Why Soft Problems Can't Be Solved

Lon Roberts, Ph.D.
Roberts & Roberts Associates
Plano, Texas
Phone: 972-596-2956
E-mail: Lon@R2assoc.com
Website: www.R2assoc.com

Abstract

Many problems arise in business, and life in general, that cannot be solved—at least in the sense of finding a solution that will make the problem go away or ferreting out root causes that will make the effects disappear. This essay challenges the reader to consider the circumstances where such problems arise and to be cautious of our conditioned inclination to seek simple algorithmic solutions that will bring "closure" to the problem.

I recently read Victor Hugo's classic novel, The Hunchback of Notre Dame. The thought that lingers in my mind is a troubling scene when torture was used to force a confession from the ingénue, Esmeralda. Humane considerations aside, torture, it seems, is quite an effective problem solving tool when the problem is defined as "the lack of a confession" rather than the more difficult task of "establishing truth beyond reasonable doubt."

We've come a long way since the barbarism of the 15th century but we still have a ways to go when it comes to defining and solving problems. In fact, most of what we've been taught about problem solving is not only wrong but potentially dangerous—at least in the realm of solving "real-world" problems. Wrong because the techniques tend to be inadequate for dealing with the problem's complexities; dangerous to the extent that critical decisions are based on overly simplistic solutions.

Consider this classic textbook example. Sue has five candy bars. She gives three to Jill. How many candy bars does Sue now have?

This example epitomizes the type of problem we've been taught to solve since elementary school. Everything about the problem is given or can be deduced. Also, getting from problem to solution involves the use of a prescribed routine. Finally, even if we can't agree that the answer is two candy bars, we can probably agree that the solution involves a certain number of candy bars. In other words, the form of the solution can be agreed upon and closure, when it occurs is recognizable as such.

Now let's give the problem a bit of a twist. Once again, Sue has five candy bars. This time, Tom is demanding that she repay the three candy bars she owes him, but, Jill, to whom Sue owes a big favor, has asked for three of the candy bars. What's Sue to do?

Things are not so easy in this case. Even defining the problem is a problem unto itself. As it turns out, problems of this variety are more common in today's workplace (and society in general) than

those of the first type. These so-called "wicked problems" typically involve compromises, uncertainty, and complex cause-and-effect relationships. They almost always require the use of a reasoning process that's not easily expressed in an algorithmic form that can be programmed into a computer. Neither can they be plugged into process tools that conveniently tell you to choose alternative A over alternative B. Furthermore, they almost always have a downside—or unintended consequences.

The really tough problems in the workplace are of the wicked variety. Problems of this nature often have little to do with ferreting out root causes—they're essentially conditions that exist because of the complexity of the circumstances. These are sometimes masqueraded as a vexing dilemma, for instance, "How can we establish a fair and equitable compensation plan that rewards results without penalizing risk-taking?" or "How do we recognize and compensate individuals while fostering a spirit of teamwork?"

It is significant to note that most of what are ironically labeled as "soft issues" fall within this more difficult realm. In fact, many of the issues that involve the enigma of human nature are essentially insoluble, at least in the sense of being able to achieve closure. Consequently, it is more accurate to view wicked problems—including those of the soft variety—as being treatable rather than curable, an outlook similar to that taken in dealing with an incurable disease.

Once this mindset is embraced we can see right away that we lack a suitable vocabulary for dealing with wicked problems. For reasons that may have something to do with our need to control nature, it is less satisfying to say that a particular problem is being treated rather than being resolved.

Accuracy aside, I suspect we will continue to use the expression "problem solving" in dealing with these situations, even at the risk of elevating expectations beyond reality. But, from my perspective, this misrepresentation is dangerous to the extent that it perpetuates the use of simplistic formulas and recipes when dealing with "people issues" in particular. This, of course, is a bitter pill to swallow for those who are more comfortable with a deterministic world—one in which pushing button A will certainly and consistently result in outcome B.

About the Author

Lon Roberts, Ph.D. is the president of Roberts & Roberts Associates, an international consulting and training firm based in Plano, Texas. He is the author of numerous publications and training programs, as well as four books, his latest titled *SPC for Right-Brain Thinkers: Process Control for Non-Statisticians* (ASQ Quality Press, 2005). Dr. Roberts is noted for providing "rapid-solution" consultation to teams, team leaders, process owners, and executives. He also conducts workshops in the areas of SPC, process reengineering, project management, problem solving and decision making, and quality excellence. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma and B.S. and M.S. degrees from Oklahoma State University.

> For information on workshops, keynote presentations, publications, or consultation, contact Dr. Roberts at:
>
> 972-596-2956
> Lon@R2assoc.com

Lon Roberts