



**HOW TO HELP
YOUR TEAM
ADDRESS A
PROBLEM
THAT YOU KNOW
ISN'T GOING TO
BE SOLVED ANY
DAY SOON**

**A SPECIAL RESOURCE
By Dr. Jim Dyke
The Boss Doctor™**

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How to Help Your Team Address a Problem That You Know Isn't Going To Be Solved Any Day Soon

Introduction

One of the points I often make in my management training courses is this obvious one:

There is no such thing as a perfect organization.

Every organization has its problems, shortcomings, inadequacies, imperfections. Part of this is the reality of human nature—organizations are made up of people, and people are not perfect. I often make the point with the following advice I share with my management students:

If you ever find a perfect organization, don't join it—because you will ruin it if you do!

The principle is clear: If you have people in an organization, you are going to have problems! (Unless you have *no* people in your organization, in which case you have a REAL problem.)

Up Close and Personal

When I finally decided to pull the trigger on starting my own consulting company, I phoned a friend of mine, to share the news. I told him,

“I'm starting my own company! I'm tired of working for idiots!” He laughed, and said,

“I know what you mean, Jim—this time YOU are going to be the idiot!” I laughed, and told him,

“That's right! There's only gonna be room for ONE IDIOT in this company, AND IT'S GONNA BE ME!”

Idiots and the Problems They Create Are In Every Organization

I wager that every employee in America (given enough time and experience on the job) has felt—at some point—like there were idiots somewhere in the organization who were making bad decisions and not taking good care of the work or the people.

That often happens when employees see problems that are obstructing their performance and productivity and wonder why higher-ups aren't solving those problems! They start thinking, WHO'S IN CHARGE AROUND HERE??? WHY AREN'T THEY DOING SOMETHING??? The situation (and solution) seem obvious to clear-thinking employees. It's natural for them to question the competence, intelligence, or commitment of top brass, *including YOU!*

The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem. Theodore Rubin

If you don't address a problem that is frustrating your team, it only raises their anger and lowers their morale.

The Boss Doctor



That often leads to **frustration** and **anger**—which then compounds the problem and creates the accompanying challenge of leading and managing the team's negative attitude and low morale.

In a recent web article published by *The Harvard Business Review*, author Nihar Chaya offered this keen insight:

Anger and resentment across your team can make an already stressful leadership job feel worse. But how you respond to your employees' frustrations is critical to ensuring negative emotions don't limit your effectiveness.

So...What's a manager supposed to do?

REALLY Up Close and Personal

One of my consulting assignments gave me an insider's view of the largest business unit of a *Fortune 500* company. The Director of this business unit assembled his upper and mid-level management team for a three-day getaway at a renowned golf resort—to relax and have a little fun; take care of a bit of “housekeeping” business; and allow me to share some management wisdom and know-how, to help sharpen their leadership skills.

The session on “housekeeping” was an eye-opener for me.

Mark, the Director, had *specifically* set aside this time during the getaway to address the “elephant in the room,” which was an organizational problem that had become a point of frustration and anger with his leadership team.

It was a software issue. And it had become a maddeningly frustrating problem for his team.

Allow me to explain.

The top hierarchy of leadership in the company was populated primarily by executives with accounting and finance background. They were used to measuring productivity and performance through detailed financial metrics, primarily from the field of accounting. The software they used in this regard reflected this strongly finance-based approach.

It was driving Mark's team crazy.

They were required to use this software to provide detailed reports that higher-ups used to measure the performance and productivity of their work.

Here is the problem that company leaders were not addressing or solving:

Mark's team did CONSTRUCTION WORK—major contracts that included projects like large infrastructure (roads, causeways, and bridges), city parks and associated landscaping, city streets, and major thoroughfares. The software they were required to use was not designed to track the metrics of construction work—it was for application in the finance and accounting fields. So Mark's team was required to do a host of hand-calculating, in order to supply the numbers that were required by higher-ups. To add insult to injury, the hours that team members used to produce the calculations were considered “non-billable” and were thus marked against them in their own performance metrics!

Mark's masterful approach with his team was a perfect "case study" to show leaders how to handle this challenging situation and maintain team integrity and morale. Here's the good news:

You can learn from Mark's example and be an effective leader just like him! Here's how...

1. Start by adopting a positive attitude, mindset, and perspective.

When you are dealing with an obvious organizational "imperfection," it's easy to fall back into negative thinking, side with your team, and take the position: "Yeah, this organization sucks" or "higher-ups are morons." Here's the problem with this stance—you *are part of the organization and the leadership!* So...if the organization sucks, *you are one of the "suckees!"* And if higher-ups are morons, *you are one of the morons!*

REMEMBER: One of your most important responsibilities as a leader is to provide your people with a positive role model!

If your attitude goes south, your team's attitude and morale will follow in the same direction. You've got to display a positive mindset when you address the situation with your team. You've got to show...

Loyalty to the organization – *Of course this place isn't perfect—every company has room for improvement.*

Optimism – *Together, we can find ways to deal with this problem more effectively.*

Support – *I'm going to do everything I can to help this team succeed.*

*Problems are common, but attitude makes the difference!!! **Abdu Kalam***

It's also important for you to work through your own anger and frustration, so you can deal with your team's strong emotion in a constructive way, without knee-jerk defensiveness or dismissal of the problem *or their anger about it!* You have to be willing and able to listen to your team's complaints and frustrations without judgmentalism or rejection. Your team is looking for an empathetic response. They need to know (a) that *you understand what they are feeling* and (b) that you care enough *to do something.*

Nihar Chhaya gives this advice to embattled managers:

Depersonalize how you receive both the direct and indirect feedback that your team is angry. It's essential to perceive these inputs as data, not danger. In time you'll have a chance to share your view, but for now, don't get caught up in how your team's anger reflects on you.

Remember that whatever your team is feeling, whether you sympathize with it or not, provides valuable insight to have in your leadership role. When you resist the initial urge to add your judgment and excuses to this data, you will be able to respond with a much more effective strategy toward resolution.

Mark was a good listener—available to complaining team members who came to him individually to gripe about the software issue. A few one-on-one sessions were enough to convince him that the problem needed to be addressed before it completely eroded his team's morale.

That led to the next step...

2. Set aside a time and place when you and your whole team can address the issue thoroughly.

The worst thing you can do as a manager is to attempt to ignore the elephant in the room. That completely undermines your credibility as a leader. You will lose the trust of your team!

You must be willing to admit that the problem exists. You must embrace the reality of the issue and address it in a constructive way. But to make any real headway doing that, you need time—time to *learn, teach, and innovate*.

Your team needs the opportunity to share their experiences, insights, and frustrations...so you can *learn*—and gain a thorough view of the situation *from their perspective*.

You also need time to *teach*—to give your team a thorough view of the situation *from the perspective of higher-ups*.

What you deny or ignore, you WORSEN. What you accept and face, you CONQUER.
The Boss Doctor

That brings us to the next step...

3. Provide information about the issue – explain the “big picture” of the organizational context and why the problem is not being addressed.

Mark did a masterful job, describing the organizational pressures on executive leadership. He explained the changes in the industry, government, and business environments that were making it more difficult for the company to operate profitably and competitively. He also helped his team understand the priorities in organizational expenditures—for operations as well as for employee salaries and benefits. As a result, they had a much clearer grasp of the reasons why their request for expensive software revisions were low on the list of financial priorities.

That paved the way for the next step...

4. Tell your team what YOU are doing to address the issue.

Mark told his team, “EVERY QUARTER, my request for this software revision IS AT THE TOP OF MY LIST. And so far, EVERY QUARTER it’s been refused...for the reasons I’ve explained.” His team could tell that Mark’s energy and commitment to advocate for them was authentic. They trusted him when he told them, “I’m CONSTANTLY BANGING ON THE VP’S DOOR to make this happen for you. I’m not giving up!”

Now you *and your team* are ready for the next step...

5. Brainstorm potential approaches for dealing with the problem as a team.

Harness your team’s collective creativity to address the problem with a fresh approach. That might mean creating innovative “workarounds” or ways of mitigating the impact of the problem on work processes, outcomes, or even customers.

Nihar Chaya points out...

Once you have de-escalated emotions by inviting dialogue and learning about the source of their anger, you can initiate methods to channel their frustration toward more constructive outcomes. Research has shown that you become more proactive and increase motivation when you redirect your frustration ... toward a battle that benefits others. Helping your team regulate and pivot their emotions not only helps everyone feel better, but can spark more creativity around what changes to make and how to get started.

The key to handling problems and conflict within an organization is to keep the channels of communication wide open. Anita Roddick

Mark's team jumped right into the constructive discussion. One team member announced that he had created an *Excel* spreadsheet that he programmed with the formulas needed for their complicated metric calculations. It saved time by short-cutting the process and making it much easier and more efficient. Mark took a quick poll: "How many of you would like a copy of that?" The response was unanimous, so Mark responded with a simple request of the creative team member: "Would you be willing to send that out to the rest of the team?" (I remember the mood in that moment—the positive energy in the room was tangible!)

I have always taken a cue from Benjamin Zander in this regard. In his book, *The Art of Possibility*, he describes three possible reactions to insurmountable problems:

Resentment – *This sucks. I hate it.*

Resignation – *This is the way it is. I can't change it.*

Reimagining – POSSIBILITY! – *I can exercise creativity and open new doors of possibility!*

It's a leader's responsibility to take their team into the third realm of possibilities—of creative alternatives that can make things better.

BTW... I addressed this type of creative challenge in an earlier blogpost. It's worth reading:

[Great Advice from Top CEO's – #11 | The Boss Doctor](#)

Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them. Paul Hawken

And this final step—advice from Nihar Chaya...

6. Be open to changes you can make to your leadership, to work more effectively with your team and address similar issues in the future more constructively.

I watched while Mark encouraged his team to keep the channels of communication open—to overcome any reticence they might have to share difficult information with him. He told them,

"I am ALWAYS open to anything you want to share with me, especially if it's something that is preventing you from doing your best and most efficient work! You guys in the Eastern Region—don't send me an email! PICK UP THE PHONE AND GIVE ME A CALL SO WE CAN TALK! All of you in the Western Region where I have my office—PUT DOWN THE PHONE AND WALK DOWN THE HALL SO WE CAN TALK FACE-TO-FACE!"

The meeting ended on a much more positive note—with optimism; a sense of progress; an appreciation of Mark's leadership; AND ANTICIPATION OF A GREAT DAY OF GOLF AHEAD!

People who work together will win, whether it be against complex football defenses, or the problems of modern society. Vince Lombardi

In Conclusion...

In your role as a leader, you have the potential to turn aggravating problems into fresh opportunities—to educate and mobilize your team to become a highly motivated, highly creative force for innovation and cohesive teamwork.

One of the most valuable by-products is a higher level of *resilience*—for each person on your team *and for the entire team itself!*

Research has shown that collective team problem-solving is a catalyst for high morale; creative thinking; increased team and individual performance; and greater employee retention.



This is the rationale for providing training for your team—to help them develop the essential skills:

- Critical Thinking
- Creative Problem-Solving
- Effective Decision-Making
- Interpersonal Communication
- Conflict Resolution

If you would like to bring this kind of training to your organization or your team—give us a call!

This creative consulting and training organization has trained thousands of leaders—at every level and from every conceivable industry—both public and private sector. And we have also coached and equipped teams and team leaders for greater effectiveness in their work—helping them to become more cohesive, resilient, and creative. *We can help you, too!*

Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems. Gever Tulley



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