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Opportunity

From the Editor

“There’s nothing remarkable about it,” said Johann Sebastian Bach. “All one has to do is hit the right keys at the right time and the instrument plays itself.”

Right! *All* we have to do is hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself. I don’t know J.S. but it seems like you loaded a ton of meaning into the word *all*. In order to be able to hit the right notes at the right time you have to understand the structure and beauty of music, learn the keyboard, embrace the disciples of learning and practice, know the limits and possibilities of the instrument, develop a passion for exquisite execution, and then and only then will the instrument play itself.

However, you are right: this is the price of admission to be seen as a consummate professional.

Part of what we do at LIVE Consultants is help individuals and organizations learn the disciplines of leadership so that more often than not they can play the right notes at the right time and inspire others to give their best.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Does it matter much whether you view a situation as a problem or as an opportunity? They both require a certain amount of genius and a fair bit of hard work to turn them into something worthwhile for the organization.

Problems, it seems, encourage us to apply a fix and be done with it while opportunities oblige us to think about possibilities and where they could take us. After cautioning us against the easy path of becoming a spin doctor, Stephen offers seven ideas of how to turn a problem into an opportunity. To be honest, the ideas are more than just ideas; they are based on his experience observing many of the fine leaders in our client group.

Stephen is a principal in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Opporknockity Is Tuning

Historians, I am told, have a list of sure signs that an empire is in decline: tacit agreement to suspend liberties, expansion of bureaucracies, the advent of self-interested leadership, pervasive apathy, a population who willingly spends themselves into debt, a disinclination to help the poor and disadvantaged, and the list goes on. Although I don't disagree with those observations, my list is much shorter: the proliferation of spin doctors. These people dedicate themselves to ensure that their view of the world becomes our view of the world; they reposition, redefine, reform, reshape, redraw, and reinterpret. Prisoners of war are now spun as unlawful combatants; oil spills are unscheduled deliveries; job loss is an economic adjustment; lying is merely a momentary suspension of the truth.

Now here's the bind I'm in. Reframing to deceive is indefensible. There are times, however, when reframing (okay spinning if you want) can help us see what we haven't seen before; it can create new insights, help us see beyond the obvious, find better ways.

It is in the spirit of this more helpful intent that I would like to argue the value and virtue of seeing problems as opportunities.

One observer has suggested that problems are nothing more than opportunities in work clothes. For the most part this is true. Most problems have hidden possibilities that if well-understood can be opportunities. But before I go on to suggest how that can happen, I'd like to make clear that there are some problems that require no other response than an unrestrained commitment to make sure the problem stops: abuse, violence, dishonesty, corruption, duplicity, cheating, to name a few.

That having been said, how do leaders help others find opportunities in the problems they face? What follows is a set of suggestions that I have observed leaders use and that I've found helpful myself.

P — Probe

Challenge yourself with questions about the problem. Ask questions like,

- “Why are we holding onto this problem?”
- “What does this problem do for us?”
- “Why do we want to see it as a problem?”

Serious answers to those questions force you to consider what part you may unwittingly play in sustaining the problem.

Sound odd? Why would a leader ever want to sustain a problem?

Because every problem has benefits. For example, what are some of the payoffs for a manager not to address the poor performance of a team member? It provides them with someone to blame when bigger problems occur ... it allows them to position themselves as a hero when success does happen (I did this despite the problems I was facing) ... it gives them a way to feel needed. These are but a few possibilities and some may seem far-fetched but I can tell you that I've seen them all.

Knowing what your part is in sustaining the problem provides you with an impetus to get on with it.

R — Reframe

Keeping the already noted cautions about spin-doctoring in mind, the second step is to determine alternative ways to look at the situation that is confronting us.

Again, questions are our allies:

- “How else could we look at this?”
- “What's here that we're not seeing?”
- “How would we define this situation if we believed the glass was half full?”
- “What gains are to be had?”
- “What does this situation give us that we wouldn't have otherwise?”

Those types of questions allow us to see greens instead of sand traps, doughnuts instead of holes, lemonade instead of lemons.

When reframing, a fundamental belief must undergird the dialogue you have with yourself or others: there is always more than one way to look at a situation and when we find those other ways we will be able to find opportunities.

Remember that you won't be able to reframe and find the opportunities if you haven't probed

at why you want the problem.

O — Own

Leaders, good leaders, never blame others for the place they are standing, for the hand they are dealt. In the same way that a workman never blames his tools, a potter never blames her clay, a batter never blames the ballpark. The best leaders I know adopt a stance that says if-this-is-where-we-are-so-be-it; they are realistic and make the best of what they have.

Here's the insight these leaders have. If I own it, I'll do something about it. If I blame somebody else for it, I'll wait for somebody else to fix it. And waiting for somebody else to fix it gives the somebody else the control ... and, more often than not, I won't like what they do with it.

B — Build scenarios

Using what has been done in reframing, leaders now ask, "What would be different if we saw the world that way?"

For example, one of my clients has a propensity to view their customers as picky, demanding, aggressive, and impossible to satisfy. In fact, the description that has crept into the lexicon of the organization is "problem customers" and it seems to shape much of their thinking. They act to defend themselves from the customer; they provide detailed reasons why they can't do what the customer is asking; they blame the customers for having a negative impact on employee satisfaction.

We began to ask how we might reframe such a definition and the answer that emerged was, "We have customers that value quality, want to work with the best, and are keen to serve *their* customer well." Then, in building scenarios, we asked, "What would be different if we saw the world that way?" and the answer was, "We would push to improve our processes, we would take pride in the quality we are capable of producing, and we would take responsibility for our own satisfaction ... in fact, we would feel like we were in control of how we're managing the business and we wouldn't spend a moment blaming others."

L — Listen and Learn

Leaders who can turn problems into opportunities listen to others and learn from their experience and knowledge. They ask,

- "What do you see that I don't see?"
- "What do you know that I don't know?"
- "What do you understand that I don't understand?"

They talk to people who have a different point of view because they realize that different perspectives can blast them out of a problem-driven mindset.

I have a client who owns the market share for their products and services. Yet, almost every time I am with a leader in that organization, I hear them ask, "What can we learn from our competitors? We see this as a problem and they don't; what do they know that we don't?"

E — Energize

An odd word? Here's what I've seen. Leaders, the better leaders, talk to anybody who will listen about the opportunity that they are beginning to see. The more they talk, the more energy they create for seeing an old problem as a new opportunity.

They work hard at giving the newly discovered opportunity some life. This is done in the hope that they can prevent themselves and others from going back to the old, comfortable definition of the situation as a problem.

M — Make connections

The best leaders I know who can turn problems into opportunities see ripples. They can talk about "if we start to define the situation as an opportunity instead of as a problem, here's what's going to happen." By making connections they help others understand what changes must happen ... and in doing so hold up an image of what is possible and what it will take to get there. With a realistic view of what is possible and what the ripples are, people will embrace the opportunity.

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