But What About People Problems?

A discussion with an experienced **BPI** instructor/consultant about using critical thinking skills to analyze problems "caused" by people.

People Problems

How does BPI define a "people problem"?

Well, first we need to define what a problem is. Many people misuse the word "problem" to describe all manner of challenges, decisions, or complex situations they find confusing. **BPI** defines a problem as a deviation from a standard or an expectation. More simply, *when what you have is different from what you really want,* that is a problem. Therefore, thinking in terms of cause and effect, a problem is the effect. When you first see a problem, you may or may not know the cause, but you are witnessing its effects.

Because we define problems as visible effects, people problems are those in which we see deviations in people's performance or behavior. We observe people behaving in an unacceptable or an unusual way and we want to understand why. It's vital that we understand the cause of this behavior before deciding what to do about it. This protects us from making knee-jerk responses to people problems – a temptation that often produces inconsistent, inappropriate and foolish actions.

But, How do you analyze people?

We don't. Instead, we analyze the problem situation in an objective manner by factually describing the specific behaviors or changes in performance that were actually observed. We describe the problem in factual terms and use these facts to lead us to the true cause of the problem.

Do you have any examples?

I have many to choose from. Here's one. I'll state the problem as first described and then reveal what was really

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going on as determined by the **BPI** process.

"People just don't care about work anymore!"

- Management believed that people just did not care anymore, that the younger generation had not learned or adopted the proper work ethic.

- The observed problem was *a steady increase in the average duration of absences* in one of the company's divisions. The workers most affected were those that were supposed to have the good work ethic! The real cause of this specific problem was a change in the *absenteeism policy* that punished the number of absences but not the duration. Long absences were more attractive than short ones because the workers got docked pay for the first day but then the company paid for all subsequent days. So, people reasoned, why take just one day off?

Wasn't that obvious?

Well, that's the nature of hindsight – problems always look easier once they're solved. During a problem, however, many factors can converge to hide what would otherwise be obvious.

What's important to note is that the problem described above was analyzed using information that was already known. There was no new information. Same people, same information, different process. What made the difference was a process that organizes certain key facts and provides the right questions to focus people's thinking. It was the use of our process that made the cause obvious.

How about another people problem example?

Poor supervisory skills

1. A manager believed that the supervisor of an information processing unit lacked proper people handling skills.

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2. The observed problem was *an increasing number of complaints about the supervisor being* **unfair** *and* **biased** *and* **playing favorites**.

3. Analysis revealed that the supervisor had worked well with this unit for a period until the company began to automate the unit. Then, workers were asked to perform temporary tasks associated with the company's move to a new location outside the city. The cause of the complaints was determined to be the *employees' fear of losing their jobs* precipitated by the on-going automation, the company's plans to move, and the frustrations of tedious and temporary work. The problem disappeared when the group learned they would all be needed after the move and that in fact the unit would be expanded and given new, permanent responsibilities. What I found interesting was that as soon as job security returned, the supervisor miraculously transformed back into the same swell guy he was before the complaints. Isn't that amazing?

Yes, it is! I notice that your training starts off with a problem-solving example involving things (e.g. mirrors on windshields or defects in paint.)

When do you get to issues involving people?

Right away! We usually start off with a **Concern Analysis** case study that describes a complex situation that includes, in addition to the things you mention, absenteeism, complaints about management or their decisions, and comments questioning the competence of employees. This is an unstructured exercise that reveals to the team members the way in which they typically deal with complex issues. We want them to be conscious of what they do naturally before we teach our methods so they can identify where their thinking is strong or weak, and so they can more readily integrate this new methodology with their current strategy. What most teams in the workshop do before learning our methods is focus on the people as the root of all the

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problems and suggest forming a task force (if they are people centered) or firing someone (if they are not.) These suggestions indicate to me that they are deficient in critical thinking skills.

Now, of course, people are at the root of all problems in a broad sense because we are dealing with organizations created by people, run by people, and serving people. Our training teaches people how to objectively determine what is really going on and to understand why. We have to be able to separate facts from opinions and use the facts to guide our inquiry.

- Is the problem we're observing caused by the systems we've created?

- Are incentives out of alignment?

- Could our suppliers be to blame?

- Do our employees lack understanding?

We'll need to know the true cause of the problem to take effective action.

But these are manufacturing cases and not service industry cases?

To begin, yes. When we introduce our processes, we deliberately use case studies that are unrelated to participants' present work environment so they can focus on learning the process without distraction. Manufacturing scenarios provide convenient examples because it's typically easier to describe and understand objects in the physical world than it is to describe and understand the complexities of human behavior. After participants, have mastered the process using simple scenarios, they are better equipped to tackle more dynamic and challenging problems, such as those involving people.

We have 35 years' experience tailoring and testing various case studies for our customers and we've learned that certain basics are best taught using non-industry material. Otherwise, people struggle to see the process we are

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teaching. The content gets them too wrapped up. If you are currently dealing with the same issues on your job that the case identifies, you are going to have difficulty separating what information is from your job and what comes from the case. It also can be emotionally upsetting for some participants who have strong feelings about one or more of the issues which can further compromise their learning experience. We must highlight the thinking framework first, then move toward applying the framework to the participants' real job issues so we don't confuse the two. This is especially true when we teach our cause analysis procedure, although it's not as crucial when introducing our decision making or planning procedures.

The BPI Workshop Teaching Model

Our teaching model follows this pattern
1. **Non-industry case** – introduction and presentation
2. **Non-industry [or Industry] case** – practice and coaching
3. **Industry skill building exercises** – informal test with feedback
4. **Applications** – current concerns volunteered by participants

So, does the problem-solving process work equally well with things and people?

Yes. But in many ways, *it is more critical to follow a process to guide our thinking about people issues.* We need a process to help keep us honest, so to speak. When dealing with people issues, we are more likely to jump to conclusions, make wrong assumptions, and let our emotions and our relationship to those people cloud our judgment. We all need help focusing on the relevant facts, staying objective, and verifying our conclusions.

What experience have you had with non-manufacturing people using these ideas?

Many of the companies we serve are non-manufacturing.

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Actually, my first exposure to using these ideas was with an insurance company. I conducted classes for over 900 managers, assistant managers and supervisors. We've had an insurance industry package in one version or another for 35 years. Our experience working with investment, banking, health-care, academic, retail, and even public transit companies (e.g. Equitable, AAA, Zurich-American, Security Pacific, NY Stock Exchange, Fidelity Investments, Stanford University, Chicago Transit Authority) has allowed us to create more than 30 case study packages tailored to a wide variety of industries. So far, we haven't found an industry that could not benefit from better thinking methods.

To respond intelligently to a people problem, you simply must be able to objectively describe the problem and assess why it is happening. In terms of power, time, and ease of use, we know of no better analytical tool available than the **BPI** process.

Summary

So, to summarize, you claim the BPI approach only applies to understanding widgets and things and is not useful for exploring issues involving people?

Hmmmm. No – our methods work for BOTH!

Learn more about our **Critical Thinking for Leaders** workshop.

Learn more about our curriculum recommendations for common organizational initiatives in these **videos**.

Contact us with any questions or comments.