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Forget About Solving Problems

by Keith F. Luscher
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One expression I hear that often makes me cringe is “problem solving.” It expresses a paradigm that has dominated many peoples’ thinking and planning. Ask yourself: “What is problem solving?” It’s about making something go away. If this is all you care about, then another problem will simply take its place.

Case in point: years ago, a beginning New York City high school teacher named Steve Mariotti faced his first day on the job at Boys & Girls School. This inner-city high school had become known as the worst in the entire district:

- * Seventy-two teachers preferred unemployment over going to work.
- * The dropout rate was 50 percent.
- * The NYC Board of Regents placed the entire school on probation.

Mariotti was a math teacher. On his first day of school, his class had 59 students enrolled with 42 seats and 39 books. The students had NO discipline, respect, not to mention adequate supplies. Diagnostic test scores were dismal at best.

His mission: teach them math, and meet minimal testing requirements for passing.

A hopeless situation, isn’t it? Imagine yourself in Mariotti’s shoes. All those kids in their unstructured lives! Then imagine yourself talking to Mariotti at the end of that first day (For fun, let’s place you in a bar—it’s where I would be!) He describes to you his situation and the day he has had—spending most of his time just trying to keep the kids’ attention, and the classroom in order (forget the math!). Remember: he was tasked to solve a problem: the kids failed the math diagnostic exams—just get them to pass.

After hearing about this “hopeless” situation, you might ask him, “So, Steve, what are you going to do about it?”

Steve’s response: “The issue here is more than getting them to learn math. They must develop skills and experiences that will profoundly change the direction of their lives, increasing performance in ALL subjects—not just math. They will WANT to go to school and will WANT to learn. They will acquire personal life skills, such as integrity, relationship building and communication. Most importantly, they will believe in themselves and will believe that they can accomplish anything to which they set their minds.”

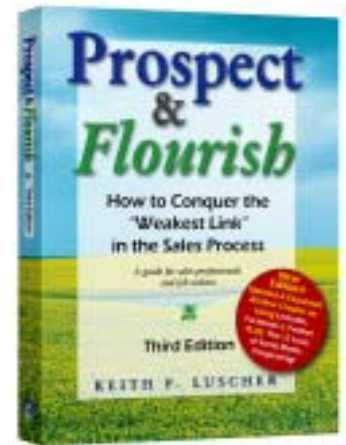
As you continue to listen, you signal to the bartender to cut your young friend off.

“Oh, by the way,” Mariotti adds, “They will do it within one school year.”

At that point, you take the bottle of whatever he is drinking away from him.

Your skeptical reaction—normal for any “problem-solver”—is this: “Are you crazy? You can’t even get them to listen to you! Give it up! Those kids are gone, and cannot be saved! Transfer to a better neighborhood school, or work with younger children. They are the ones you can save! Those high school students are hopeless.”

If such a scenario had ever taken place following that first day of school, I was not privy to it. The fact is, if Mariotti did hear such negative advice, he ignored it. The reality is that Steve Mariotti changed those children’s lives and accomplished ALL of his “pipedream” objectives—within one school year—and I will tell you how next week.



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