

Three Steps to Transform Your Approach To Relational Problems



When facing difficult relational problems at work, it is natural and nearly automatic for us all to want to diagnose what is wrong and come up with THE right solution as soon as possible.

It is very common to leap quickly to strong but faulty conclusions. One example is attributing relational problems to personality issues or lack of skills. Actually, *situational* stresses are far more often the primary cause of difficult behavior.

Situational stresses arise chiefly out of the constant change, complexity, and pressures inherent in work life. These factors almost inevitably lead to differing viewpoints and experiences among the people involved. Relational problems arise when these differences have not been adequately heard and understood. Pushing for a solution prior to such understanding runs a substantial risk of provoking negative reactions and push back.

Resisting the rush to solutions and taking the time for “dialogue and discovery” usually leads to much more success. By engaging in dialogue, a process of hearing and understanding different viewpoints, new perceptions and solutions emerge surprisingly often.

While there are no recipes or scripts, the following three steps provide guidance.

- **Reflect—recognize and manage leaps to conclusions in yourself**
 - Set aside certainty that there is ONE correct viewpoint (no matter how certain you are). Prepare to state your view in order to be understood, not to “get” others to agree.
- **Dialogue—first, set aside finding solutions in order to build mutual understanding**
 - State your intention to first understand each other even if there is disagreement. Be vigorous in assuring accurate learning about different viewpoints by avoiding debates and repeatedly summarizing and checking for understanding.
- **Decide—seek agreement to meet again (expect multiple conversations for resolution)**
 - Take small steps over multiple conversations to enable the best chances for a *mutual* solution. It also helps to have clarity about how a decision will be made if and when that becomes necessary (e.g. by consensus vs. by a person with the authority to decide).

The first step (Reflect) can be the most difficult. When the stakes feel high, at times we all have *unproductive habits* of reaction. These take practice to change and, sometimes, coaching.

The *productive habit* we need to continuously strengthen is counterintuitive: we need to slow down the rush to solutions and take one *small* step at a time through dialogue and discovery. This enables the chances for the best success with *both* task and relational goals.

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Neil J. Baker M.D.

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About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare leaders and teams to enhance impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership and Team Strategies*. This means focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult—as opportunities to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress to results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com.