

Conventional Wisdom

with Frances Frei, Associate Professor, Harvard Business School

“Don’t bring me problems—bring me solutions!”

I recently heard Frances Frei, an associate professor in the Technology and Operations Management Unit at Harvard Business School, comment that “one of the more counterproductive things a manager can say is ‘Don’t bring me problems—bring me solutions!’” I wanted to hear more—and thought that HMU’s readers would want to listen in. This is an edited record of our conversation.—*Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay, Editor*

CBD: I thought that encouraging employees to solve problems was a good thing—?

FF: It is, of course. But sending out this message doesn’t do it. Instead of promoting accountability, it actually encourages employees to turn a blind eye to problems they see but cannot figure out how to fix. When you say “Don’t bring me problems—bring me solutions,” what you’re saying, in effect, is “Of all the problems you find, I only want to know about the ones you can solve.”

Identifying problems can be a solo sport, but finding solutions rarely is. This is especially true when the problems have any degree of complexity.

If you’re giving people permission to tell you about just those problems they can solve, you’re missing out on many opportunities for improvement. You’re leaving performance boosters on the table simply because the problem and the solution aren’t collocated.

CBD: When you put it like that, it seems pretty obvious. So what would

you say accounts for the enduring popularity of this management chestnut?

FF: At first blush, it sounds empowering: “Hey, go out there and solve some problems. You’re smart, you’re able—I trust you to do it!” But as well intentioned as it is, it’s misguided. I always cringe a little bit when I hear managers say it—and I hear it a lot.

One reason for its popularity, I suspect, is that managers use it to quiet chronic complainers. But any good they’re realizing by silencing squeaky wheels is more than offset by the damage they’re causing by stifling collective solutions.

Managers need to find another way to deal with the whiners—one that doesn’t prevent observant, well-intentioned people from pointing out problems that limit performance.

CBD: I know that your work takes you inside a lot of companies. Are some cultures particularly resistant to the surfacing of problems?

FF: Sure. One example is cultures that place a strong emphasis on doing things right the first time. Companies that pride themselves on attaining straight-from-the-gate operational excellence often make it feel dangerous to point out problems—especially when the person doesn’t see an immediate solution. In an environment where it’s not safe to talk about problems, we know that performance lags. My colleague Amy Edmondson has done some great research in this area.

(See the Harvard Business School case study “Safe to Say at Prudential Financial,” # 9-603-093.)

CBD: What companies do a good job in this respect?

FF: Companies with a relentless focus on performance improvement. For them, problems are good things in that they offer opportunities to get better. Toyota is a great example.

Toyota’s strong culture of improvement not only makes it safe to bring up problems, [but] the culture actively encourages workers to do so. On the assembly line, for instance, there’s something called the andon cord. If anyone sees a problem on the line, he is supposed to pull the cord to summon a manager to look into it immediately, before the car or components on the line go any farther.

Assembly-line employees at Toyota aren’t told, “Only pull the cord if you see a problem you can fix!” They’re encouraged to identify problems—period—and they’re honored for doing so. This is one reason among many that Toyota outperforms its competitors so consistently.

CBD: What advice would you leave HMU readers with?

FF: Create a culture of accountability that doesn’t limit recognition only to those who find both the problem and its solution. Of course, you want to reward creative problem solving. But you also want to celebrate the person who brings a problem to light, however big or small. That person is as much a part of the solution as the people who actually formulate the fix.

The bottom line is that you can’t improve performance if you’re not solving problems, and you can’t solve problems you don’t know about. ♦

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