

Thinking Around Corners



Been to any meetings lately where people yak about problems but don't solve them? Plenty, I'll bet. I know why that happens: bosses train their employees not to solve problems.

You think I'm kidding? At the next opportunity, audit one of your internal meetings. Tell the folks you're there merely to observe the process then keep your mouth shut. If they swirl around an issue without resolution, if they look at you for cues, or ask you what they should do, you'll know you've got a group that can't think for themselves and that you're a well-paid bottleneck.

How did these people become such sheep? Well, owners with their names on the door often enjoy a sort of masturbatory validation when they gift their subjects with "the answer." They'll complain they can't delegate to the staff because ". . . they never have any good ideas." And that's true - because they've been schooled to come to Papa for answers, not generate their own.

Take heart. You can do something about it.

Don't let people dump their problems in your office like the family pet dropping a trophy mouse at the master's feet. Break the habit by demanding that anyone who brings you a problem also recommends solutions. And not just a stab-in-the-dark idea, but a handful of possible options, A, B, C, D & E, with a concluding reasoned recommendation on the best course of action. The formula is, What's the issue, What will happen if it remains unsolved, What are several possible solutions with pros and cons, and - this is how leaders are developed - How they'll fix it. Turn away anybody approaching your desk without a solution even if it's not a good one.

In fact, now and then let them prosecute their recommendations even when you know they'll fail. There's a legend at IBM that a junior VP once made a bad call costing the company about a million bucks and spent a sleepless weekend sure he'd be fired come Monday morning. Sure enough, even as he was putting his office doodads in boxes early Monday, the boss called. But he said, "Hold on. You've learned the lesson of a lifetime. You don't think I'm going to fire someone we just spent \$1 million educating, do you?"

Remember that no matter how smart you think you are you don't hold the sole franchise on good ideas. Henry Kissinger, clearly one of our brighter public servants with no dearth of experience in world issues, taught his juniors never to plop a policy brief on his desk unless accompanied by suggested resolutions. Thus he mined a trove of ideas while training a legion of colts to think around corners.

Problems are simply puzzles. They're satisfying to solve and doing so builds confidence. You've probably gotten good at it over the years but if you're the self-appointed protector-of-right answers your folks will keep having meetings where all they do is rant about problems without fixing 'em. Why should they when they can visit the All Powerful Oz for answers?

And that's the lesson from the Emerald City, isn't it. Dorothy and her buddies already had the key to their issues inside themselves - all they needed was a little boost to their self-confidence from the guy behind the curtain.

Not a bad job for a Wizard, huh?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Grant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.