



The Peanut Gallery

Have you ever experienced this?

You try something new. It wasn't a total flop, but it didn't go quite as you envisioned it either.

Now, if you were on an island...alone... when all of this happened, you could lick your wounds, go back to the drawing board, figure out what worked and what needs tweaking, and then try it again. Ah, to dream!

Unfortunately, at times like these, you're usually nowhere near that oft-desired island. Instead, the less-than-brilliant attempt was seen, and critiqued, by a host of others...the beloved Peanut Gallery.

*"You know what your problem is?"
"Let me tell you how to fix that."*

Been there? I have too. (And so has the **EA Insights** reader who shared this topic with us.)

We're surrounded constantly by well-meaning, and sometimes not-so-well-meaning, problem identifiers and problem solvers. (And, at times, WE are THEY!) So, what do you do?

Start by reading on. This month's **EA Insights** explores differences between the two approaches and gives some clues about functioning successfully in either role.

All the best,

June

June Melvin Mickens
Executive Advantage, LLC



Problem Identifiers vs. Problem Solvers

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Quotes

"We may need to solve problems not by removing the cause but by designing the way forward even if the cause remains in place."

~Edward de Bono

*"[O]ur model [is] of being an advisor to our clients. *** We want to have longer, more meaningful conversations with clients to figure out exactly what their needs are and provide them with advice that quickly gets them to their business goals. *** Business owners, especially small business owners, don't have a lot of time. They really do rely on someone who can suggest alternate ways of doing things, especially when those suggestions lead to greater business success for them."*

~Paul Brown

"It isn't that they can't see the solution. It is that they can't see the problem."

~Gilbert K. Chesterton

"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

~Albert Einstein

June Melvin Mickens
Executive Advantage, LLC

Most of us will admit that, when you're in the middle of a vexing situation, it can be hard to see objectively. That's true whether you're in the midst of trying something new or facing a dilemma that's been a plague for years. Whatever the circumstances, it can be helpful to add an external set of eyes for perspective.

Have you noticed, though, that "external eyes" tend to fall into two categories -- problem identifiers and/or problem solvers?

Now, before you immediately jump to the conclusion that one is bad and the other's good, think again. There actually are pros and cons associated with both approaches to tackling problems.

A Closer Look at Problem Identifiers

Some folks observe a situation from the *problem identifier* perspective. These are people who excel at pointing out where you're going astray. Okay...is that a negative or a positive? Well, it depends.

Bottom line: Identifying problems just for the sake of identifying problems is of no good use.

You see, folks who identify problems, and stop there, are folks who just like to *pick*. "This is wrong." "That won't work." "Hmm, you know you should have done that differently." (I bet you can name at least one person who has this art mastered, can't you?) That's the point. When the sole (or the primary) purpose of identifying a problem is to shame the actor, or thwart progress, or elevate the speaker's stature at someone else's expense, the activity starts and stops with picking at the problem (or you). And, that's not productive in the least.

On the other hand, being a problem identifier *can* be a good thing. Think of the golf pro who analyzes your swing to help you improve. Think of the teacher who had you "show your work" so that she could help you figure out your misstep. Even think of management consultants, like Executive Advantage, whom you retain to examine a business process, a team's functioning, or your individual direction-setting in order to help you grasp where a course correction might be needed. Problem identification, when it's undertaken to foster growth and development (and, perhaps, even prevent future issues), definitely becomes productive.

What's the difference?

One difference may be *intent*. Is the problem identifier's purpose for offering an opinion to build up or to tear down? Feedback can be delivered, and received, very differently depending on the underlying motives.

A second difference may be *relationship*. When the person offering insight into a challenge is someone who knows you, cares about you, and seeks your best, those words are likely to mean more than critique that comes from one who is on the fringes of your life and/or business.

A third difference may be *permission*. Think back to our earlier examples. What do that coach, teacher, and consultant have in common? Each of them is someone whom you have invited into your life. You *want* to tap that person's expertise to advance your growth. Accordingly, you open yourself up -- give permission -- for this person to serve as a problem identifier for you. And, with permission, comes the privilege of supplying input.

"Most people spend more time and energy going around problems than in trying to solve them."

~Henry Ford

"One of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency."

~Arnold H. Glasow

*"My customers will sometimes come to me with a problem they need solved. Or they'll have an idea of what they need, and we figure out how to design a component that will meet that need. What we do here *** is come up with ideas, and then take the concept from design to actual product."*

~Tony Glinke

"I like to figure things out and solve problems."

~Temple Grandin

"The point is to solve problems, not point fingers."

~Jane Harman

"Some people think only intellect counts knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship, compassion and empathy."

~Dean Koontz

"My view is that...you ought to have a process where you can sit down and talk about things. How else do you solve problems?"

~Dan Miller

"No problem can be solved until it is reduced to some simple form. The changing of a vague difficulty into a specific, concrete form is a very essential element in thinking."

~J. P. Morgan

A Closer Look at Problem Solvers

At first glance, you may assume that being a problem *solver* is always preferable to being strictly a problem *identifier*. Think again. Problem-solving mode has its pros and cons as well.

Believe it or not, a problem solver who swoops in and fixes your every issue does you a big disservice. That's because some of life's greatest lessons are learned through trial and error. Fall down; get up; look back; adjust; try again!

However, when a problem solver's involvement causes, or assists, you to circumvent any vital stage in the learning process, in the end you miss out. (You also frequently end up repeating mistakes because you didn't learn the lesson on the first go-round.)

Problem solving needn't be all bad, though. Have you ever had someone simply dump a problem in your lap and literally (or figuratively) walk away? It leaves you with that "What just happened here?" feeling. You've got someone who's willing to show you what could go wrong/ is going wrong/ has gone wrong but who's unwilling to bust a brain cell to share anything that's even close to a plausible solution to the problem that's just been delivered. Familiar, isn't it? Well, now that you've experienced the agony of the problem-solving void, let me introduce you to the joy of the problem-solving partner.

A problem solver benefits you when that person becomes your partner in determining the needed course correction. She doesn't do the work for you. Instead, she assists you to examine the situation realistically, encourages digging deeper and not just resting on surface causes or fixes, and fosters an atmosphere of creative thinking about what's happening. Your partner may offer suggestions as you brainstorm together, but this person always gives you the latitude to reject or alter recommendations as you seek to develop approaches so that they fit you or your environment and get you closer to your desired outcome.

Where does that leave us? In a nutshell, good *problem identifiers* work with you to recognize impediments and to clarify the real issues that are hindering progress. Good *problem solvers* join forces with you to arrive at adjustments that will enable you to advance.

So, how well do *you* function as a problem identifier and a problem solver?

And, no matter the role you play for others, do you *have* productive problem-identifier and problem-solver support? If not, it's time to develop that relationship. It may be just the thing standing between you and your vision of yourself or your business.

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"I never worry about the problem. I worry about the solution."

~Shaquille O'Neal

"It is only in the process of accepting and solving problems that our ability to think creatively is enhanced, our persistence is strengthened, and our self-confidence is deepened."

~John Ortberg

"Every project is an opportunity to learn, to figure out problems and challenges, to invent and reinvent."

~David Rockwell

"When things aren't going right, he doesn't mind letting you know it, and that's good. If we can't identify problems, we certainly can't work on fixing them[.]"

~Rusty Wallace

"The first step in solving a problem is to recognize that it does exist."

~Zig Ziglar

About Executive Advantage

At **Executive Advantage**, we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

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