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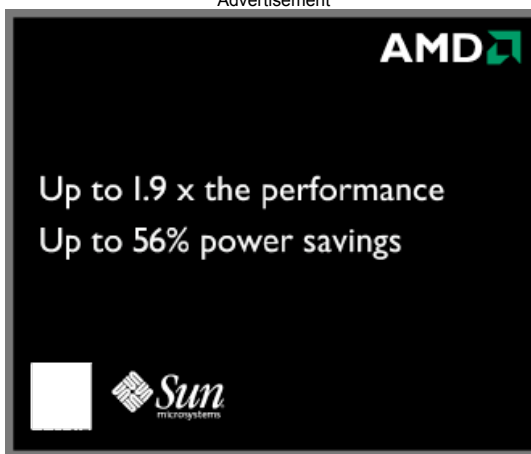
How CIOs can find the right solution for the real problem.

Aug 03, 2006

By Deborah Gilburg

Nowadays, having a solution is viewed as the key to solving a problem. But what happens if we are applying solutions to the wrong problems? How do we always know what the real problem is, especially if it involves murky areas like staff morale, employee conflict or poor communication? For people who pride themselves on fixing things and having the answers, sometimes the best way to identify and solve these problems is to give their solution-providing reflexes a little vacation. This requires patience and the will to resist the pull of our 24/7, deadline-driven world. It is worth the effort though, because the wrong solution can be more costly than taking extra time to find the right one.

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I once knew a CIO who was concerned about the communication behavior of his direct reports. They were hard workers, but were reluctant to contribute their thoughts and opinions at meetings and resisted collaborating and sharing ideas with one another when working on teams. They seemed to prefer taking on projects and working with their own staff in isolation. Incidents marked by miscommunication and misunderstandings among his staff were increasing, and he found himself spending more of his time managing the resulting conflicts. This was becoming a problem and beginning to affect his department's productivity and customer service, not to mention employee morale.

This CIO had made his way professionally by finding answers. He was a fixer, a solution provider who had learned that ignoring a problem was the worst way to solve it. He decided he was going to fix this communication problem. He was going to get his staff some communication training.

No doubt communication training is a solution, but is it the right solution for this CIO's problem? More significantly, has he even identified the real problem?

In my experience, one of the most effective methods for solving problems requires that we allow ourselves to have no answers—that we defy the urgent pressure to provide a solution and instead make time for questions. The power of questions lies in the ability of the right question to lead you to a new perspective. The process of inquiry calls for leaders to invest more time up front seeking to understand the problem in order to find a solution that delivers better outcomes. It also requires that they abide by the number-one rule of effective problem solving: Never exempt oneself from the problem or the solution.

Here are five steps to finding the right problem and its solution:

1. Generate open-ended, expansive questions about the observable data.

Open-ended questions cannot be answered by "yes" or "no." They generally start with words like *how*, *what*, *where* and *when*, and invite a number of potentially diverse responses. Expansive questions are designed to seek a broader perspective about the issue or topic. The objective at this stage is simply to generate good questions, not to answer them. To that end, it is very important for

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those compulsive solution providers out there to put aside any thoughts about the fix, to resist answering questions, and stay open to new perspectives and ideas.

My friend the CIO might choose to describe to his staff the behavior he has observed and ask them to write down the kinds of questions that will help them all think more broadly and deeply about the situation. As the questions are submitted, he could read them aloud (without attribution) and ask the group members to add to the list. And he would participate, asking questions to broaden his own thinking about the perceived problem. Consider these examples:

- How do we want our work environment to function?
- How is communication an issue?
- What gets in the way of our being able to communicate effectively across team lines?
- How else might we think about this problem?
- Where might we focus our attention differently?
- As leader, what am I doing, or not doing, that helps or hinders good communication?

2. Circulate questions and collect answers.

Once there is a relevant list of questions, it is time to collect answers. It is generally a good idea to get input from all staff involved. Ensuring that their answers remain anonymous will encourage candid responses. For the leader, it is especially important to remain curious, to really listen. Any and all answers are good answers.

Our CIO, for example, may find that some of the answers indicate that communication is a problem; however, other answers reveal that communication is actually occurring successfully at many levels of his department, just not at his level. He may discover that his managers have fears about his reaction to their ideas, or that colleagues may be too critical. He may also discover that other problems exist, such as confusion by staff as to who is in charge of each team project, or how final decisions are made.

3. Clearly communicate the results and the next steps. By sharing the data and clarifying the decision-making process, leaders can engage the support of others while managing expectations and outcomes.

For example, our CIO may see himself as the ultimate decision-maker but can seek meaningful input from his staff by revealing the data and clarifying the criteria and parameters that exist for making a final decision (i.e., priorities, desired outcomes, budget constraints and timelines, etc.). By stating that he will make the decision, and is seeking their best thinking and input first, he lets his staff know what is expected of them, and they will be better prepared to support the process.

4. Ask more questions designed to focus on the best solution.

When we allow for expansive thinking about a situation, it is important eventually to narrow down the field of possibilities in order to determine the best solution. This process can be done with questions too—convergent questions designed to help draw the focus to the most relevant issues reflected in the data.

At a meeting held to discuss the data, our CIO might ask for questions from the group designed to help narrow down and prioritize the issues. He can guide his staff by specifying the outcomes he is seeking: for example, creative interaction between his direct reports, productive teamwork and collaboration between their staffs, less conflict or improved performance and customer service department-wide. Again, it is important to list all questions before seeking to answer them. Here are some examples:

- What does this data reveal about the problems we are having?
- Where is it most impacting us? Our customers? Our performance? Our morale?
- What are some ways of addressing these issues?
- What approaches will work best with the data?
- What kinds of solutions fit best with the needs identified by the data?
- What solutions have the greatest leverage given the parameters/criteria out there?

5. Choose a solution.

Once the convergent questions are asked and answered, it is time to choose solutions for the key problems. The best solution may be very different from those envisioned before the inquiry process began.

Our CIO, for example, may decide to forgo communication training for his staff and instead work to offset some of the concerns they have about sharing their ideas. He and his senior team might establish agreements about how to interact when brainstorming and discussing new ideas. They might develop protocols clarifying cross-team collaboration, project oversight and decision-making responsibility. And the CIO will have to consider his own communication behavior, perhaps agreeing to monthly all-hands meetings in order to update his department on the priorities, policies and direction of the organization.

The power of inquiry lies in the process itself. Often the act of engaging others in assessing the problem through expansive questions alters the group dynamics as people ask questions,

consider many viewpoints, listen and share data and ideas. Such may be the case with our CIO, for the use of the inquiry process itself could help improve trust and communication between his senior team and their staffs. Leaders who are by nature solution providers may find they do a better job at solving problems when they refrain from always having the answers, and instead find ways to empower and engage the thinking of their people to help define and solve problems. This kind of effort creates a solution-providing culture, one that recognizes that the right solution comes from understanding what the real problem is, and taking the time to get there.



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Readers Viewpoint

immediate solutions

Posted: AUG 11, 2006 05:25:55 PM

There is tremendous pressure in IT to "fix things yesterday" and this no doubt leads managers to adopt immediate solutions even it is known that in the long run they will need to be fixed again. I also suspect that other issues come into play such as how a manager's personality type affects their perception of problems and their solutions. Certainly a CYA mentality of easy and quick fixes (squeaky wheels) exists where there is poor corporate communication.

Very good article - however, describing what individuals should be doing versus them actually adopting such processes is the proverbial case of "easier said than done".

Right solution for 'stressful' CIO moments

Posted: AUG 07, 2006 09:27:17 PM

Ask yourself these questions 1. What is happening right now? Stretch it out by asking yourself three subsidiary questions: What Am I doing right now?; What am I feeling right now?; What am I thinking right now?. 2. What do I want right now? (In otherwords, ask yourself what you are trying to achieve in this conversation. Often simply the act of asking this question will provoke a change, w/o you making a deliberate decision to change) 3. What am I doing right now to prevent myself from getting what I want? (Make a choice at this moment. All you need to do is say to yourself, "I choose..." 4. Take a deep breath hold it for as long as you can and move on.. Now that you know what you want, move toward it! Your experiences? Comments? www.Moravecglobal.com Milan Moravec

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Dated: August 03, 2006

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