

I'm a Problem Solver and THAT Is The Problem

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I'M A PROBLEM SOLVER AND THAT IS THE PROBLEM

Abstract

An overabundance of a strength becomes a weakness. When leaders identify themselves as an expert problem solver, they look for problems everywhere and uncovering a good crisis becomes even more enticing. There is a seductive Me-centric vortex created by being the expert problem solver. However, this attitude becomes career limiting. In this paper understand how this seductive vortex manifests between individuals, within a team, and among organizations. Learn how to spot the symptoms, how chaos spreads, and how to overcome this dilemma. As a leader our ability to inspire, motivate, and influence others to produce collaborative results requires a balance between technical and interpersonal skills. Building and sustaining trust-based relationships and resolving the heart of conflict is the pivotal source of our influence.

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Introduction

As project managers (PMs) and leaders, we solve problems. Solving problems is what we do, solving problems is what we are good at, and we use these skills to set project direction, inspire, motivate, and influence others to produce collaborative results (Bristol & Yeatts, 2010, p. 1). We plan and build schedules, so the project team has a clear understanding of work expectations. When deviations occur, we fix what needs correcting. Experience has taught us that cumulative uncorrected deviations can lead to re-work, tumble into confusion, mushroom into turmoil, and escalate into conflict. As a problem solver, we use our business acumen, technical skills, project management knowledge, and interpersonal competencies to manage events before the whirlwinds of chaos divert resources from timely and accurate project completion. The pressures of missed delivery dates, poor quality, and cost overruns increase the wind velocity. As pressure mounts, individual team member differences emerge. These individual differences left unmanaged reduce team collaboration and distract members from producing results. This escalation turns into the Problem Solvers Vortex™ and spawns the mistreatment of others. As leaders, to resolve the heart of a conflict, we need the ability to detect wind shifts and influence others into appropriate action. Unknowingly, we can make matters worse even with the best of intentions as our problem-solver ability becomes more Me-centric and diminishes coworker abilities and self-confidence. As a leader, avoiding the Problem Solvers Vortex™ by helping things go right is highly contingent on our interpersonal skills to build trust-based relationships.

As project leaders, our authenticity helps to create a climate of mutual trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Our capacity to solve problems requires balanced competencies and ties directly to our ability to build and sustain trust-based relationships. Succinctly stated by Lencioni (2002), "Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without trust, team work is all but impossible" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 195). Lencioni (2002) ascertains the lack of trust creates the common team dysfunctions, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, accountability avoidance, and inattention to results (Bristol & Yeatts, 2010, p. 1). Separately, each dysfunction diminishes a team's ability to deliver the right results and collectively creates complex leadership challenges. Being an expert problem solver may be our Achilles heel and become a career limiting behavior (CLB). Kaplan & Kaiser, in *Stop Overdoing Your Strengths*, "...found that taking a strength to an extreme is always detrimental to performance, but even a mild tendency to overdo it can be harmful," (2009, para. 6).

Vortex Detection – Awakening our senses

To transform turmoil into collaborative results requires self-reflection and an objective look at our mindset. To enhance our interpersonal skills, we need to direct our attention to the turmoil indicators, better understand challenging behavior patterns, and recognize basic behavioral intent. With enhanced detection capacity, leaders are better equipped to self-manage and manage relationships.

Mindset – What are we thinking?

Johari Window

The Johari window (Exhibit 1), created in 1955 by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (Jo-Hari), provides a framework for an objective reflection about our awareness of self-and others. Ideally, as transparent and authentic leaders, others will know the majority of our behaviors (Handy, 2000). According to Lencioni, "The most important action a leader must take to encourage team trust is to demonstrate vulnerability" (Lencioni, 2007, Loc 1932). A leader achieves vulnerability by disclosing to the team or a colleague something relevant that was previously unknown. Equally important is the systematic self-discovery process to reduce personal blind spots. As a leader, others observe our blind spot behaviors, which inadvertently invite colleagues to respond in ways we see as problematic. As I self-identify as an expert problem solver, we are vulnerable to seeing others as a problem. This perspective begins to stir the vortex related wind. Consequently, enhancing our interpersonal skills requires leading a self-examined life to minimize the unknown, reduce the facade, and shrink blind spots. The Johari window is foundational for personal discovery.

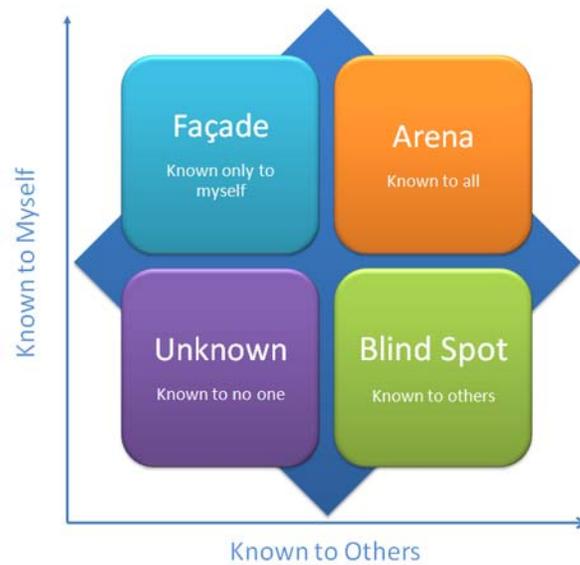


Exhibit 1 – Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955)

Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goldman’s 1996 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, provides another framework (Exhibit 2) for building and sustaining trust-based relationships. Emotional quotient (EQ) improves when we develop personal and social competence skills. Mersino (2007) states compelling reasons for PMs and leaders to enhance their emotional quotient (EQ) in order to avoid poor decision making, reduced collaboration, and low awareness of others. Significantly, Dr. Friedman (Frieland & Frieland, 2013) describes how the amygdala (Exhibit 3) hijacks our capacity for creative and logical solutions while flooding our body with cortisol and adrenaline. This survival instinct while useful in some situations significantly reduces our effectiveness in a professional setting. As a leader, recognizing and identifying our emotions, and an awareness of the emotions of others is an essential interpersonal competence.

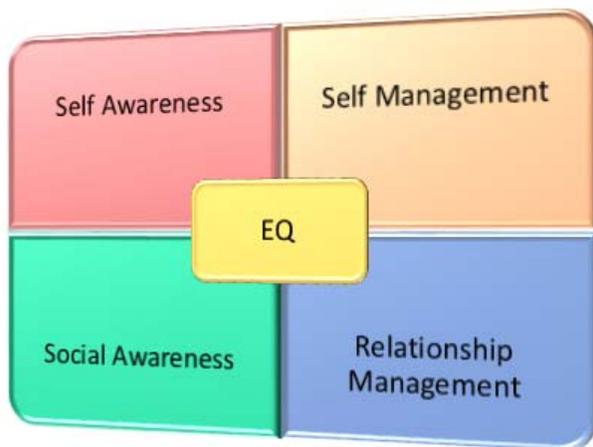


Exhibit 2 – Emotional Quotient (EQ) (Goleman, 1996)

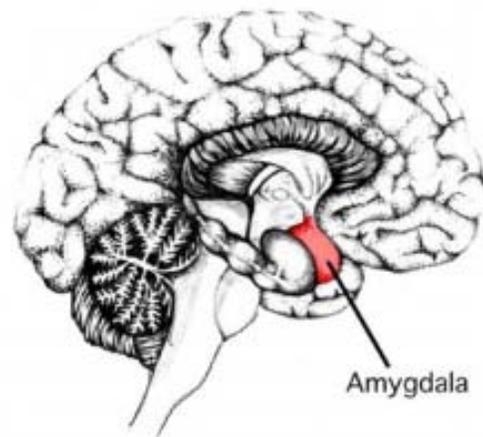


Exhibit 3 – Amygdala

Wheel of Emotions

Robert Plutchik, PhD., emotions wheel (Exhibit 4) and emotions table provide leaders with a graphic reference to become familiar with the basic emotions, blended composition, opposites, intense forms, and mild forms (Plutchik, 2002). Plutchik’s distinctions and graphic representation help builds an emotion differentiation ability. Discerning various types of emotions and associated behaviors

allows a leader to calibrate to significant relationships. As a leader, the ability to correlate emotions and behaviors establishes the foundation for communication flexibility.

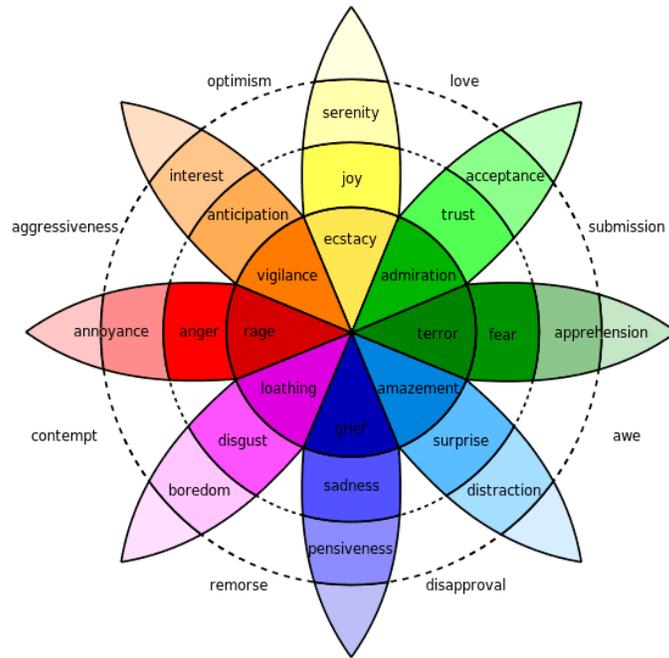


Exhibit 4 –Wheel of Emotions (Plutchik, 2002)

Emotion	Level	Opposite	Intense Form	Mild Form
Anger	Basic	Fear	Rage	Annoyance
Anticipation	Basic	Surprise	Vigilance	Interest
Disgust	Basic	Trust	Loathing	Boredom
Fear	Basic	Anger	Terror	Apprehension
Joy	Basic	Sadness	Ecstasy	Serenity
Sadness	Basic	Joy	Grief	Pensiveness
Surprise	Basic	Anticipation	Amazement	Distraction
Trust	Basic	Disgust	Admiration	Acceptance

Exhibit 5 - Table of Emotions (Plutchik, 2002)

Communication styles and motivators

Leader’s best use communication styles and motivators as a filter to understand behavior and create exquisitely designed communication strategies for each person. A word of caution... this knowledge becomes a problem-solver's weapon when used to label behavior or pass judgment. Knowing our personal communication and motivator bias helps us as leaders better self-manage. With increased awareness of the behaviors and emotions of others, we can now build an inventory of effective communication strategies. Alessandra & O’Connor, (1996) and Bonnstetter & Suiter, (2013) identify four-communication styles (Exhibit 6) and associated behavior (Exhibit 7):

1. **D** – when problem-solving – aggressive or reflective
2. **I** - when influencing others to actions – passion or logic
3. **S** - how the environment pace effects communication – slower to change or quick to change
4. **C** - how processes and rules effect communication – comply by the rules or pioneer new ways

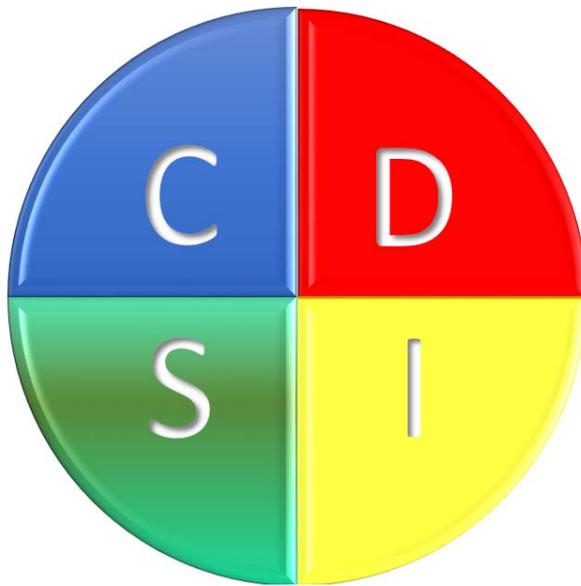


Exhibit 6 – DISC Behaviors Wheel



Exhibit 7 – Communication Style Behaviors (Bonnstetter & Suiter, 2013)

Bonnstetter and Suiter’s (2013) research validates that people have unique behavioral styles and under stress these style differences can create conflict (Exhibit 8). We significantly enhance our interpersonal leadership skills when we know our behavioral style strengths and weaknesses and can identify the behavioral styles of our colleagues. With this awareness, we can *Speak the Language of Leadership* (Bristol & Yeatts, 2010) demonstrating the ability to adapt to others and speak with them as they experience the world. This style flexibility allows us as leaders to sustain rapport. By refining this fundamental communication skill, we can respond appropriately to stressed or non-stressed communications patterns. Additionally, we deepen our understanding of the human condition by applying Brinkman, & Kirschner’s (2012) framework for understanding difficult behaviors. In essence, everyone’s behavior is a mixture of people or task focus and reflective or aggressive assertiveness. Paying attention to the associated emotional and behavioral signals, enhances our EQ social awareness and our relationship effectiveness as we discover effective communication strategies. Developing this communication competence, we are better equipped to help teammates, colleagues, and clients operate at their personal best.

	D	I	S	C
Under More Stress ↓	Self Perception			
	Pioneering Assertive Competitive Confident Winner	Enthusiastic Outgoing Charming Persuasive Optimistic	Considerate Good-Natured Dependable Team player Good listener	Precise Thorough Diplomatic Knowledgeable Analytical
	Other's Perception			
	Demanding Nervy Egotistical Aggressive	Self-Promoting Glib Overly Optimistic Unrealistic	Non-demonstrative Hesitant Unconcerned Inflexible	Pessimistic Picky Worrisome Fussy
	Abrasive Controlling Arbitrary Opinionated	Overly Confident Talkative Poor Listener Self-Promoter	Possessive Stubborn Detached Insensitive	Perfectionist Hard-to-Please Strict Defensive

Exhibit 8– Communication Styles Under Stress (Bonnstetter & Suiter, 2013)

Bonnstetter and Bowers state, "Knowledge of an individual's motivators, help to tell WHY they do things" (Bonnstetter, 1990-2013, p. 25). Discovering a colleague's motivators helps us as leaders align natural enthusiasm with work assignments (Exhibit – 9).

Motivators		
Theoretical:	I will use my cognitive ability to understand, discover and systematize the truth.	Knowledge
Utilitarian:	My goal is to achieve a return on every investment I make in time, energy or money.	R.O.I.
Aesthetic:	I will enjoy and appreciate the form, harmony and beauty around me and allow it to mold me into all I can be.	Harmony & Balance
Social:	I will invest all resources into helping others to realize their potential in life.	Others
Individualistic:	I will achieve the highest position and wield the greatest power.	My destiny
Traditional:	From the many individual meanings of life, I will seek, select and follow a system for living.	Beliefs or System

Exhibit 9 – Motivators (Bonstetter and Bowers, 2013)

Vortex Exploration – How chaos spreads

The seeds of conflict are dormant around every aspect of life, both professional and personal. When we are inattentive, under pressure, experiencing tension, stress, or fatigue we are vulnerable and may slip into less productive behavior. Diminished awareness increases as a leader creates box-like barriers with and an increasing Me-centric orientation. We then begin to treat others with impatience as we see them as an obstacle, hampering the achievement to timely delivery or a quality result. Suffer an amygdala high jacking and our ability to self-manage becomes impaired. This instantaneous blind spot shift is unknown to us, yet experienced by others, opening the way for blame, critical judgments, or passive aggressive behavior. To avoid the swirling seduction of the Problem Solver Vortex™ we need to understand the mechanics of how chaos spreads. As leaders, this knowledge helps us make choices, so we are more equipped to help others and help things go right.

Indications – What to look for

Indicators (Exhibit 10) that chaos is forming are most frequently ignored. Paying attention to these cues and associating the indicators to emotions and behaviors provides us an opportunity to build viable strategies to invite improvement. Brinkman, & Kirschner's (2012) intent framework (Exhibit 11) provides a simple filter for understanding difficult behaviors. Task-Oriented people want to get the work done or get the work done right while a people-orientation is about getting along with or getting appreciation from other people. A high task-oriented person may want actions taken quickly, over-look details, and be tightly goal focused. When producing a quality result, getting it done right, is the highest precedence, there may be a tendency to slow down and dig into the details. As getting along with people becomes the driving orientation, there is a tendency to seek harmony by being less assertive and introducing change at a slower pace. Soliciting appreciation from other people requires an intense people-orientation, manifested by enthusiasm, rapid speech, and omnidirectional thinking behaviors.

<p>Indicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaming others and making excuses • Diminishing the contributions of others • Spreading innuendo and rumor • Exaggerating the importance their contribution • Demand respect because of positional power or service longevity • Being impatient or frequently short tempered • Talking down to others • Acting entitled to special treatment or privileges • Justify their poor treatment of others • Being overly critical of others • Complaining about the lack of opportunity

Exhibit 10 – Problem Solver Vortex Indicators

Difficult Types	Behavior Description	Strategy
Tanks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confrontational • Pointed and angry • Aggressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold your ground • Pattern interrupt • Aim for the bottom line
Snipers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biting sarcasm • Rude comments • Eye rolls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intent ○ Relevancy • Hold your ground • Clarify your expectations
Know-It-Alls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not like contradiction • Quick to blame others • Closed minded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your facts • Short bursts of facts • Indirect presentation • Align expertise to solution
Think-They-Know-It-All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen as an expert • Exaggerates • Over states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge positive intent • Clarify for specifics • Link to reality • Have compassion
Grenade Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explodes with anger • Rants and raves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower and slower – voice • Use hand gestures • Find root cause • Stay objective
Yes Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forget commitments • Over commit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with planning • Encourage realistic discussions • Remember the helpful intent
Maybe Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision procrastination • Wants more facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce risk concerns • Develop a decision strategy • Better the enemy of good
Nothing Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal engagement • Slow pace • May seem aloof 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be patient... slow your pace • Use humor – keep it light • Ask about future challenges
No Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fault finder • Problem finder • Sees what is missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go with the flow... yes – and... • Early warning system • Make a polarity statement • Remember the helpful intent
Whiners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees what is missing • Never good enough • Perfectionist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift “not wants” to “wants” • Get a solution focus

Exhibit 11 – Type of Difficult People (Brinkman, & Kirschner, 2012)

The Seeds of Chaos

"There are three principles in a man's being and life, the principle of thought, the principle of speech, and the principle of action. The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and I don't do what I say."

Martin Buber

Behavior and emotions provide indicators of the vortex in motion. Helping things go right requires a more refined awareness. Martin Buber's philosophic work, *I and Thou* (1923), provides a helpful distinction between an individual's way of consciousness, interaction, and being when engaging with others. Buber's basic modes are word-pairs termed: "I-Thou" and "I-It." When "I-Thou" reflects our way of being, others in our life count the same as we count. With a We-centric orientation, I am aware of others dreams, hopes, fears, and concerns as much as my own. With an "I-It" or Me-centric orientation, I experience others less as a human and more as an object. Furthermore, as an object a person can become an obstacle – blocking my progress, vehicle – a tool to provide an advantage, or an irrelevancy – just invisible to my awareness. Intensifying the seeds of chaos, a prolonged "I-It" interaction, I can adopt a "Better Than..., Must Be Seen As..., or I Deserve..." attitude creates more heightened interpersonal barriers or boxes. The accumulating interpersonal boxes spawn a need to justify my poor behaviors, thus aggravating the situation. This justification only sustains our invitation for mistreatment.

Chaos Between Individuals

Like all storms, the Problem Solver Vortex™ winds begin softly and may go unnoticed. The velocity increases when I have a sense to help a colleague struggling to complete constructing a schedule; yet resist this sense to help. Instantaneously, I begin to justify my behavior by telling myself "he's never helped me... why should I help him?" As I begin to see my colleague as lazy, I do not help and avoid contact, maybe even speak to others about his inability to construct a schedule. Because of my actions, my colleague is invited to see me as a selfish person and hard to work with. As the vortex wind speed increases, by being "wronged" by me, my colleague returns my mistreatment, pulling us deeper into the vortex and additional mistreatments. Inflamed by this poor treatment, I speak with other co-workers about the injustice inflicted upon me, while concurrently my colleague begins to recruit allies in his war against me. When I resisted my initial sense to help, the price for my choice is a "blindness to how delicious I find suffering and the cloak of innocence I wear in that suffering. Refusing to forgive, my wrong then is double. I condemn myself to ongoing misery and woe (The Arbinger Institute, 1998, p. 60)."

Chaos Between Organizations

As an individual gathers allies, this collusion (The Arbinger Institute, 2008, p. 51) can easily spread to a departmental level conflict. For example, a Semiconductor manufacturing company PM may need to transform turmoil when sales personnel consistently annoy engineers by disregarding standard machine configurations. Engineering begins to see Sales as people with no integrity – promising anything to secure a contract. The Engineers, begin to analyze the deal, only to find components specified that severely compromises machine quality and performance. The analysis yields a series of detailed questions for Sales. Concurrently, the customer is clamoring for the machine arrival date. Now under pressure, Sales threatens to escalate the slow design approval to the executive level because the Engineers **always** slow down the process. With threats delivered, Engineering views Sales as crybaby prima donnas who do not follow the rules and bully others to get what they want. The Engineers respond by searching the historical files of evidence proving the bad record of accomplishment of Sales. When Manufacturing Operations staff discovers that design modifications create delivery date obstacles, Sales recruits new allies against Engineering. At this point, the vortex is in full spin, only to start another cycle of collusion (Exhibit 12) with the placement of another order. A leader interrupts the collusion cycle by engaging team members in the transformation process.

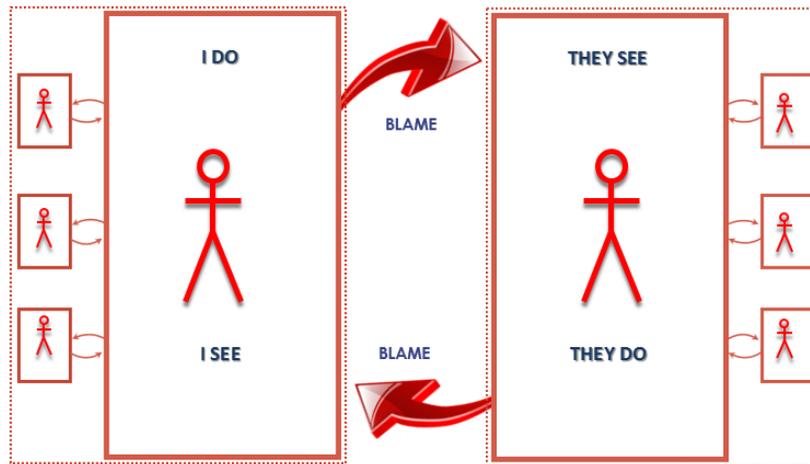


Exhibit 12 - Collusion Diagram (Arbinger 2008)

Vortex Transformation – Restoring order

Transformation Process – Getting out of the Vortex

The Problem Solver Vortex™ is only a metaphor about our relationships with other people, in order to help things go right, and we need to self-manage and use our interpersonal skills. *The Anatomy of Peace* (Exhibit 13) depicts the four-step process (The Arbinger Institute, 2008, p. 176) to escape a tightening vortex spiral. The essential first step recognizes the vortex indicators, ideally just as the winds increase. Second, re-connect to your resourcefulness. Step-in-to your EQ, activate creativity and reason, while gaining inner clarity and peace. Third, as our experience becomes more objective, now is the time to invoke curiosity, allowing us to ponder deeply the situation from a new perspective.



Exhibit 13 – Getting Out Process – Arbinger 2008

Ponder Deeply

As a leader, our role obligates us to reflect and consider the challenges, pains and burdens each person may be dealing with, both past and present. As I review their motivators and communication style, contemplate if I have inadvertently added to their turmoil. Then, I need to reflect deeply on how I may have added to those burdens and challenges. I deepen this inquiry by asking myself three questions:

1. How am I a problem for others?
2. What can I do to help others?
3. What do I need to do to make things go right?

When we genuinely contemplate any conflict situation afresh and engage our natural curiosity, we access the creative and logic centers of our brain in addition to our native motivator and communication capabilities. Accelerating solution discovery is the shift from a Me-centric to a We-centric way-of-being.

Final Thoughts

As leaders, business acumen and technical skills provide an expected footing for results. Refined and enhanced interpersonal skills dramatically increase our ability to inspire, motivate, and influence others to achieve collaborative results. The foundational Johari, EQ, DISC, Motivators models help us understand how people see and make sense of the world. These frameworks help us better understand our personal beliefs and behaviors. These models are not tools to be used for stereo-typing or labeling others. These interpersonal tools help us understand how or why people behave and allow us to adapt our behaviors. We are not our behaviors. If our current approach is not achieving the desired outcome, we can change and adopt another approach. Ultimately, knowing how others process experience and knowing our interpersonal strengths and weaknesses allow us to build a collaborative team culture. As leaders, executives entrust teammates to our care and resources for our productive use. We have an obligation to deliver business results, help others, and help things go right. A leader's ability to transform conflict requires a deeper understanding of the human condition and a We-centric orientation. This deep understanding is rooted in a way-of-being that honors the humanity of everyone and inspires each of us to rise to our full potential.

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