

Stop Speaking in Solutions! *Focus on the Problem Instead*

by Katherine Rosback

When I think about organizations that struggle with implementing initiatives or solutions such as DEI, data analytics, or the numerous other programs highlighted by popular management magazines over the years, I'm reminded of a pivotal scene from the movie, *Moneyball*.

Billy Beane (played by Brad Pitt) is the general manager of the failing Oakland Athletics baseball team. Speaking to a roomful of scouts who are discussing possible recruits to replace retired players, a very frustrated Beane asks, "What's the problem that we are trying to solve?"

BILLY BEANE: Guys, you're just talking. Talking "la-la-la-la" like this is business as usual. It's not.

GRADY FUSON: We're trying to solve the problem here, Billy.

BILLY BEANE: Not like this you're not.

You're not even looking at the problem.

GRADY FUSON: We're very aware of the problem. I mean—

BILLY BEANE: Okay, good. What's the problem?

GRADY FUSON: Look, Billy, we all understand what the problem is. We have to—

BILLY BEANE: Okay, good. What's the problem?

GRADY FUSON: The problem is we have to replace three key players in our lineup.

BILLY BEANE: Nope. What's the problem?

CHRIS PITTARO: Same as it's ever been. We've gotta replace these guys with what we have existing.

BILLY BEANE: Nope. What's the problem, Barry?

BARRY: We need 38 home runs, 120 RBIs, and 47 doubles to replace.

BILLY BEANE: Ehhhhhhh! [imitates a buzzer] The problem we're trying

solve is that there are rich teams and there are poor teams. Then there's fifty feet of crap, and then there's us. It's an unfair game. And now we've been gutted. We're like organ donors for the rich. Boston's taken our kidneys, the Yankees have taken our heart. And you guys just sit around talking the same old "good body" nonsense like we're selling jeans. Like we're looking for Fabio. We've got to think differently. We are the last dog at the bowl. You see what happens to the runt of the litter? He dies.

I LOVE this scene. In the two minutes that Beane takes to explain the issue, he also gives a clinic on why so many organizational initiatives fail or solutions miss the mark: obliviousness to the real problem that must be solved.

A few years ago, I looked into the implementation of popular organizational initiatives to get an idea of how successful these efforts generally were. What I found was a pretty consistent rate of striking out.

Remember Total Quality Management? That initiative had a 20 to 40 percent rate of successful implementation. Re-engineering? Only 15 percent of those programs lived up to implementation expectations. The track record for data analytics—despite all the hype—posts similar "success" rates (and has remained fairly steady since I first started tracking this data).

And the same lame rates apply to the uptake of popular HR initiatives. A 2013 Gallup Business Journal poll reported that more than 70 percent of change initiatives fail. The batting average is consistently low. But why?

Organizations and teams tend to skip the base of defining the problem, preferring the perhaps easier (and more prestigious?) work of sliding into home plate with a shiny new solution.



What Do the Scouting Reports Say?

The causes for these high failure rates were cited as:

- Too much emphasis on tools and terminology
- An inability to create or maintain commitment (i.e., Why does this matter?)
- Losing sight of what the initiative was intended to do (i.e., What is our objective?)
- No articulation of the specific problem the initiative was intended to solve

They all add up to the exact issue that frustrated Beane: No one is stepping back to define the problem they're trying to solve.

The data analytics initiative? Multiple studies cite data initiatives not linked to "valuable problems" or not tied to the company strategy as a reason for failure. HR initiatives?

An Harvard Business Review article reports on how tempting the hot, new idea is for companies, suggesting that they become enamored with "bright, shiny solutions" and programs too quickly.

Instead, it advises that leaders "fall in love with the problem" and "spend time letting the challenge soak in, studying it from various angles, and understanding it more deeply."

Skipping First Base

This counsel reflects my experience. I frequently see teams or organizations tackling challenges without first fully defining the problem they are trying to solve. They tend to skip that base, preferring the perhaps easier (and more prestigious?) work of sliding into home plate with a shiny solution.

I recall one organization committed to becoming "more collaborative." As I talked about the initiative with a top-level leader, I noted to him that being "more collaborative" is a solution to something.

ME: What is the specific problem you are trying to solve?

HIM: That's a good question.

ME: What will you look to to know your solution worked?

HIM: That's another good question.

ME: What would I see someone who is collaborative doing differently than someone who isn't?

HIM: That's a third good question. We should study that.

Sounding like the scene from Moneyball?



To counter this predictable tendency, one of my first exercises with a team implementing a new initiative or tasked with developing a solution is to have everyone write down (writing is important) the definition of the problem they are there to solve. No initial sharing. In my more than 25 years of doing this, the resulting diversity and ambiguity of the written problems continue to amaze me. The teams are nowhere near ready to start discussing or evaluating solutions!

Understand What is Happening by Asking the *Right* Questions

In a subsequent *Moneyball* scene between Beane and Peter Brand, Brand notes that there is an “epic failure ... in understanding what is really happening. They are asking all the wrong questions.” As you consider this statement, what are the better questions you could be asking before leaping into your solution?

Here are some examples of what I ask of teams:

- Take a systems thinking approach and map out your current state so you can examine it from multiple angles. Then ask, “What assumptions are embedded in our model? What don’t we understand?”
- Examine your problem from various perspectives by asking, “How would we frame this problem from a scientific or technical perspective? How might we frame this from a psychological perspective?”
- Use question-storming. Ask the team members to brainwrite ten questions, starting with the word “why,” about the current state. Then capture the resulting questions, and draw out and challenge the underlying assumptions.
- Ask, “Where isn’t this an issue? Why does it make perfect sense that it isn’t?”

If you’re about to make an investment in an initiative, understand the problem you are trying to solve. Avoid the errors of Beane’s scouts, and ensure that the solutions you are sending to the plate can help you score the runs you need.

NOTES

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