The Problem with Problem Analysis

© 2004, Coert Visser

In a previous article I claimed that everybody is frequently confronted with problems. Paying attention to problems is not only inevitable it can also be useful. You can deal with problems in a variety of ways but these ways are not all equally effective. How precisely you pay attention to problems matters a great deal. This article compares problem analysis, problem denial and problem acknowledgement and recommends for the latter.

Problem analysis is sometimes useful…..

Problem analysis can be defined as dissecting and thoroughly studying the problem with the objective to understand how the problem emerged and how it grew to its current proportions. Analyzing problems is useful when dealing with many medical and technical problems. The assumption behind problem analysis is that there is a clear cause and a clear solution. And indeed it can be useful in many situations to find out what caused a problem and how the problem developed. Because if you would succeed in finding this out you could take away the cause and eliminate it or take it away and thereby solve the problem. A simple technical example illustrates the use of problem analysis.

For instance, if your bicycle gets a flat tire, it is surely helpful to check if there is a piece of glass on the inside of your tire. Repairing the tire without removing the glass is probably unwise because the same piece of glass could keep on causing the tire to go flat until it is removed. Here is also an example from medical practice, illustrating the use of problem analysis. A football player has a painful knee, which has been making it impossible for him to play for some time. It seems wise to analyze the problem by checking for instance if the kneecap or the meniscus is fractured or if cruciate ligaments are damaged. If these issues are neglected while there is actual damage this will most likely keep on causing pain and probably create further damage. These two examples illustrate that problem analysis may be very useful. The approach relying on problem analysis is often called the medical model and can be described as:

1. Problem analysis: detailedly analyzing the problem symptoms and causes
2. Diagnosis: determining in what kind of known category the problem fits
3. Prescription: determining what treatment can be chosen from what is known about this type of problem from scientific knowledge or theories
4. Treatment: applying a prescribed intervention
5. Evaluation: check whether the problem and the symptoms have already diminished or disappeared.

...But often it isn't

As we have seen, problem analysis can be very useful in some circumstances. But unfortunately, its usefulness is enormously overrated. The medical model is not only used for medical or technical issues but also for all kinds of problems related to human behavior and cooperation. But these problems are usually so complex that searching for causes of these problems is fruitless. Usually there is no clearly identifiable root cause.

For instance, if there is a conflict in a management team, you generally will not be able to find the root cause of that conflict. If you are a consultant hired to help solving the conflict you'd better not analyze this problem. Doing this might lead to some very unpleasant conversations with people trying who might try to blame others and defend themselves but probably not to identification of the root cause. Instead you would probably find more and more causes and end up in confusion. In the team, the person who started the argument plays his role, like the person who responded irritably. But the team leader too may be viewed as responsible by not intervening effectively. And what about the passive by-standers? Couldn't they have helped? The cause of the conflict lies really between all those involved.

Concluding: applying problem analysis in the domain of human behavior is often not useful. It usually does not lead to relevant answers but instead to unpleasant conversations and even to a deterioration of the situation.

Pitfall: problem denial
People who have found out how badly problem analysis often works can be tempted to avoid all talk about problems. They may say things like:

“Surely it is not as bad as it seems”

“But there are also many things going well, aren't there?”

“Problems should be seen as challenges!”

“Don't be so negative! Cheer up! Be positive!”

“Problems don't exist!”

“Problems exist only inside your head.”

Probably these people mean well when saying things like these. They want to motivate others to be positive and to look at what is going well. That may sound wise but denying the reality of the problems may have more disadvantages than advantages. Problems don't always disappear by simply trying to define them away. Doing this might also impair cooperation. When one person mentions a problem and the other makes one of the remarks mentioned above it may become harder to understand each other. The reason is that this type of responding really is a way of saying: “Your view is wrong, you have to see things differently, don't be so difficult.” Problem denial can also stand in the way of success. It may lead to the underutilization of the potential of problems. Problems have an important function in achieving success by motivating people to change their behavior and circumstances.

Problem acknowledgement: key to clarifying the desire for change
A very effective way to pay attention to problems is what we call problem acknowledgement. It is aimed at understanding how a situation is problematic in such a way that the desire for change becomes explicit and understood. With problem acknowledgement the problem is clarified while an analysis of how the problem developed is left out. Also there is no attempt to create a comprehensive picture of the problem. Instead, what is made explicit is what the problem is and how it is a problem to the person or people involved. The table below summarizes in which respects problem analysis and problem acknowledgement are different.

Problem analysis:

Aimed at understanding how the problem grew. Example questions:

- Why it is a problem?
- What caused the problem?
- Who is responsible?
- When did the problem start?
- Why haven't we/you been able to solve the problem?
- What weaknesses have caused this problem?
- What are we doing wrong?
- Why are we doing it wrong?
- Why didn't we do something else?
- What will keep us from solving the problem?

Problem acknowledgement:
Aimed at understanding and eliciting the desire for change. Example questions:

- What would be useful to discuss?
- What is the problem?
- How is it a problem?
- How does it hinder us/you?
- What would we/you like to change?

Example responses

- Okay, I understand how this is a problem
- Aha, I can see why you want to change this situation

Problem acknowledgement has the following important advantages:

1. Realistic: A picture of reality is painted which is neither gloomier nor rosier than it really is.
2. Respectful: By asking what the problem is and how people are hindered by it their perception of reality is treated as a useful starting point.
3. Positive: discussing problems does not take any longer than strictly necessary. When it is clear what the problem is and how it is a problem you can proceed to defining goals (how would you like the situation to be instead?)
4. Useful: problem acknowledgement leads to useful information. Making explicit how something is a problem may contribute enormously to creating energy for change. It becomes clear what you want to change and why.

Conclusion
Problem analysis is much less applicable that often thought. Problem acknowledgement is often much more useful. It is a very useful to deal with problems. It fits both reality and the perception of problem owners. Furthermore, they lead to energy for change. It is the ideal step to goal formulation.