

Solving the Wrong Problem

Reflections from a Coaching Perspective

by Karen Staib Duffy

I was seated next to a woman at a conference. I'll call her Judy. We got to talking. Judy had just been out to visit her daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren. They live in Colorado. Judy lives in Chicago. Her trip had left her frustrated and disappointed. During her visit, every member of the family was busy with other activities, commitments and friends. They were not available to visit much with her, and as the week progressed, she felt more and more isolated and ignored. Feelings hurt, she returned home, dissatisfied with her visit and vowing not to do it again.

Judy decided something had to change and concluded that a change in venue would accomplish her goal. She would insist that, in the future, if they wanted to see her, they would have to come to Chicago. That way, they would be away from all the competing activities, commitments, and friends, and could give her the attention she wanted.

She shifted in her chair, still a little uncomfortable with this demand. It was not a wholly satisfactory solution. After all, it was much harder to get four people organized for a trip than one, and much more expensive. It made seeing her more problematic and therefore, less likely.

She also did not have enough space for them in her two-bedroom condo. They would either be cramped and on top of each other for the week, or perhaps the family would elect to stay at a nearby hotel. This, however, would make the trip even more expensive and the warm, cozy companionship she craved would slip away. Her daughter had grown up in Chicago and still had many friends she might want to visit as well.

Judy sighed, unsatisfied with her solution, yet unwilling to continue her visits as before.

Shifting the Focus

Albert Einstein has said: *"You cannot solve a problem at the same level of consciousness in which it occurs."* What does this mean for Judy and for us? How do we apply it?

For Judy, as we talked further, the focus of our conversation shifted. I asked her: "What is the real problem here? What do you really want?"

By shifting her focus and reexamining her perspective, she was able to move into a new level of consciousness and find a better solution.

"I just want to be with them, but they are so busy there's no time for *me!*" she blurted out. "I want their attention. I want to do things with them: go to lunch with my daughter and find out how she really is; take her and my son-in-law to a really nice dinner at a favorite restaurant; and take the kids to the zoo and the movies. I want to spend time with them."

Although Judy's preliminary focus was on whether they wanted to see her, as reflected in the idea "no time for *me,*" further reflection led to the realization that the key really was "no *time* for me."

Time was the problem, not their desire to be with her or the location of the visit. With this shift in consciousness, Judy was able to focus on solving the problem of time. She decided to call before her visit and get on their calendars for the desired events. The family would then have time for her scheduled into their busy routine and all the other logistical difficulties became unnecessary. Their calendars became her ally, instead of the obstacle. She was now solving the right problem!

We all do it. Solve the wrong problem. In Judy's example, by shifting her focus and reexamining her perspective, she was able to move into a new level of consciousness and find a better solution. Her problem and solution were on the strategic or tactical level. We can also apply this approach in an even deeper way.

An Edge of Discontent

In the pressured lives we lead, we zoom along from event to event, hurrying, hurrying, ever faster. There is sometimes a quiet edge of discontent within us. We ignore it. It grows. We push it away. It grows again. It gets bigger and harder to ignore. Still we rush. Onward, onward, ever faster. Then, one day, we can stand it no longer and we suddenly make a change. We change jobs, or move to a new neighborhood, or find a new life partner. But do we change our relationship to the world around us? Do we reconsider our perspective on life? No.

We continue our rushing, as before. The nagging edge of discontent returns. We make another change — in job, neighborhood, or partner — and rush onward. Once more, the quiet edge of discontent creeps in — a feeling

that there is so much more to life than we are experiencing. We wonder what's the point of it all. We look for meaning in our activities and sense a disconnection, a flatness in our deepest being.

At our core, we human beings are meaning makers. We make sense of the world around us. The thoughts we hold and our worldviews shape our experiences. They can determine whether we find satisfaction, peace, and joy in our daily lives. Yet, we often make changes and change nothing. At a deeper level, our relationships with people and events remain the same. Our old perspective and approach to life simply continue in a new place or with a new person. In our search for meaning and joy, we have solved the wrong problem.

When we act without reflection, we never get to the heart of what is bothering us. Suddenly changing jobs or relationships, we are looking on the outside for something that is missing on the inside. We look for a logical, rational approach to what we do, as the source of meaning in our lives. Yet, as Julio Olalla, founder of Newfield Network, has said: **“Meaning is an emotional connection with the world.”** Not a rational, logical one.

What does it mean to have meaning in our lives? Meaning fills us with a wonderful satisfaction in life as it is. It springs from a deep connection with the world and the human beings around us. It flows from our emotions. It responds to the hunger of our souls. It is bigger than our rational, logical self. It includes all aspects of ourselves — deeper than our jobs, our neighborhood, or even our partner. It comes from the core of our very being.

Leap of Consciousness

How do we create or shift this emotional connection with the world? Olalla suggests an epistemological shift, testing the validity and limits of our knowledge, a genuine leap of consciousness. “We must begin to open ourselves up to other forces besides the purely material, to other ways of knowing than the purely rational. We must learn to develop other forms of intelligence, including the emotional, intuitive, the esthetic, and the spiritual.”

It all starts with observation, with you observing you. Pay attention to the ebb and flow of your emotions, as you go through the day. When are you filled with enthusiasm? When are you drained of energy? When do you want to flee? When is your heart singing with joy?

Next, tune into the conversations surrounding you. Pay special attention to the stories you tell yourself. We live in our stories. These narratives create and guide our emotions. Our focus and meaning in life are pulled from these stories. Suspend the assumption of “correctness” in your worldview and deliberately seek another way to under-

stand the situation. Observe your thoughts. Question your assumptions. Look for the emotions behind the actions. How do you feel? How do you want to feel? What is really important? What's missing?

Change your story, slightly or dramatically. Observe again how you feel. Become aware of when you feel connected and when you are not. Take an action. Do something different to create a new emotional connection for yourself with the people and the world around you. Observe again.

In this way, you begin an iterative process of deliberate experimentation that will shift your consciousness. Over time, you will deepen your emotional connection with the world and create more satisfying and joyful meaning in your life. Observe and notice your emotions. Observe and change your story. Observe and change an action. Observe, reflect, and change.

Any time is a great time for review and renewal, for letting go of the old and starting over with a new perspective. Start by living fully, from this moment on. Question your assumptions and create a vacuum to let in something new. Observe the flow of your emotions. Take a new action. Through these little steps, you can uncover a deeper meaning and a new emotional connection with yourself, your passions, the world around you, and even everyday living.

Solve the right problem! ■

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