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THE BOLDNESS OF NOT KNOWING

HOW OFTEN DO YOU OBSERVE QUICK LEAPS TO SOLUTIONS?

When a problem is raised by an individual or a group, how much time lapses before you or others give an answer? My experience is that thirty seconds to a few minutes from problem to answer is not uncommon. Such quick answers often feel emphatic, as if they are the right ones.

Quick answers risk undermining dialogue and desired outcomes. Rapid solutions do make sense in many situations. And, some situations are truly urgent. This article focuses on the first few minutes when the pull to quick answers can be remarkably powerful and bypass the best judgment and intentions.

THE POWERFUL PULL OF QUICK ANSWERS LURES EVEN SKILLED FACILITATORS.

The pull to quick solutions is surprisingly powerful. For some individuals and teams, it is an ingrained way of responding. But, anyone can fall into quick answers at times.

I lead groups of experienced coaches in discussions to help each other with difficult organizational situations. We know the powerful pull to quick answers. We even have a guideline to generally wait roughly 15 - 20 minutes before giving solutions.

Still, very frequently, coaches jump to solutions within a couple of minutes. To my embarrassment, sometimes I find I am the one with the instant right answer. And I am so sure it is right! When I realize what I am doing, I confess my error. We all laugh. Dialogue usually then becomes more lively. We almost always come up with better solutions.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF QUICK ANSWERS?

People and organizations are complex. The initial problem statement could easily miss critical details. Stress, time pressures, and other factors may lead to a flawed, subjective rather than objective definition of a problem.

Dialogue is at the heart of finding a good starting place for generating solutions. Also, such dialogue is important to empowerment. Quick answers can derail helping people to find their own way--and many ways may be viable. There is a risk of inhibiting a process of discovery people need to find personal inspiration, motivation and commitment. It may sometimes be most important for another person to find a solution whatever our own "right" answer may be.

WHAT MAKES IT SO HARD TO RESIST ANSWERING QUICKLY?

I lead trainings on dialogue. In one role play, a leader successfully facilitated another person to discover her own solution. I complimented the leader but he kept saying, "*What was so great? I didn't do anything!*" He could not experience offering value unless he gave the solution. There is a strong pull to get confirmation that we know what to do, especially if we have professional

training, especially if we are seen as experts, especially if we have organizational authority. People may also *expect* leaders, managers and experts to give them the solutions.

Not quickly knowing the answer can make people feel exposed as less adept. We don't want ourselves or anyone else to feel uncertain. It is hard to acknowledge areas of ambiguity. Giving answers has an aura of expertise, confidence, and power. Creating even a short time for not knowing may feel the opposite. It can simply be hard to hold the feelings of not knowing.

CASE STUDY, TAKE ONE: JIM ASKS JAN FOR HELP.

Jim is an Executive Director under pressure to implement a new initiative. One of his managers, Bill, is against the new initiative and is highly critical of Jim. Jim tells Jan, another Executive Director, he doesn't know what to do. Right away, Jan tells him, "*It is time to set limits and get on with it!*" Two weeks later, Jim has still not taken action and avoids Jan. He feels stuck and embarrassed and is sure she would just get on him for procrastinating.

CASE STUDY, TAKE TWO: JAN RESISTS THE PULL.

Jim: Bill is so negative and demeaning. I don't know what to do.

Jan: *(Jan is strongly pulled to say "Just get on with it" but stops herself. She spends 15 minutes using active listening skills to explore with Jim more details.) Jim, I think you know more about what to do than you think. What I hear is that you think Bill sees some real flaws in the initiative. But, his demeaning criticisms get in the way of constructive action and undermine your value of mutual respect. Do you think I captured it correctly?*

Jim: You captured it. I realize it is not that I don't know what to do. Bill's criticism causes me to back down from my convictions. I lose confidence.

Jan: *I've been there. Those are difficult situations. What are you going to do next?*

Jim: I will meet with Bill tomorrow. I will treat him the same open way you treated me--I will ask his perceptions and share mine. will meet with Bill tomorrow. I will treat him in the same open way you treated me--I will ask him his perceptions and share mine. But, there must be mutual respect--even if he does not like it, he must still help the new initiative to move forward and do so in a respectful way. In turn, I will commit to listen carefully to his concerns.

Jan: *How about we check in about this after that to see how it went?*

BEING ABLE TO SUSTAIN BOTH DIALOGUE AND DECISIONS FOR ACTION TAKES PRACTICE.

In "Take One" of the case study, Jan's quick answer, though partly correct, does not address Jim's lack of clarity or confidence. This actually slows Jim down. Jan is more effective in "Take Two" by holding back her answer and helping Jim with his own thinking. She carefully assures that they do not get caught up solely in dialogue by defining action steps and follow-up.

It is important to see that Jan, in "Take Two," artfully challenges Jim's original definition of the problem. This requires empathy and trust. Even then, Jim might have resisted her challenge. There is more to dialogue than just active listening. Quickly knowing has power in it. But, allowing space for not knowing can be far more bold.