
The Human Dimension of Problem Solving

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Those of us who consult to management do our best work when we are fully aware of our clients' problems. It also helps to be fully aware that they are multidimensional human beings, that their problems often arise in one dimension while the solution resides in another, and that our job is to help them shift dimensions.

The following example involves the CEO of a foreign division of a multinational corporation. He badly wanted a transfer to corporate headquarters but had been told that his abrasive behavior was a barrier. He had been coached about his behavior but seemed unable to change it. Several members of his executive team described him as difficult and offensive; one of them even characterized him as abusive. He responded to this depiction by portraying his way with them as "tough love," saying that he had been the same way with his two children. When asked how he was with his grandchildren, he answered, "Oh, that's a different story. I play with them, I teach them. I enjoy them."

He was startled by the suggestion that he approach his executive team more as a grandfather and less as a "tough love" parent, but he agreed that it was worth a try. Things were not good in his team; its performance was suffering along with that of his company. Without much further prompting, he began to invest himself, grandfather-like, in the success of his team members and to curb his critical, punitive behavior. After an initial period of suspicion about his transformation, the team responded by soliciting his input more often and even came to regard him with affection. Their work together became far less contentious, more relaxed, and more productive. The company did well, and he did earn a transfer to the corporate headquarters.

This CEO's problem was presented as behavioral; he was critical and punitive in various ways. The solution, however, was not behavioral but rather conceptual. Specifically, the solution was found in rethinking who he was expected to be in his role. It is unlikely that any type or amount of behavioral coaching or training (if a CEO could be induced to undertake such training) would have made much difference without such a conceptual change. Yet the rethinking itself spawned a variety of new and

more productive behavior. Also, he didn't need training in that new behavior; he already knew how to be a supportive grandfather.

The solution to his problem was uncovered by shifting attention from the dimension that focused on his behavior to the dimension that focused on his thinking.

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**Facilitate change by asking
questions that will alter
how clients see themselves.**

Four Dimensions of Energy

When helping clients to shift from one dimension to another, I find it useful to think of four dimensions of human energy:

- *Physical energy* is expended when we use our bodies. It lives in tissue, muscle, and organs. It is tangible and solid. It involves how and when we move, engage in work or play, and arrange objects in our environment.
- *Mental energy* is activity of the mind. It shows up in ideas, evaluations, memories, plans, and ruminations. Like the body, it requires nourishment; its food is words or numbers served in a manner that stimulates and enlightens. Its structure is logic and science.
- *Emotional energy* shows up in feelings. It is more liquid than solid; it flows like a river, at one moment turbulent

and the next, serene. It often rushes along beneath the surface of awareness, occasionally breaking through whatever defensive crust we may have erected to suppress it.

- *Spiritual energy* arises from our beliefs about the unseen forces that shape reality and about our relationship to those forces. It concerns the divine, spirit, and soul. Spiritual energy gives meaning to our lives. It is the source of our impulses to create. It is anchored in our answers to unanswerable questions. It reveals itself when we are inspired by something larger than ourselves, such as an idea, a cause, a god, or a country.

The problem involving the man in the example above was originally considered to be one of physical energy—what can be done to change his behavior? The solution, however, was found in the dimension of mental energy—how he thought of himself—and perhaps within the dimension of emotional energy. He did, after all, refer to what he did as “tough love.”

Another example occurs in the story of a woman who, while working for a large corporation, laid the foundation to start her own business. She did a market analysis, created a business and marketing plan, and otherwise engaged in all of the mental gymnastics that a successful start-up normally requires. She also sorted out with friends and

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trusted counselors all of the hopes, fears, and worries that come with such a venture. But still she hesitated.

She had asked and answered questions of physical energy, such as *How will I spend my time?* She had asked and answered questions of mental energy, such as *What is my marketing plan?* And she had asked and answered questions of emotional energy, such as *What fears are in my way and how might I overcome them?* Her breakthrough came when she was asked, *Why will this new venture be a good use of your life?* Her answer was that she believed she had something to offer that could not be accomplished within the constraints of a large company. She had more to give. This is the dimension of spiritual energy; she wants to make her best possible contribution to a community that needed what she could offer.

It is tempting to see these four dimensions as a hierarchy, perhaps placing physical energy at the bottom and spiritual at the top, with mental and emotional energy occupying intermediate levels. It is tempting, but not necessary. The point is to shift dimensions when someone is stuck in one or the other and not to determine which is higher or lower. There is one way, however, in which it is useful to view them as a hierarchy—a hierarchy of discomfort relative to the person or group we are working with. For example, those who work in business are generally comfortable in the realms of physical and mental energy, less so in the realm of emotional energy, and even less so in the realm of spiritual energy. More often than not, our work involves inviting (or maybe shoving) them into a realm where they are uncomfortable. This is often where and why we meet with resistance: “I am not going there. Oh boy! Not me.”

Energy and Vision Making

A third example will illustrate how subtle and powerful a shift of energy can be when working with an executive team that is creating a new vision for its company. The team went to a lovely mountain conference center for a retreat. On the first morning the team members met in the dining room for breakfast and were given an opening assignment intended as background for creating their new vision. They were found a half-hour later sitting around a rectangular table in a basement room that had no view of their fabulous surroundings. When asked why they had chosen that particular setting from among the variety of far more pleasant and inspiring surroundings that were available to them, the team members replied that it was what they were used to. They usually met around a large mahogany table in a windowless conference room.

That first exercise involved forming conclusions about strategic directions that the company might take based on information about how its market was changing and what its competitors were doing to meet the market. It is an exercise of mental energy, although emotion might arise—fear, to be precise. The company was lagging behind the pace of change.

The team members were then guided through a discussion about their habit of remaining in the realm of mental energy, what was needed to move beyond that habit, and why moving beyond was necessary to creating a compelling vision. Then the group agreed—most of them anyway—that the surroundings they had chosen for their first exercise, although familiar and comfortable, were not conducive to creative thinking or to discussing the range of

emotions that the exercise was producing. They were, in fact, fearful about the threats posed by their competitors, but their habit of remaining in the realm of mental energy, reinforced by the atmosphere of the basement room, was inhibiting frank discussion and thus impeding their progress.

The group moved to a room with a wall of glass overlooking the surrounding mountains, where they could sit in armchairs and sofas before a smoldering fire. The discussion about their energy, along with the new seating and surroundings all contributed to a shift from the realm of mental energy to that of emotional energy. The discussion and new setting also served them well when they were asked questions intended to draw upon spiritual energy, such as *What will this company contribute to the human condition?*

The failure to manage such energy shifts in a conscious and deliberate way is the primary reason that organizational visions and mission statements end up dry and lifeless, utterly devoid of “oomph,” appeal, and staying power. Such visions and statements lack emotional and spiritual energy because they are created by groups who do not recognize that their habitual comfortable mental energy is unlikely to provide a vision that stirs the emotions and rouses the spirit.

Invitations to Shift Energy

There are at least four ways that we can help clients when a shift in energy is needed. First, we can ask questions that invite the shift, such as:

- What are the practical consequences? What should we do differently? and How will we get this done? are invitations to shift to physical energy.
- What do you think about that? How will you explain that to others? and What conclusions can you draw? are invitations to shift to mental energy.
- How do you feel about that? and What emotions does the situation stir? are invitations to shift to emotional energy.
- How will you contribute to the human community? and Why is your current job a good use of your life? are invitations to shift to spiritual energy.

Second, the dimension in which we offer our *observations and feedback* often invites others to shift their energy. If, for example, we give feedback that consists purely of observations concerning behavior to a person or group that operates largely in the mental dimension, we are

likely to elicit rationalizations (mental energy) about behavior (physical energy). If, however, our observations and feedback contain an emotional component—*I sense frustration and disappointment*—then we are more likely to elicit a shift in energy and a willingness to enter the dimension of emotion.

Forming observations and feedback that shift energy is mostly a matter of listening for clues that a different dimension has been touched upon, along with whatever dimension is most obvious. It involves hearing the static

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caused by the less obvious dimension, such as a hint of emotion in an otherwise mental discourse or the call of spirit within strong feelings.

Sometimes, clues about the need to enter a different dimension can be presumed. In the story above about the woman who wanted to start her own business, it seemed that she had exhausted what efforts could be made in the dimensions of physical, mental, and emotional energy so that the only place left to look for reasons to hesitate were in the dimension of spiritual energy. Also, in the story about the executive team creating a vision, it seemed obvious that the information given to them for their first exercise would elicit some measure of fear that they would not be able to turn the company around.

The third way in which we can help clients shift energy is by our choice of setting, techniques, content, and tools. An exercise in trust or the use of instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory may help a person or group shift to emotional energy. A mind-map may help to create a shift to mental energy. My own theory and methods designed to help people identify their unique genius and calling may help create a shift to spiritual energy.

When using setting, techniques, content, and tools to shift energy, it is exceedingly useful to be very explicit about what we are doing and why. The objective of being explicit is to enable the client to manage energy shifts after the consultant has gone home. The executive team members who worked on their vision became much more proficient at managing their energy during their retreat. By the second day, they were asking one another questions involving emotion and spirit. When they arrived at a vision, they spoke of how they felt about it and about

their commitment to it; the vision was not merely a good idea, but also an expression of passion. No matter what else we do for our clients, building their ability to manage their own energy may be our greatest gift to them.

Fourth, we can be on the alert for *teachable moments* when our client spontaneously and without prompting enters into a dimension of energy that seems out of character. There may be a sudden burst of feeling that opens a door onto emotional energy—a musing about “the meaning of it all,” for example, that signals willingness to explore spiritual energy. Or there may be a new way of viewing a seemingly intractable problem that calls for mental energy.

When these moments occur, it is often up to us to follow the initial change of energy with the right questions, observations, techniques, and tools to keep that energy alive long enough for it to do its work.

Who We Are

Our effectiveness at helping clients manage energy in the way I have described it here depends, of course, upon our facility with our own energy. Like our clients, we tend to gravitate toward the energy with which we are most comfortable. This may cause problems for us and our clients. For example, an intellectually brilliant executive team working with an intellectually brilliant consultant—all of

whom are uncomfortable outside the realm of mental energy—will produce an intellectually brilliant vision: but it is likely to be a great idea bereft of passion.

Our own facility and comfort with the various dimensions of energy place an upward limit on our ability to help clients shift their energy. You might gain a sense of your own level of comfort in each dimension by observing your reactions to the questions mentioned above. Do the questions associated with a specific dimension make you uncomfortable?

It is up to us, if we wish to work with integrity, to be clear about what we can and cannot offer in the way of helping any particular client shift energy in order to meet challenges. And, if we wish to work effectively with a broad range of clients, it is up to us to develop facility and comfort with all dimensions of our own energy—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. That facility allows us a wide range of responses to our clients’ needs; it allows us to lead them where they might not go without us, where solutions for their problems and challenges might very well reside. ■

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