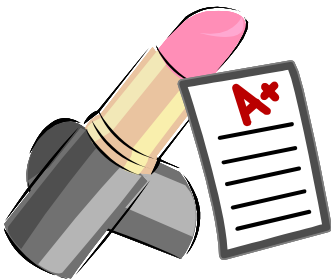


A Leadership Minute

ON PROBLEM SOLVING

“If I had an hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five finding a solution.”

...Albert Einstein



“Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts.”

...Joe Friday

(Sorry Joe...the facts are never “just the facts”)



It’s worth listening for that dog that doesn’t bark. If you don’t you may have a big mess to clean up.

Lots of Lessons from Ladies in Lipstick

When your mom was a teenager, she probably went to a local drugstore or Five & Dime to buy lipstick. The store offered her tester tubes to try so that she could see what Crimson Kiss or Red Hot Nights really looked like on her before she made a purchase decision. While settling on the perfect shade she usually swiped several across the back of her hand to compare them. Some women actually swiped the testers across their lips.

Reading that may have made you cringe a little, but those were the days before we knew to slather on hand sanitizer before eating in the cafeteria and use our elbows to open public restroom doors. And well before our H1N1-inspired obsessive-compulsive disorder became the new normal, lipstick testers made manufacturers cringe a little, too. Their product liability worries loomed so large, they stopped offering them.

So, women just opened tubes that were meant for sale and tried them. Then they put the used tubes they rejected back on the shelves. This made retailers go berserk. They weren’t so worried about product liability; they were watching their profits vanish faster than cold crème could make lipstick disappear.

Retailers complained to manufacturers who came up with a nifty solution. They began to wrap tubes of lipstick with mounds of impenetrable plastic that practically took a blowtorch to open. Almost instantly the retailers’ losses stopped.

This also prevented their customers from trying before buying. As well, the new packaging strongly implied to women—their customers—that they were thieves. And did we mention that they also raised prices to cover the additional tamper-proof packaging? A unique version of the customer-oriented marketing campaign, no doubt.

So What?

The retailers, the manufacturers and the customers of lipstick each defined the problem differently. But because the customer was not well represented or understood or heard as a *stakeholder* in the

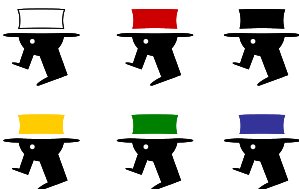
This is a common sugar packet in the US:



Here are a few from Italy:



Do you think the Italians were trying to solve a different problem than the Americans?



Check out Edward deBono and his *Six Thinking Hats*



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problem's definition, she lost. To this day, she still cannot try a drugstore lipstick before she buys one.

But lipstick customers are a pretty intrepid bunch. They are still determined to try the stuff before they buy it. So, whole gaggles of them walked on over to Macy's and bought more expensive lipsticks from the nice ladies at the cosmetics counters who let them try on as many as they wished while providing liability-reducing supervision. It didn't take much to figure out that \$22 for a tube of lipstick from Macy's that one would actually wear is cheaper than the drawer full of \$9 tubes from Walgreen's that only get worn once a year...maybe on Halloween?

So, who's the loser now?

What's Your Problem?

Here's the deal. We spend tons of time solving problems. But defining those problems first? Not so much. And getting better solutions is pretty dependent on first getting a good understanding of what you are trying to solve. Really good problem definitions come from looking at the problem through the lens of as many stakeholders as possible. Your customers and partners as well as those weenies in Legal, the tight wads in Finance, and the bleeding hearts in HR. Yes, all of them. And there are more. Stockholders, local regulatory bodies, community groups, the media and on and on. And beyond all those people who could receive consequences from the chosen solution, there are also a variety of ways to look at a problem beyond stakeholder positions.

How would the most negative curmudgeon define your problem? How about that little Miss Sunshine with her rose colored glasses? There are at least six of these views or as Edward deBono calls them, *hats*. Each represents a different perspective. And possibly a few that are not naturally available among your decision-making group. It can be very advantageous to overtly adopt a different perspective or two when wrestling with the many thorny problems businesses have today.

Hey, that *thorny* problem thing? You have been saying that for years, haven't you? Bet you never stopped to think much about the analogy, though. Think of each of those thorns as a stakeholder. And each one can draw blood if you are not careful. Well, at least each can take their business to companies who are more careful in addressing their concerns.

Walgreen's; meet Macy's.