

People and Problems

Have you ever found yourself saying, “Solving this problem shouldn’t be so difficult”? IT professionals are asked to solve problems. “Students aren’t engaged in courses.” The solution? Active learning. “We aren’t getting the decision-making power we want from our ERP system.” The solution? Business intelligence. But in moving down the path to a solution, we often encounter one struggle after another.

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. Maybe we run into difficulties because we don’t understand what a solution involves. As stated in a Harvard Business School Working Paper, most solutions involve (1) technical and political components, (2) maldistribution, (3) complex systems, and (4) concurrent action on many levels.¹

1. *Technical and political components.* Experience has taught many of us to “fix” problems. If students aren’t engaged, we integrate a simulation or a game. After all, this is the Nintendo generation. Doing so requires software and perhaps a different lab configuration that includes headphones, graphics cards, and a different type of console. Problem solved, right? Wrong. The solution implies that the faculty member’s teaching has been dull, dry, and uninspiring all these years. What does the department chair say to the dean, or the president to the trustees, when the student newspaper decries the waste of tuition dollars on games? When the technical solution is fine but the political result is disastrous, the problem just gets more difficult.
2. *Maldistribution.* The College of Engineering has a data center with excess storage capacity; the College of Humanities and Social Sciences needs storage. The Statistics Department has expertise in analytics; the CIO’s office

could use that expertise. The School of Design has a wealth of graphic designers; the Teaching and Learning Center is struggling to develop images to enhance their Web pages. Solutions often exist but often are maldistributed. Without conversations and cooperation, finding the right people and the right solutions will be virtually impossible.

3. *Complex systems.* Perhaps you want to get more value from your ERP system through better decision making and so you push for a business intelligence solution. Although all the vice presidents and deans want that improved decision-making capacity, as soon as they hear you’re going to create a data warehouse with *their* data, pandemonium breaks loose. They do not trust your office with data you couldn’t possibly interpret correctly. In addition, legal affairs chimes in. What if the legislature wants access to the data? What if the legislature uses the data to prove that your institution is not as productive as your sister institution down the road? What if you can predict which students are at risk of dropping out? If you don’t intervene successfully, can they someday sue your university because you should have ensured they earned their degree? Complex? You bet. Even simple solutions exist in the context of complex systems.
4. *Concurrent action.* The university has decided to become a biotech powerhouse, attracting star faculty, federal research dollars, post-docs, and graduate students and resulting in economic development and a world-class reputation. Now you just need the computational power and research instrumentation to make this possible. But housing the new HPC resources and providing power, storage, backup, and networking must be coordinated with all the departments involved,

with the office of research, with facilities, and with the finance office. No single activity can take place without concurrent action by others. Adding computational cycles just became very complicated.

All of these aspects of a solution involve one vitally important, often overlooked element: people. We have experience, expertise, and a level of comfort with the technology—whether instructional technology, enterprise systems, or research computing. But solving a problem requires experience with people as well. That’s why finding a solution can be so difficult. With people comes politics. Everyone has a point of view and something they want—even the IT staff. Dealing with people requires the ability to see their side, listen, facilitate, and negotiate. It requires communication skills—not just talking or telling but being able to convey complex ideas in a straightforward, concise manner. Few faculty or administrators will stay in a lengthy technical conversation. Nor are they likely to want to learn about IT. Solving a problem involves being a convener as well as a communicator. Building a network and finding common ground speeds the resolution of any problem.

Solving problems shouldn’t be so difficult. Perhaps when it is, we’ve forgotten the people.

Notes

1. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Rakesh Khurana, and Nitin Nohria, “Moving Higher Education to Its Next Stage: A New Set of Societal Challenges, a New Stage of Life, and a Call to Action for Universities,” Harvard Business School Working Paper, No. 06-021, October 25, 2005, <<http://www.hbs.edu/socialenterprise/pdf/Moving%20Higher%20Education%20to%20Its%20Next%20Stage-Working%20Paper%20Oct%2025-05.pdf>>.

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