



TerrificMentors International

*The Seal of Good Mentoring
practical experience and expertise*

Enthusiasm, Encouragement, Determination

Problem Solving

John Bittleston

Problem solving is the last of the seven vital elements of creativity. It is more a consequence than a cause of creativity. So why is problem solving itself a tool of creativity? The answer lies in the mind of the problem solver. Some problems solve easily. If you are thirsty you drink some water. More complex problems involve emotions and our instinctive reactions to them will often be irrational.

A married couple had a well run, successful small business. It was strapped for cash, under resourced and, when they called me in, starting to fail. They simply could not keep their staff. Accountants came and went faster than the cars on an F1 circuit. From delivery man to manager, employees were just waiting to quit.

Contrary to what is generally believed, working with a spouse does not normally predict marital catastrophe or commercial disaster. If the couple's expectations are modest and they get on in their married life it can work very well and allow for short cuts in communications that save a lot of time. Of course, we all know of cases where it doesn't work, too.

It quickly emerged that one partner in the business bitterly resented the fact that the other partner financed it and wanted to call the shots. It happened that the richer partner was also the cleverer partner; that added to the strife. Quarrelling partners disturb staff more seriously than most other problems. Having had a brief look at the business I asked the couple to be polite to each other.

This didn't resolve the under resourcing, the tight cash position or the market forces that a small business has to deal with. But they followed my advice and the business returned to its even keel and started to grow again. Its future success depends significantly on whether they can continue to be polite to each other. Good manners were vital to solving their immediate problems.

Problems are solved in two stages. The first stage, defining the problem, calls on four of the other vital elements of creativity: Alertness & Observation, Sensitivity, Reflection, Memory. Looking and listening are the two keys to defining a problem. As you look and listen, keep an open mind. Many problems remain unsolved because the person trying to solve them jumps to a conclusion about the cause too early in the diagnosis. An apparently lazy child may be simply unwell just as easily as an apparently sick child may be simply lazy.

The second stage requires the other two vital ingredients, Humour and Vision / Foresight. Unfortunately the two stages are not that neatly packaged. You cannot check off stage one and move on to stage two. You may have to move back and forth between the two stages several times before you see a solution.

As with most things in life being clear about what you want is the most important part of problem solving. It's as if you are in a jungle. Between you and the longed-for peaceful river are weeds, reptiles and all kinds of traps. There is the folly of personal feelings, the boa-constrictor of power, the nettles of relationships with vested interests, the ground-weed of procedure. Cut through them all, concentrate on reaching the river and your problem will be solved.

The distractions of the irrelevant must be set aside. Be grown up enough to abandon the hurt feelings. Cast off the mirage of control. And, above all, never seek revenge; it muddies the pure river water, hurts your self image and leaves you a poorer specimen. That is not a recipe for a happy solution.

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