

25 Problems

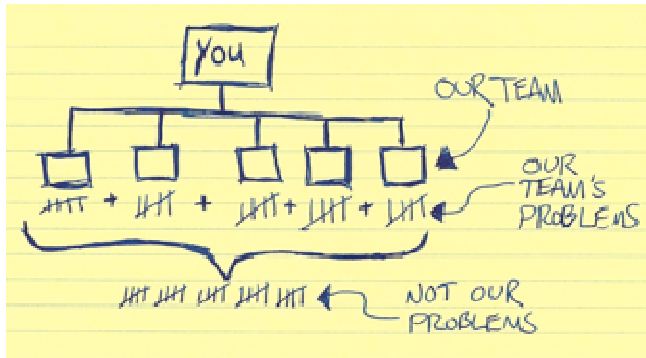
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Managers get tons of training on how to solve problems. They get no training on their role in problem solving. Their role isn't just about solving problems. But here is the neat trick. It is solving problems that probably got them the promotion into management in the first place.

This happens continually in the management chain. What leads to success in one role is often different in another role. We cannot take a super worker and [make them a supervisor](#), without changing their role and their skills. So what happens to managers when they get promoted? How do they start to engage in the problems of the organization? Many experience what I call **The 25 Problems Problem**.

If you have five direct reports and each of them has five problems they are working on, how many problems do you have? If you didn't think I was setting you up, most would answer 25 problems. But that's the wrong answer. Your team has 25 problems. But those are NOT your problems. Those are your team's problems. If you see them as your problems, you will do all the wrong things.



Here's what it probably looks like. The team has 25 problems. You cannot solve all of them, so you decide which of the 25 are the biggest. Then you focus your

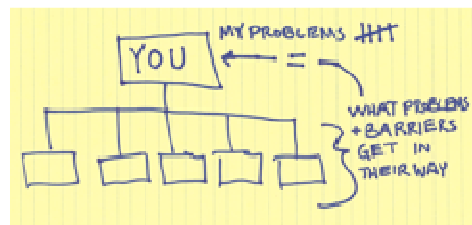
attention on those, along with the people that are already dealing with them. And that feels good, because they are getting extra attention.

But let's take that to the extreme. Imagine the CEO leads an organization with 1,000 people who each has five problems. Does she have 5,000 problems and just has to decide which 10 to deal with? I say 10 because obviously a CEO can handle more problems than the average person, or so we like to think (note intended sarcasm in case you didn't pick up on it). If she only looks at those 5,000 problems and picks which ones to work on, many of the right things won't happen in the organization.

Here is why this happens. It's simple. It's our comfort zone. What is the biggest thing on your mind as a new manager? Making a good impression, both with your team and with your boss. And how do you do that? Do something at which you are good. You will do it with ease, people will be impressed, but the organization will fail because those are not your problems.

Your problems are not the sum total of the problems of your direct reports. You do not have 25 problems. You have your own problems.

So what are your problems? Your problems are the barriers that prevent progress, breakdowns in your



systems, and opportunities that enable success across the work of your direct reports. So let's define your role at a different level.

A. Systems

Your team works within a system. It is made up of activities, connections, and flows. Your job is to make sure that work is effective. You are ultimately responsible for working with your team to design, manage, and improve the work to get the right results. If you spend all of your time playing “whack-a-mole” when reacting to the system's problems, you will never step back and look at how the system is giving you those problems. [For those who have never been to a carnival, whack-a-mole is a game where little moles pop their heads out of hole at random locations and your job is to hit them on the head before they retract. I'm sure many of you have felt like this would describe your day.]



You of course should be aware of your team's problems. These provide some of the information or data about what is going on at the system's level. They become indicators. They are evidence. They are symptoms of the system.

When it comes to problem solving and your systems, ask yourself the following questions.

1. How do people know that they have a problem? How do they know their work is being done effectively?
2. What do people do when they have a problem?
3. What help do people need, and how do they connect to that help?

This will help you design the right systems to support people with their 25 problems, without making the 25 problems your problems.

B. Skills

The skill and ability to solve problems might be described as part of the system. It is a particular part of the system that, as a manager, you are responsible for developing and improving.

The 25 problems should give you ample opportunities to observe, coach, and develop people in their capabilities to manage and solve problems. Part of your role is to observe people. You cannot observe people if you rush to solve the problem for them. Not only are you not in the right mindset and focus to observe, but you've taken them out of the equation. Observation requires restraint and patience to truly understand the current conditions.

You also must be an effective coach. Put your hand up if you consider yourself a coach. Most of you just did, at least mentally. But let me distinguish coaching people towards the solution versus coaching people on the method.

If someone comes to you with a problem, when do you start thinking about the solution? For many of you, if you're honest, it is before the other person finishes their sentence. This is natural. But whatever conversation ensues, you are likely to coach that person towards what is (or what you think is) the right answer. This is very different than coaching someone on the method. When you coach someone on the method, your focus is on neither the problem nor the answer. It is on

the thinking of the individual: [What questions do they ask?](#) What evidence do they gather? Who do they include? How do they develop options? How do they test? If you want to build skill, then you must take the time to coach people on the method. It takes longer, but it provides a better return on your invested coaching.

Ask yourself:

1. What are the skills my team has to solve problems? What strengths and weaknesses do they exhibit?
2. What kind of coach am I? What kind of coach do I want to be and how do I get there?
3. What are my coachable moments? How do I determine when I should be coaching?

Improve yourself to improve your team.

C. Culture

Culture can quickly be described as the collective and shared thinking and behaviors of the organization, or the team. And it has a huge impact on the problem solving within the organization.

Consider what happens when there is a need to surface a problem. If a member of a team surfaces a problem, and you groan and drop your head, or assign a weekend's worth of work, or [criticize that the problem exists](#), what behavior do you think that would drive? An unwillingness to raise problems in the future. Your behavior impacts the behaviors of others.

If people don't look at problems as opportunities to build a better system, then they will just take the shortest path to remove the symptom. If people don't look a problem solving as a learning opportunity, then they won't seek collaboration or experimentation in the process. Regardless of how effective your systems and skills are, the wrong behaviors can deter all progress.

In your role of developing the right culture for problem solving, ask yourself these questions:

1. What behaviors do I want to see from my team?
2. How do I articulate these behavioral expectations?
3. What behaviors must I exhibit to enable that culture?
4. What behaviors must I eliminate to enable culture?

Your role as a manager in problem solving is not the same role as an individual contributor. You must examine the role you play, and the role you should play. Your team's 25 problems are not your problems. Focus on the right role, and those 25 problems will go away, and a whole lot more.

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