be validated quantitatively. Progress is delayed when hard data are unavailable, which creates rifts with people whose experience and input should be valued and trusted.

A COMPLEX MINDSET

When we work for problem solvers, our survival depends on understanding how they think and feel. Troubleshooters feel threatened when things go wrong and problems have no readily apparent solutions. They fear their analytical skills—and, by extension, they themselves—are inadequate. A loss of control over circumstances adds hopelessness to the mix.

Many problem solvers deal with their insecurities by fixing things and bringing order to their world. Their mindset is fairly concrete: Everything needs to be fixed. Trouble lurks around every corner and must be snuffed out. These leaders have an innate protection mode.

Problem solvers rarely recognize their fears or desperate need to feel safe, but they're keenly aware of their preparedness. They're always ready to dissect problems methodically. They pride themselves on their diligence.

Troubleshooting leaders are often the odd one out, taking a minority view. They notice how few of their colleagues grasp their insights, which empowers them. Their research often leads to predictions, which take the form of warnings to heed their advice. Setting themselves apart from others affirms their belief that their contributions are important.

Problem solvers revel in hard data. They dismiss others' intuition as inferior to facts. Gut feelings are deemed inappropriate and risky. They require a high level of certainty. But when data are hard to obtain or seem misleading, these leaders struggle to make decisions. Pulling the trigger without enough assurance seems riskier than doing nothing. Appealing to their common sense proves fruitless.

Over-analysis is never a problem for obsessive troubleshooters—the more, the better. Extended

analysis may uncover other problems— an effective bonus in the war against trouble. Discovering hidden problems is a delightful find for them, akin to uncovering a treasure no one else has spotted.

Problem solvers have trouble taking criticism, which they view as a roadblock to progress or a detriment to morale. But they often accept it as the price to pay for fulfilling their role as protector of the people. Criticism would be far worse if their careful analysis failed to catch problems.

When working with problem solvers, try to understand their perspective and appreciate their gifts of discernment and analysis. Know that they don't intentionally bog things down with their hyper-focus. Their goals are honorable, though they may pursue them in disruptive ways.

MINIMIZING CHALLENGES

Problem-solving leaders needn't forsake their analytical skills or interests, but they can use them in more helpful ways. Problem solvers can learn to develop good personal relationships with peers and subordinates, thus ensuring greater trust in people, processes, practices and products, as Dr. Chestnut suggests. An experienced executive coach can help reduce skepticism and embrace challenges realistically.

Leaders can learn to present their ideas more effectively, and work on accepting feedback and consensus. They can express their intentions honorably and seek collaboration sincerely. Ultimately, they'll learn to work the relationship side of the equation and be rewarded with better professional experiences.

Chronic problem solvers make the greatest strides in overcoming their foundational fears by seeing, admitting and facing them. Searching for problems is a sign of anxiety or negative thinking. A leader's confidence is the best weapon to override fears and build positivity.

Uncertainty is a given in leadership and life, and self-assurance is vital to achieving success. Problem solvers know they have the skills to identify and mitigate risks, but they also want to trust their abilities to tackle major issues and decisions. Train your staff to tackle lesser problems, and delegate appropriately. Qualified employees with excellent judgment can lighten your load and any associated anxiety.

Problem-solving leaders must find an effective balance between their analytical skills and everyday time constraints by allowing others to help them. With a healthier mindset, free from fear and anxiety, they can manage problems constructively and unify people, without frustrating or discouraging them