



Lost in the Swamp?—Three ways to find your True North.

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At one of my recent leadership workshops, a participant said:

“When I came here I felt my problems were unsolvable. Now, I see solutions to try.”

What happened is that she had gotten lost in The Swamp of everyday complexity, volatility, uncertainty, unexpected crises, and a million items on her to-do list.

In organizations, this can happen to anyone at any time. The stress of The Swamp tends to narrow and constrict our thinking. Problems can feel impossible. Or, the solutions we do come up with seem driven by pressures of the moment and don't feel quite right.

It is common for clients to come to me at such times feeling like they lack sufficient knowledge and skills. I find clients almost always know a good deal about what to do but their knowledge is obscured within the entangled vines and mud of the swamplands. **The first step is to let go of the push for solutions and look for their own personal “True North” for guidance.**

For all of us, finding True North involves clarifying ways of doing things (our principles and values) that *feel most important to us*--what we care most about--in a certain situation. Once we find this True North, creative solutions start to flow.

Below are three methods to get back in touch with True North. The methods work best when done with a colleague or coach who is not caught up in the situation.

1. **Nine Whys** (1)

Ask "Why is that important to you?" around five to nine times consecutively.

Example (client story)

A manager of a staff working on financial reports for outside clients came to me very frustrated. His staff kept missing due dates. He felt trapped into being a micro-manager or giving corrective actions. But neither action seemed right to him.

When first asked why due dates were so important, he said “so the reports get done on time.” To the second “why,” he said “to make the clients happy.” At about the ninth “why,” he found what he cared about most—enabling sufficient time to discuss reports to assure *learning and development* for staff *and* clients. Instead of feeling trapped, he was inspired to talk with his staff about this vision and ways to make it happen—including due dates.

2. Put yourself in their shoes and ask “How would I want to be treated?”



This method is particularly useful for feedback and performance management situations.

Example (client story)

An executive felt pressured by her senior leaders to fire one of her managers who was making everyone feel very frustrated. Her impulse was to just get rid of him but she did not feel quite right about it.

By asking how she would want to be treated if she were the manager, she was able to quickly identify *what she cared most about*—what a value-driven performance management process would look like. She could then easily see that the manager had not received explicit feedback and there had been no plan or timeline for making changes.

She felt strongly she needed to develop a rigorous feedback process with a timeline before considering termination. Also, she felt confident presenting this plan to her senior leaders.

3. From complaints to commitments (2)

Being lost in The Swamp commonly gets us into complaining about people. It is hard to feel good about actions coming out of that state. But, behind complaints is a lot of passion that means we are highly committed to *something*. The task is to find that underlying, *positive* commitment.

Example (client story)

An executive was quite angry that her boss made a decision which cut money from her budget. He had informed her via email. The only options she could see were to quit, tell him off, or just push down her feelings and accept the situation. None of these options felt very good to her.

By reframing her reactions into positive commitments, she could see how much she cared about involving people for input prior to making decisions whenever possible and talking in person. She also rediscovered her strong commitment to not assuming bad intentions--e.g. attributing to her boss the intention to be disrespectful--just because she *felt* badly. This helped to calm her anger.

Grounded in these principles, she felt able to enter into a nonjudgmental, mutual conversation rather than just venting anger. She planned to talk to her boss to find out how he came to the decision. If this went well, she would ask if he was willing to get her input in the future about decisions which impacted her directly.

Our True North never really goes away.

Our True North is always there. It just gets repeatedly obscured by day-to-day work pressures. By consistent practice, we can gradually improve our ability to rediscover the True North which helps us create strategies to navigate the inevitable swamplands of organizational life.

References

- (1) From Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz **Liberating Structures** 2014
- (2) From Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey in **How We Talk Can Change the Way We Work** 2002

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps leaders and teams build high quality internal and external partnerships in the service of achieving their vision and goals. To this work he brings insights from 24 years of experience as an organizational leader with responsibilities ranging from overseeing a 70 staff unit to guiding quality improvement for a state-wide \$1 billion healthcare delivery system. He has extensive experience with quality improvement, behavioral science, and adult learning. Neil has worked with organizations widely known for innovation including the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado. He received his B.S. from Stanford University and M.D. from Stanford University School of Medicine. See neilbakerconsulting.com for more information.

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