# ideas

original perspectives on life and
business from leading thinkers *Volume nᵒ 3*

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"A mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions"
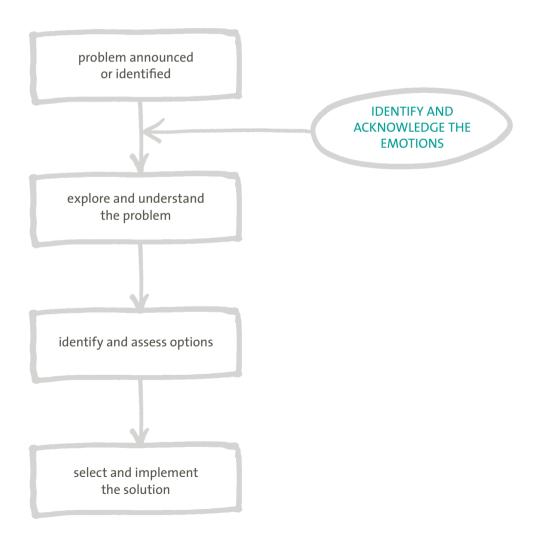
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

# "The most powerful conversations you can have are when you truly engage with the humanity of other human beings."

We all like to think that we are good at helping other people. But if we only focus on finding the right solution we are missing something. If we can identify the feelings at the heart of the problem then the person we are helping is far more likely to appreciate our advice – and appreciate us.

solving problems for human beings
## MARTIN MULCARE

**PROBLEM-SOLVING AND THE MISSING LINK**

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│   problem announced     │
│     or identified       │
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              │                          ╭─────────────────────╮
              ◄──────────────────────────│   IDENTIFY AND      │
              │                          │ ACKNOWLEDGE THE     │
              ▼                          │    EMOTIONS         │
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│  explore and understand │
│      the problem        │
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│ identify and assess options │
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│   select and implement  │
│      the solution       │
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## TRADITIONAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Problem solving has a proud and well-documented tradition. The structure of problem-solving algorithms is ideal for applying thorough and consistent methods to tackle practical challenges. They are designed to avoid emotion as emotion can inhibit rational thinking. After all, we do not want people emotionally attached to particular solutions! We want the best solution – as determined by the objective criteria selected for assessing the various potential options.

Traditional problem-solving methods work perfectly when we are fixing *things*. When a machine breaks down, for example, the maintenance crew swings into action:

1. Examine the machine
2. Analyse the cause of the breakdown
3. Understand the root cause
4. Identify potential remedies
5. Assess the possible solutions
6. Make a decision
7. Implement the fix

The rigour of such problem-solving models not only *appeals* to engineering types; they were also *designed* and *developed* by engineering types. The analytical approach matches the inanimate nature of the problems that we are addressing. It also often matches the personality types that are charged with fixing the problem. That is great, but what happens when the problem extends beyond 'things'?

## RISKS WITH TRADITIONAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Have you used or experienced someone using traditional problem-solving models for problems that involve real people? Did you get a feeling that something was missing? I can recall a visit to a doctor where he very proficiently swung into action using the same approach as the maintenance crew. The detailed diagnosis uncovered a symptom that was expertly treated; however, I do not believe he

identified the root cause of my ailment. As a result, I do not believe that I obtained the best advice. Furthermore, how did I feel? I did not have any sensation that the doctor dealt with me as a person and consequently I did not fully accept and adopt his solution.

When rational problem-solving techniques are applied to human beings there are three serious risks:
1. The analysis phase may only identify the symptoms, not the root cause.
2. The range of potential solutions may be limited (and exclude the best options).
3. The person may not gain the confidence needed to accept and apply the solution.

So what is missing?

## THE MISSING STEP: EMPATHY

As part of the analysis phase it is critical to identify *and acknowledge* the feelings experienced by the person with the problem. How might you identify these feelings? They may be immediately evident from the person's tone or body language. It is one thing to recognise that someone is very anxious but it is important to verbalise it in order to acknowledge that emotion. "You seem very anxious about this ..." (then listen to the response!). If the feelings are not immediately evident, employ simple questions to explore some more. "How are you feeling about the situation?" The person may not always admit their real feelings so their emotional state may need to be explored some more.

The acknowledgement step is an interesting exercise. There is a temptation to say something such as "I understand how you feel". This can easily lead to a validation of your understanding by recalling – and retelling – a similar experience. For example, "I know what it's like. I was made redundant back in the 90's ..." This 'autobiographical empathy' is not what the person needs. Remember, if it is a serious problem the conversation has to be about them – not you!

## The benefits of this step

Why would we stray into the dangerous territory of emotions when we are keen to solve someone else's problem? At a minimum, the acknowledgement of their feelings demonstrates genuine listening and understanding. Immediately there is some comfort that you are treating their problem as if it belongs to a person rather than a machine. This may give them to a sense of confidence knowing that they have 'come to the right person'.

There may also be a sense of relief that comes with openly expressing their feelings. This has the benefit of opening up the conversation. Putting the emotion on the table frees up space for thinking. This outcome is somewhat perverse – by starting with feelings, the balance of the conversation is likely to be more rational! In particular, the range of options that you might explore is likely to be wider when their emotional state has been downloaded.

There is another subtle benefit from the empathy step. Ultimately, the person will decide whether to accept your advice or proposed course of action. If your proposed solution aligns with their feelings then the probability of implementation has increased. In other words, by addressing the emotion, you can validate the advice or solution. ("If you ... then it will take some of your worries away").

## Applications

Let's look at some examples:

1. I was running a workshop on customer service principles and the question arose about behaviour in the Complaints Department. The employees in the Department were keen to help their customers but their enthusiasm to get to a solution prevented effective engagement. The scenario we role-played was typical of the complaints they had to manage:

   "You promised me that the order would be delivered by noon. It's now four o'clock and it still hasn't arrived. What the #%^ is going on?"

   They were trained, as per traditional problem-solving, to ask:

   "Do you have your order number so that I can check where it is on the system?"

I suggested an intermediate empathy step:

"That must be very frustrating for you ..."

When the participants in the workshop began to understand that when the empathy step is inserted first and a bit more steam blown off, the request for the order number is more readily accepted.

> It seems that most business cultures have a powerful orientation towards action. Generally, businesses measure employees on what they *do*. The emphasis on outcomes is not in itself a bad thing. However, it emphasises *ends* rather than *means*.

2. I was working with an executive who was, rightly, very conscious of the personal impact on his team when he was planning a change in his organisational structure. He recounted the response from one of his colleagues when the change was announced.

   "How come I am now reporting to Barry? I just don't think that is going to work!"

   The HR Manager, who was assisting him, then employed a traditional problem-solving approach:

   "Can I check your role and we can see how that fits with the new organisational chart?"

   Fortunately the executive intervened with an empathy question:

   "How are you feeling about the restructure?"

   In this example the empathy step was a critical element of the diagnosis. The core of the employee's concern could have been any one of a number of drivers (e.g., status/position, business functionality, personality clash, etc.) There was little value in exploring solutions until the employee's underlying mindset was understood.

3. At home, familiarity can result in a solution-oriented response which neglects the feelings of a family member. Consider the options when my wife exclaims ...

   "Damn! I can't find my keys!"

I find it hard to resist the temptation of asking
(as per traditional problem-solving methods):

> "Where did you leave them?"

If I am suitably in tune with her, I should remember
to apply the empathy step and ask:

> "That's so annoying isn't it? How can I help?"

I can assure you that the latter evokes a much
warmer reception than the former!

## WHY IS THIS DIFFICULT?

These examples help illustrate how valuable the
'empathy step' may be but they also indicate how
difficult it may be to regularly employ. Why is it hard
to do in reality?

It seems that most business cultures have a powerful
orientation towards action. Generally, businesses
measure employees on what they *do*. The emphasis
on outcomes is not in itself a bad thing. However,
it emphasises *ends* rather than *means*. It is not
surprising that employees have a strong bias toward
solving customer complaints or implementing new
organisational structures – and that this may result
in overlooking the *people* in the problem. This
phenomenon extends to our broader culture. The
'busy world' sensation means time is the commodity
in shortest supply. It is not easy to devote time to
uncovering emotions.

More provocatively – and speaking as one of
them – I suspect that many Australian males
feel uncomfortable about openly discussing
emotions. Male readers might not be prepared
to embrace a model that involves identifying and
addressing emotions.

Finally, the often unstated obstacle in modifying
our problem-solving techniques is our ego. If the
conversation and the solutions are going to be
about *them* then it cannot be about *us*. This is a
serious challenge!

If we can focus on the other *person* then we will find
that our problem-solving will become highly regarded.
Solutions will be more grounded and more likely to be
accepted. People will appreciate that they are treated
as people – and will appreciate us.

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**ARE YOU CAPABLE OF EMPLOYING
THE 'MISSING STEP'?**

If you answer "No" to any of the following questions,
you may be stuck with traditional problem solving:

1. Would you waste time exploring feelings when
   the solution is "obvious"?
2. Are you willing to recognise and name the
   feelings being experienced by the person
   you are talking to?
3. Are you genuinely prepared to put the other
   person first in order to solve their problems?

*Martin Mulcare*

**MARTIN** enjoys working with different types of people. He presents training programs for financial advisers and coaches on relationship skills. Martin is involved in customer service training for a diverse range of companies and presents the 'Business Essentials' program which focuses on developing people skills. He also acts as a business adviser to business owners who appreciate the need for external accountability.

Prior to his current portfolio of activities, Martin had more than 25 years experience in the financial services industry. He developed his financial and analytical acumen as an Actuary and then enjoyed financial and general management roles with two leading financial institutions.

Martin believes in balance and ensures that every week includes family, social, community, sporting and spiritual activities.

*Karen Nelson*

**KAREN** is a successful elephant tamer who works with organisations to *get things done*. After graduating from the University of Waikato with a Bachelor of Management Studies (BMS Hons) in 1991, Karen travelled extensively to develop her craft within large multi-national businesses.

Noted for her early success in delivering the core integrated business systems for PepsiCo Europe's 17 finance, procurement and manufacturing snack-food plants, Karen was engaged to design and broker the global fixed assets management solution for Reuters' 62 country-based operations.
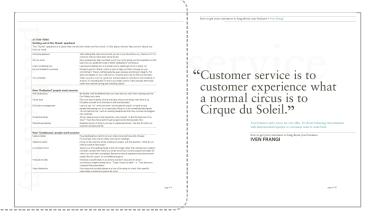
Leveraging these early accomplishments, Karen has continued to work independently with many organisations to trouble-shoot issues, design integrated solutions, turn-around failing projects, deliver change initiatives and launch new operations.

When not teaching others to become elephant tamers, Karen works directly with organisations of all sizes to help them design solutions, overcome barriers and deliver results. Karen is an expert at spotting and resolving the 'elephant in the room' – the obvious, yet ignored, issues preventing organisations from getting things done.

ORGANIC CREATIVE

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**MO FOX**

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ACTION ITEMS

"Customer service is to customer experience what a normal circus is to Cirque du Soleil."

how to get your customers to brag about your business:
**IVEN FRANGI**

bios

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