

Don Gray

Solving Other People's Problems

A problem can be a lot of things; perhaps a struggle, a puzzle, or a task. As a consultant, I find it useful to define "problem" as *the difference between what is, and what is wanted*. From that point of view, learning to solve other people's problems means learning to connect with your client, understand what they think they have, what they think they want, and what they would like to do about it. The experience of living teaches each of us a lot about this kind of problem solving, but the lessons are often murky. In recent years, I've been trying become more conscious of my own process so that I can control and accelerate it. Here are some basic principles that I've found helpful.

The Pause Principle

When you receive a problem, pause before trying to solve it.

The problem solving starting point should be "Don't just do something, stand there!" This principle is especially important in the case where there are strong emotions involved. It's downright critical when those strong emotions belong to you. Pausing creates space for a lot of things: to breathe, to center yourself, to let more information come to you, to notice that the problem is different than you first thought, or to notice a solution sitting in plain view. To pause is not to stop everything. You can be doing a lot of things while you're pausing. One of the most important is to pay attention.

The Pay Attention Principle

Critical information about the problem will hide in plain view.

I often find that what I need to know to solve a problem is not explicitly stated. But I also find that it's not always easy for me to hear information that I *am* told. Communication is a complicated process. One tool I use for checking the process is the Satir Interaction Model. This model decomposes communication into four parts: Intake, Meaning, Significance, and Response. Intake is what we physically see or hear. Meaning is the sum of ideas we think are conveyed by the message. Significance is our how the message impacts us; our emotional reaction to it. Response is what we do in reply or reaction to the message. What I like about this model is that it helps me be aware of a lot of ways that good communication can go bad. If any part of this process goes wrong, the whole communication will be distorted in some way. Certain personality types may be more prone to mistakes in certain steps than are others. I occasionally jump too quickly to into Response, before I've sorted out the other three parts of the process. Knowing that, I find the Pause Principle to help me give the process time and ultimately pay better attention.

Communication is also important because of the next principle: partnership.

The Partnership Principle

When I make the problem my problem alone, that makes more problems for all of us.

The problem I'm presented with isn't really my problem. I am not in the middle of that problem, the other person is. So there are risks whenever I try to help. By helping I may:

1. Deprive that person of a learning opportunity.
2. Take time from my work to do their work.
3. Encourage an ongoing co-dependency between my client and me.
4. Find a "solution" that my client feels no connection with.

The Partnership Principle reminds me to keep my client involved with the solving process. Ideally my client will solve the problem and I will support them as they do so. The worst case is when I find myself solving a problem so much by myself that by the time I unveil my wonderful solution, the client has forgotten about the problem and moved on. This situation relates to the next principle: passion.

The Passion Principle

Don't care more about solving the problem than the other person does.

I once worked with a company that I believed had a problem. Their training material was sub-standard, their trainer had never used the software, and they were losing money because the sales channel wouldn't promote the class. We (the client and I) initially set out to solve this problem. But less than a week after we dove in I woke up and realized I was the only who cared about solving this problem. They would not commit the resources to deal with the problem. My visions of better training and a better training business notwithstanding, I had to scale down my own enthusiasm to match their level of caring. A client who has no passion about a problem doesn't really have a problem. And when something's not a problem, it's also not a problem not to solve it.

Passion does not belong to the intellect, so you can't solve important problems with intellect alone. You also have to connect emotionally, in some way. You have to see the people involved and find a way to enter their way of seeing the world.

The Person Principle

Every problem is a problem for some person.

Each of the principles above is a reflection of this one. To solve a problem well, you need to discover whose problem it is, and find a solution that works for them. This is not so difficult if you are both the owner and the solver of the problem, but it gets tricky when you're acting as a solver of someone else's problems. Often there are many more people involved in the problem than just the particular person who brought it to you to solve. Furthermore, you aren't only dealing with the people themselves and the problem itself, but also how these people feel about the problem, about each other, about you, and about the attributes of whatever solution you come up with.

And *that* is *your* problem.