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Problem Solving

From the Editor

In 16th century Italy there was a rival to Leonardo da Vinci for the title of Renaissance man. Leonardo's contemporary was a painter, sculptor, architect, poet, and engineer. His name was Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni. We know him as just Michelangelo.

One of his observations, perhaps prayers is a more accurate description, was, "Grant that I may always desire more than I accomplish." It appears that Michelangelo knew something about the value of setting stretch goals and objectives; and he did not appear to fret that a desired goal may be beyond his grasp. When desire exceeds accomplishment, an individual knows that they must push themselves to be better.

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Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

A longstanding debate has been "Is it possible, even useful, to separate *what* the issue is (content) from everything that surrounds it and has fed it (context)? Those who are frustrated by legacies, histories, and complexities seem to find it easier to set all that aside and just deal with the problem: almost like putting something under a microscope and only dealing with what you see.

Stephen, the author of this article, is not of that school. He argues that content and context should stay intimately woven; that way we can get solutions that will work.

Stephen is a principal with LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which produces this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Finding Solutions that Fit

I often listen to a radio program on writers and writing that is thrilling. Yes, I looked up thrilling in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary just to make sure I wasn't overstating how I felt. Thrill (*n* or *v*): a powerful and often sudden feeling of excitement, exhilaration, or emotion. Thrilling is the adjective. For me, the thrill happens because the host of *Writers & Company*, Eleanor Wachtel, is a calm, intelligent interviewer who knows her craft and has done her homework. So when she asks questions, they are not softball questions; they go to the heart of an issue, and the person she is interviewing has little place to hide behind platitudes and generalities (as often happens when authors talk to other hosts who haven't read the book or play, let alone the author's oeuvre).

In February, Eleanor was talking with British playwright and director Sir David Hare whose latest works have included *Stuff Happens*, *The Vertical Hour*, and *The Power of Yes*. This latter play deals with an author's desire to understand the international financial crisis at a deeper level. Hare was hitting his stride and pointing out that taxpayers in the US and Europe have been blackmailed twice by some of the international bankers. The first blackmail was, "You have to come in and save us because if you don't save us we will sink the ship and we will go down." And the second blackmail was, "We must be allowed to return to the same practices we indulged in before the financial crisis because if you don't the recovery will be in danger." He went on to say that that the root of the crisis is that many bankers in Europe and the US were trying to prove how clever they were and that the explanation they offered when the crisis occurred was that this was some "technical glitch" or "minor speculative problem."

If he had only gone that far, the interview would have been provocative but not thrilling. Eleanor knew to ask more questions, leave more space, shift the focus to *Stuff Happens* (a play of Hare's about the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq) and the excitement began to build. Hare asserted that leaders like Tony Blair don't believe in history, only tribes. They

define everything in terms of a problem or opportunity and figure out what to do "from this point on" (my words, not his). Eleanor paused. And then Hare went back to his assertion about tribes. Without history, he observed, we are forced to resort to the "trade unions of professions" — specialists who argue for the entitlement and protection of their discipline and we are left with nothing more than trying to manage some balance among the interest of lawyers, accountants, consultants, economists, analysts, investors, politicians, columnists and opinion-makers, doctors, techies, and so on.

Okay, why were those assertions so thrilling to me?

Because they fired off an intellectual excitement that caused me to think about how possible it is to solve a problem or make change without thinking about the context in which the problem or change exists.

Some Say You Can

In the last 5-7 years, a standby cliché in many of the organizations we serve has been "going forward." "Going forward we will be paying more attention to ..." and "Our position going forward is ..." or "We plan to divest any interest in that business unit going forward." The Going Forward declaration seems to be the rallying cry of most of the professional tribes who define a problem or see a change as discreetly as possible and in terms of what tools they have in their discipline. The common belief in many of the tribes is doing something is always better than doing nothing; those tribes are versions of Tony Blair who always liked his problems free of legacies, histories, and complexities and always wanted to appear that he was moving forward in a way that none of his predecessors had been able to do.

However ...

The frequent result of just seeing a problem or a change out of context is that either the solutions are inferior given the complexity of the problem or change or the solution is some version of what has already been tried but

didn't work. A solution could be inferior for a variety of inter-related reasons: the solution is too small given the size of the problem or the change and therefore ends up with too few resources to make it happen, the solution is too narrow and comes at the problem from a single perspective or a single set of interests, or the solution is too simple and doesn't deal with some of the important barriers to success.

My experience is that if you take a problem or a change out of context, you do so at your own peril.

Please don't misunderstand me; there is nothing wrong with a leader declaring what the intention is from now on (which is what I think "going forward" really means) but you ought to do that after you have explored both the *content* and the *context* of the problem or change that is in front of you.

Worth Considering

As a leader, what should you think about and do to make sure you don't end up with inferior solutions or already tried-and-found-wanting solutions?

First, never trust professional tribes who do limited or no analysis and offer easy off-the-shelf solutions that will "get you moving forward." Tribes are remarkably self-interested and they prescribe solutions that they are comfortable with, suit them, and look deceptively easy to implement. But in the long-run, they are costly because they won't grow in your soil.

Second, "Go forward" only after you have answers to a series of questions like "How do our various stakeholders understand the issue?" "What are the causes of the problem?" "What else do we need to deal with before we deal with that problem or change?" "What in our environment supports change?" "What is stopping us from changing?"

While those questions and others are being answered, you have to resist the pressure to "just do something, anything, to get us moving."

Third, communicate to everyone that reading the problem is far more valuable than reading the boss. We have observed so many

organizations that have hobbled themselves because they have scads of people scurrying around figuring out what the boss wants to see as a solution rather than determining what the problem is, how it connects with other initiatives, and what the best approach would be. So underutilized are problem analysis and change skills that many people have forgotten how to think on their own and come up with viable solutions. What's the implication if you've seen the same thing in your organization? Encourage the development of analytic skills by providing people with learning opportunities and by asking for rigorous analysis when suggestions and recommendations are brought forward.

Fourth, have a complete, realistic, and up-to-date understanding of the culture of your organization and the marketplace in which it works. Relative to culture, define your purpose, strategies, tactics, processes, practices, values, beliefs, traditions, paradigms, structures, formal and informal communication networks, and reward mechanisms. Such an audit will give you a solid appreciation of trust levels, openness, change readiness, capacity to innovate, strength of leadership, flexibility, and resiliency. Relative to the marketplace, define who the other stakeholders are (customers, shareholders, competitors, regulators, etc.), what they need from you, what they value, what they believe, how they need you to behave, and how they have responded to your initiatives in the past.

Why do you want to know that? It is in your corporate culture and the marketplace that you'll find the legacies and complexities that will tell you whether a solution will work wondrously well or whether it will seize up and stall.

Avoid Paralysis

The dread that many leaders have is paralysis of analysis, and well they should. However if leaders are skilled at analysis and have an up-to-date understanding of the context (the last two suggestions) paralysis should be infrequent.

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