**Person, Project or Problem**

By Cheryl Scanlan

How much time do you spend every week untangling the tensions that arise from problem solving with your people? What could it mean for you - and your company - to intentionally improve that process? When leaders are assessing challenges and pain points, often we initially perceive that the people are the problem. I have learned that this is rarely the case. This probably seems implausible, although I encourage you to consider otherwise. Although it can be a tiring and at times agrueling process, the return we see for tackling issues with objectivity and wisdom undeniably outweighs the price we pay to get there. As a bonus, you may find that the solution to the problem is actually found in you, rather than in them.

A few years ago, my father-in-law moved in with us because he was in a situation where he couldn't live on his own. Overtime, he started to become quite a handful. About three years in to the relationship, we realized that Dad was in the middle stages of dementia or Alzheimer's. After a couple more years with us, he was impossible to manage, and his anxiety was through the roof. Eventually, we succumbed to putting him into a memory care unit. A few months after that difficult decision, we realized that Dad was dying. The four of us - my husband, my two boys, and I went to say goodbye to him. He looked disheveled and uncomfortable even in his coma-like state. We stood there stiff staring at him, not knowing what to do. That is, until my youngest son walked up to his grandpa, put his hands on his shoulders, leaned over him, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "I love you, Grandpa. I'm going to miss you." At that moment, a switch flipped in my husband. Suddenly, he was able to say goodbye to his dad, rather than good riddance to a problem. Later, Tom realized that dad arrived to our home as person and, at some point, had become a project. By the end of his life, it or he?felt like nothing more than problem. When our son kissed his grandpa goodbye, he became a person again.

**1. Figure out how to see your employee as a person again.**

Your employees are people who are working on projects and often times have problems. Your employees are people. It is so easy to lose sight of this. We don't even realize it's a slippery slope we are on with our fellow man.  We're tired, we feel like we're babysitting, and they don't seem to get it. Before we know it, because of problematic communication patterns, missed deadlines or delivery of poor output, they've become nothing more than one big problem. Ironically, we may find we can't terminate these "problems" because deep down, we realize that we have a problem. If you look at that continuum of person - project - problem, who on your team is at the project or problem end of the spectrum?

<---- **PERSON** ----------------------- **PROJECT** ----------------------- **PROBLEM** ---->

Who do you pass in the hallway and your stomach tightens up, or they speak up in a meeting and you internally roll your eyes? Addressing a person as if they are the problem is no more effective than addressing a wound like it's the infection. You can bandage it up and try to smooth it over, but until you get the poison out of the situation, it will keep coming back, and potentially even spread. Managers fix problems; leaders coach people through them. They find their way back to the people end of the continuum so that the problem can be addressed for what it is. And when the heart of the leader shifts, a magnificent and seemingly miraculous change happens: the employee is dignified and the business is resolved.

I am now down to one living parent. This is my last opportunity to get elder care right. My sister recently came back from Australia and wanted to spend time with our dad. She's never been involved in elder care so, naturally, her frustration grew quickly with Dad's slow pace and limited communication. Finally, in exasperation, she came to me and said "I'm going to have to try to figure out how to deal with Dad." I lovingly looked up at her and said, "I understand. I've been there, and here's what I've learned: we deal with problems, but we love people. You don't need to deal with Dad. You need to love Dad." The same switch that had flipped in my husband at the nursing home flipped for my sister that day. And thankfully for her, she gained that perspective prior to it getting out of hand and then potentially having to experience the same guilt that we did with Tom's dad.

**2.  Take time to accurately assess the true nature of the problem.**

Accurately assessing the continuum of person, project and problem creates a ripple effect in a business, from relationships all the way down to the bottom line. Dwayne Spradlin leads a team of freelance problem solvers, and [remarks that](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0016NK99_2oVcVLWH3j_B3VCIhNCxE16HbsVYom1RhxIxZyxWktFJe_hD6fbSAt7pxPJ2FYEzktI2vv1aKtSp__qzk5iLYhhm1GtwUaNHvDRxdt7GHBVhMy5kp9OkBjR8WUdaN8S_NQTuDfGCTbZ58zrOJenDS-sFSHLOWTQGynDUoITv3UA3fPwbHzfNHeeZglAEed2xWSub6wuGVvDwffgqOghq94_DA-qviouGdhqpJOj2dU1uxi44hsEipr71UhzhdIzuB0Yvyc8H9KU9-edGBZooxOfBxG&c=b4dzuxdFVlUOZEpjRSUgg4Ai4-nMEtf5Zqy4anatLbGLSoLx9IX0TQ==&ch=Ev1sISJgt1_U0ibG86KZR1HanQc0J7DPhPPlVIO3XmTgMrpSWm8CAw==),

"We now know that the rigor with which a problem is defined is the most important factor in finding a suitable solution. But we've seen that most organizations are not proficient at articulating their problems clearly and concisely... Many have considerable difficulty even identifying which problems are crucial to their missions and strategies. Organizational teams speed toward a solution, fearing that if they spend too much time defining the problem, their superiors will punish them for taking so long to get to the starting line. Ironically, that approach is more likely to waste time and money and reduce the odds of success than one that strives at the outset to achieve an in-depth understanding of the problem and its importance to the firm."

If you want your energy to be invested in moving the situation forward, you must focus on defining the problem before you ever try to solve it. This ability to have clarity in crisis is a core facet of [Executive Leader Function](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0016NK99_2oVcVLWH3j_B3VCIhNCxE16HbsVYom1RhxIxZyxWktFJe_hD6fbSAt7pxPMp-FltwGFt_iZPhqMwYk6CUVpKPZT2YEoG00BSEOCZLFjvKcy0gwokfHu_xssg9kTHPGNT4-NTrIoAv51HOfYQO0Q-4JecsuIE6XK7pdGVC3kZA72pb82PGKM5GU4tP_MnPbiOHcZFsA7kmlb0_yhQJGc7LeosP-mqI9ibLuvwv2Iwgh7Ddk3wnaCC71bIwZ_Yg1m81jPVVOfediZ8Knew==&c=b4dzuxdFVlUOZEpjRSUgg4Ai4-nMEtf5Zqy4anatLbGLSoLx9IX0TQ==&ch=Ev1sISJgt1_U0ibG86KZR1HanQc0J7DPhPPlVIO3XmTgMrpSWm8CAw==). When something goes up in flames, your primary job is not to treat the flames; it's to find the source of the fires. Every moment spent on the distractions is a moment you could have spent solving the root issue at hand.

I recently had a phone call with a client who has a great team. However, he had one person from whom he was getting attitude every time he talked. His initial reaction was, "I'm giving you a job and a desk - do your job and don't give me attitude!" Yet, he is a compassionate man; in the process of trying to help his employee grow, hebecame very involved in her personal life. He told her that if she wanted to stay here, she needed to get professional counseling, which made the situation worse. In fact, it created a wedge between them. He was right that she needed help; her husband had left her for someone just a few years older than their oldest daughter and she had three boys she was still raising all alone now. The employer's compassion kept him engaged with her, albeit overly so, despite the frustrations."Cheryl, I am not a welfare state!" "True!" I replied. "You are a business and you need to make profit. How are you going to reconcile this?" What he was working through was how to appropriately navigate both authority and compassion. As he began to step back into his authority in a manner that aligned with his highest values, he began seeing his employee as a person again. As he did so, he recognized that she needed not just direct communication, but very clear instruction. As a high "C" on the [DISC profile](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0016NK99_2oVcVLWH3j_B3VCIhNCxE16HbsVYom1RhxIxZyxWktFJe_hD6fbSAt7pxPh7iesAL9zOxPTvCpufnw5Q9_ldrQ2q8eIWFvRKOFSuHEuap1vtfFpWS_BXjXJOuUlKPAZwB1rNkx5RaJU6WYCPorl1kSHbYuTL6YkXe5lfyHOo38rpu3iIY7rm1UOYaishhMl_Po8y4TmtTQC88WlQ==&c=b4dzuxdFVlUOZEpjRSUgg4Ai4-nMEtf5Zqy4anatLbGLSoLx9IX0TQ==&ch=Ev1sISJgt1_U0ibG86KZR1HanQc0J7DPhPPlVIO3XmTgMrpSWm8CAw==), she was deathly afraid of failure. Any ambiguity in orders would lead to a "sneer" response, which in fact was rooted in fear. As my client grew in his leadership skills, he changed the way he communicated, as well as changing the employee's seat in the company. He modified her role such that it would accommodate direct and clear communication for specific short-term projects. The combination of modifying her role and changing his communication style revolutionized the relationship!  My client was able to not only solve the attitude issue, but he also created a strategic solution for the company in the process. He didn't stop at "what is keeping me from being happy with my employee," but dug deeper to the root of the issue for the person. He considered her strengths and weaknesses and how those might feed in to the problem. He also considered what habits of his own were enabling her rather than empowering her, and chose to stop seeing her as a "project." What a powerful moment when he changed his approach to address the root of the problem rather than the behavior of the person.

We often believe that problem-solving is one of a manager's greatest challenges. What is often a higher mountain to climb, as illustrated above, is actually diagnosing the problem accurately in the first place. Thomas Wendell-Wedellsborg recently unpacked this process in a Harvard Business Review article:

"The point of reframing is not to find the "real" problem but, rather, to see if there is a better one to solve. In fact, the very idea that a single root problem exists may be misleading; problems are typically multi-causal and can be addressed in many ways. Identifying a different aspect of the problem can sometimes deliver radical improvements-and even spark solutions to problems that have seemed intractable for decades."

Wendell-Wedellsborg explains through case studies that reframing the problem is often key in identifying a resolution. "You won't know which problems can benefit from being reframed until you try." He gives [seven practices for reframing problems](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0016NK99_2oVcVLWH3j_B3VCIhNCxE16HbsVYom1RhxIxZyxWktFJe_hD6fbSAt7pxPnCokZpqbUOf8wZtu7ua_xOK9wIhvG7JSx_Ly6XSNoJ2YOIcH8Md_QXpvXVKwUHr1mb6l41chklqspzq_64ie86LzjRvSWKisu41t7dbixPpK8JK5sS81WFsZiX24-ZsscNKURm3KUjm76KVqu_6O4Bx9ctXYOIE9&c=b4dzuxdFVlUOZEpjRSUgg4Ai4-nMEtf5Zqy4anatLbGLSoLx9IX0TQ==&ch=Ev1sISJgt1_U0ibG86KZR1HanQc0J7DPhPPlVIO3XmTgMrpSWm8CAw==): a process every leader could benefit from.

Not every solution has such a clear-cut compromise as the earlier example with my client. This same client had another situation where an employee was consistently showing up late to work. This was a brick and mortar business, which required 8:30am-5:30pm business hours. The employee was a fabulous worker: she delivered product, gave good attention to details, and was team player, but just couldn't get to work before 10am. The business owner tried rewards, punitive measures, flexible scheduling, yet nothing seemed to change the employee's consistent pattern of tardiness. The culture of the business with 10 employees was beginning to feel the effects of what appeared to be preferential treatment. This produced a major problem. My client had become so angry and defensive that he was now afraid to terminate the employee. He didn't trust his emotions. We worked through adjusting his perspective to see the employee as a person who had a problem, rather than the employee being the problem. After we depersonalized the situation and assessed it more objectively, he was able to see the situation with clarity, and let that frame his conversation with his employee. He terminated her employment with the firm in way that dignified her, but protected the business. In the termination conversation, the employee said, "you gave me every chance. This was my fault. I blew it."

**3. Have the courage to initiate the difficult but crucial conversations:**

What a different outcome than the first employee! We are often tempted to avoid these kinds of conversations, especially if we can find a good excuse to procrastinate the conflict. "But she's a hard worker." "I really don't like conflict." "Maybe this year, he'll turn around." One client recently told me, "by the time I realize I need to terminate someone, I've waited too long." What sets great business women and men apart is the ability to honor people in tandem with fiercely protecting the business. [Amy Jen Su of the HBR](http://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=0016NK99_2oVcVLWH3j_B3VCIhNCxE16HbsVYom1RhxIxZyxWktFJe_hD6fbSAt7pxPbiP0kcxz8Gi-93q0sEwS_wmJVWzbMohgPVx6MZBODAUVVsLVEzyfSmCmxwklrMw3kIcMFpi9Ed7sGg7WP5Wesn8Il2M0OPCEbC9sWpUTBioghI85HYbzw0I0MZ57ZoaZOrh5Kz3NaugiRYLWhG7hG1TxOUzlAydWfp1Y3ExXHi4=&c=b4dzuxdFVlUOZEpjRSUgg4Ai4-nMEtf5Zqy4anatLbGLSoLx9IX0TQ==&ch=Ev1sISJgt1_U0ibG86KZR1HanQc0J7DPhPPlVIO3XmTgMrpSWm8CAw==) suggests that,

"In our attempt to avoid conflict, soft-pedaling or sugar-coating might feel better in the moment, but if we don't say what needs to be said, real change will never happen. Get comfortable with uncomfortable emotions."

Our natural human tendency is to avoid that which is uncomfortable. Perhaps for you it is actually more comfortable to terminate a "problem" than to lead a person through the conflict to so that person can reach their highest potential - either at your firm or otherwise; you'd rather wash your hands of conflict than to work it out. Or perhaps you are like my client; so passionately wanting to help employees work through issues that you turn a blind eye to the impact to the business and to yourself. Either way, separating people from problems is something that absolutely must come from a place of understanding our values. We can't afford to make those assessments in the heat of the moment. We must choose to step back, seek clarity through outside perspective, identify our convictions based on our values, and then move forward with courage in conversation.

In the heat of the frustration, it is very difficult to move to the people side of the continuum without an outside force. In the case of my father in law, that force was my son. In the case of my sister, it was me. In the case of my client, it was a coach. Perhaps at some point we all have had a hard time regaining proper perspective. The key is to admit it to yourself so you can eventually reclaim some objectivity to tackle the situation well.  We may be tempted to throw up our hands with a "You don't understand!" However, what we need to be willing to hear is, "No, you don't understand." What can help you begin to see your people for who they are again? Perhaps this article can be that outside force for you.

**About Cheryl Scanlan**

Cheryl Scanlan, MCC, CMCC, BCC is president of C3Advantage. She has worked with CEOs that are in Fortune 100 through next generation small business owners. Having also run a multi-million dollar firm in New York, Cheryl knows the importance of business goals and the impact of teams. Cheryl's thought partnering method helps leaders see clearly what is fuzzy, articulate what is currently unintelligible, and generate coherent & executable strategy.