

Are you getting the change you need?

Focusing on your approach to problems and solutions can give you better outcomes in your change initiatives.



Changing the way we change

I've been reflecting on the various assignments I've been involved with in 2011. Many of these have involved change programs driven by leaders who have perceived the need for new and different capabilities in their organisations.

A good proportion of these change programs achieved the desired outcomes, but several change initiatives failed to deliver to the initial expectations of the leaders. I am interested in understanding some of the factors associated with these "successes" and "failures". While still early days, I have identified some issues related to the way these leaders approach the need for change.

Problems and solutions

Two issues seem relevant here:

- a. The relative emphasis given to a **problem** approach versus a **solution** approach in the change situation, and
- b. Whether the leader, inadvertently, **becomes the problem** as he/she seeks a solution to move forward in the change process.

In a **problem-based** approach, you focus on the gaps or deficiencies in the current situation and seek to get a precise and accurate definition of the problem. This approach is best used in engineering-type situations where there is a premium on accuracy and measurement.

A **solution-based** approach, on the other hand, focuses on finding a way through the current situation and moving ahead. This is best in human and organisational situations where there is a premium on providing hope and a promise of progress.

There are advocates and critics of both approaches. For example, we know that:

- we can't solve problems and initiate change unless we understand the issues completely. Defining the problem accurately gives one real insights into possible solutions
- we should focus on presenting a positive view of the future and way forward though a solutions-focused view. Focusing excessively on the problem creates negativity and may create a downward spiral, leading to despair and little change.

How to achieve better change outcomes

Two key implications emerge from this:

1. Use the problem and solution-focused approaches appropriately and properly

You should recognise your natural bias for one of these approaches over the other. Understand where each is appropriate and make sure you cover both off in the change scenarios with which you are dealing. Furthermore, follow these simple guidelines to ensure the proper use of each:

Problem-focused	Solution-focused
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the Kaizen method of “five why’s” - ie ask the “why” question five times to find out the real cause behind a problem• Reverse the key assumptions in the situation in order to trigger a different way of looking at the problem• Use analogy to compare the problem to another that has been solved in a different field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generate a picture / description of how the future state might look• Identify the key capabilities that are needed to support or give effect to that future state• Set up an action plan to develop those capabilities that are needed to support the future state.

2. Make sure that you're not part of the problem

I have noticed how several leaders are the cause of the problem in their desire to solve it or help others solve it. They spend much of their time suggesting different ways of doing things, raising issues that appear to need discussion, making recommendations about change - and then complain when people don't take up their suggestions.

Sometimes people need to be left alone to address problems in their own way. It may not be the way you would do it, but it is a way that works for them - and it may well achieve the same result in the long run.

To truly be part of the solution, you need both humility and wisdom. Humility to recognise your own shortcomings and faults, and wisdom to understand that people sometimes need to grow a little and get some experience under their belt. Sometimes they need to come to you instead of you chasing after them.

So, as you think about the challenges of 2012 and beyond, consider your approach to the way you manage change. As they say, if you want things to change, try changing yourself first!