

other people's words

Without challenges we have nothing to keep us from going back to sleep.
– Anonymous, but obviously someone lying awake.

the problem with problems

Details vary depending upon which ancient Greek storyteller you prefer, but there once was a poor peasant named Gordias who decided to sell his wares from his ox cart in the nearby city of Phrygia. Unbeknownst to our protagonist, an oracle stood in front of elders at the high council pronouncing that their years of civil unrest and war would soon end because their future king was coming – and arriving by ox cart! As these type of fortuitous events seem to only happen in folklore, the townspeople immediately proclaimed an incredulous Gordias their new king as he rode into city, and in gratitude, the world's newest royal dedicated to Zeus (the supreme God in Greek mythology) his cart as a symbol of his gratitude.

The city build a large shrine at its acropolis, and Gordias tied his wagon to it using an exceptionally complex Turkish knot. As years and decades and eons passed, it become an enticing legend throughout the Mediterranean that whoever could untie the knot would become leader of all Asia.

One might assume the 'Gordian knot' – today, a synonym for any intractable, unsolvable puzzle – would have a similar ending to the story of the infamous sword embedded in stone, which Arthur removed (albeit wizardry intervention) to become the future king of Camelot. However, in this story, the famous character was none other than Alexander the Great, who came across the knot during his conquests of Asia Minor. He took one look at the gnarly and intricate braid and without hesitation used a dashing bit of brilliant creativity to solve the problem: he lifted his sword and hacked the knot to pieces, producing the required ends of the rope.

Alexander cheated, you may cry. Well no ... he certainly didn't honor the spirit of the problem, but then again, Alexander wasn't known for his contemplative patience any more than he was known for a lack of ambition to rule Asia. Regardless, his action was a masterstroke of creative thought: he used a striking solution (excuse the pun) to solve an exceedingly complex problem. ¹

The reason this story appeals to me is Alexander's focus on the problem. Understanding the *problem* is one of the most essential elements needed in creative thinking, if not in successful communications.

I believe most people in communications think their primary role is to develop and deliver key messages (for ourselves, for clients) to target audiences in a compelling and memorable way. More often than not, people write messages with no more guidance than a positive attitude and a good dictionary. Or, as a participant in one of my writing workshops said, "My job is to tell my client's good news to their consumers and the media."

Personally, I do not believe that simply conveying positive messages will necessarily compel the target audience to think or act differently, no matter how beautifully composed and vividly delivered. It's the equivalent of demanding someone to love you simply because you say they should.

I would prefer people believe their primary job in communications is to solve problems – more specifically, to address and eliminate communications problems by developing strategic messages and delivering them through creative ideas.

Ironically, the problem for many people in this conversation is the word *problem*. We tend to use the most common definition: *a complaint, misgiving or objection*. Or, *a situation, matter or person that presents perplexity or difficulty*. Another definition gets closer to my point: *A question to be considered, solved or answered*. ²

1. To cut through any complexity with utter simplicity is also known as an *Alexandrian solution*.

2. From dictionary.com

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In *The Concept of a Problem*, Gene Agre defines it exactly: *a problem is the gap between the current state of affairs and the desired state of affairs*. In other words, the 'current state of affairs' is now, or Point A, and the 'desired state of affairs' is the future, or Point B.

As it relates to communications, Point A is what the target audience thinks and behaves today, which is a result of their history, experience, expectations and background in relation to our company, reputation or product. Point B is what we want the target audience to think, believe or act. What prevents or dissuades the target audience from moving from Point A to Point B is the 'problem.' The bridge between Point A and Point B are messages carried by the creative idea. (See chart 1.)

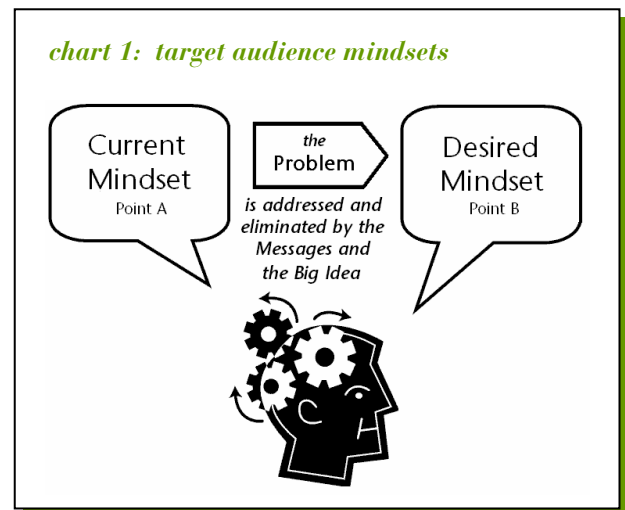
The problem derives from a very powerful element inside all of our minds, which psychologists call our *inner voice*, but I call *that little voice in the back of your head*. Whenever we hear or read any message, our inner voice silently talks to us, placing messages in context with our own self-interests.

If it's something you want to hear, or it comes from a credible source, our inner voice is favorable. If the message is irrelevant, inappropriate, unbelievable, not credible, or at odds with our own perceptions (which to us, is the truth), then our inner voice can speak very loudly indeed. It negatively influences our attitudes and ultimately our behavior, sometimes to the extreme point of making us believe or act the opposite.

Before we can convince our audiences to buy, vote, support or influence others on our behalf, we must determine what the collective inner voices will think upon hearing our messages, and why. This in turn tells us how to craft our messages to eliminate the problem, and what type of creative solutions might help to deliver those messages in an accessible and credible way.

It might seem to be excessively negative to address problems. Instead, as Bing Crosby instructed, why not *Acc-Cent-Tchu-Ate The Positive?*

First, as my grandmother said frequently: *Opportunities don't stand in the way of you being successful*. In other words, there's a reason why something doesn't happen. If you want something to happen, you have to get rid of the reason. Once you know what it is, you can fix it.



Second, don't think of the problem as always being horrible or devastating. It simply defines why we can't achieve our goal. For example, if we were launching a new product, the problem may be nothing more than the target audience has never heard of it or our company, and by default, may not want initially to give up their hard-earned money to buy it. On the other hand, the problem can be extreme, such as anger or hatred if the target audience believes you have caused a major injustice, committed a crime, been immoral, or feels betrayed. Another type of problem may be the most difficult of all to solve: apathy – our audience doesn't care.

In many situations, the target audience may simply be unaware of our product or our company, and be unwilling to trust us immediately. That's still a problem, but hardly one which is catastrophic.

Third, if we don't know what the problem is, we can't be creative. How will we know what to say? And how will we know how to deliver it? We'll recite our messages with great vigor, but the target audience may be uneducated, unfamiliar, uninterested, unimpressed – and more important, will listen to their inner voice over ours and do nothing. In the end, no sales increase, no prescriptions written, no policies changed.

The Point A-Point B analogy can also be used internally within our organizations. Point A is today's business environment. Point B is our business goal, communications objective, or project purpose. There are operational issues which prevent us from moving from Point A to Point B; for example, lack of infrastructure or resources, limited communications between departments, product delivery, sales training. If we don't address, marginalize or eliminate those issues in-house – preferably before we commence the external communications campaign – we won't reach our business goals.

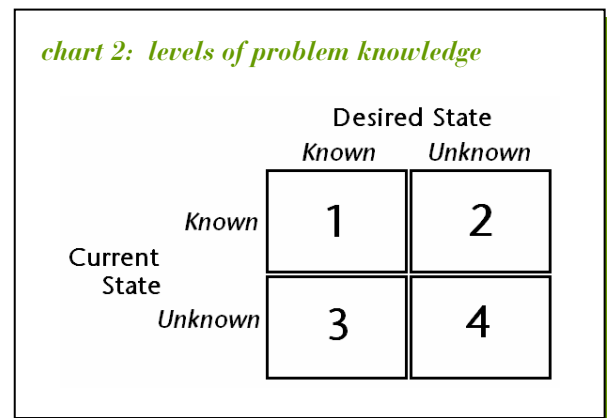
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Furthermore, the analogy applies to our employees, who have the same inner voice to balance the messages it receives from the company. If we don't understand and mitigate these internal perceptions, our organization as a culture won't enable the infrastructure, which won't ... oh, you get the picture. Indeed, this is turning out to be a big problem.

To solve a problem, it's important to understand what stage you are at in the problem-solving cycle. One of the very best books on creative thinking – *Creative Thinking in the Decision and Management Sciences* (sadly no longer in print) – James Evans uses a simple chart to explain how problem solving happens in steps. (See chart 2.)

Working on a matrix, the left side of the chart is the Current or Present State (Point A), divided into two categories: Known (I know precisely what the problem is) and Unknown (I do not know what the problem is). The top of the chart is the Desired State (Point B), divided into the same categories: Known (I know precisely what to do to solve the problem) and Unknown (I do not know what to do to fix the problem.) Thus, there are four stages.

- In **Box 4**, you don't know what the problem is (or may not be aware of the problem) and you don't know what plan or action to pursue.
- In **Box 3**, you don't know what the problem is, but you somehow have already generated an idea or have created a plan of action.
- In **Box 2**, you know what the problem is, but don't know what plan or action to pursue.
- In **Box 1**, you know what the problem is and what to do.



To effectively solve any problem, you have to be in Box 1. You can't solve a problem from any other spot, or if you do, you somehow have articulated the problem and/or developed a creative solution – either of which means you are moving into Box 1. More interesting to consider, how many times do we try to solve a problem before moving to Box 1? Isn't Box 3 the most dangerous person on Earth? This person has an idea but doesn't know what the problem is. (You could say this person has an idea, and yet, has no idea.)

Finally, if you are in Box 4, understand your current state first before deciding what your desired state should be. In other words, you would move from Box to Box 4 to Box 2, then to Box 3, then to Box 1.

six steps rules to solve problems creatively

C.E. Watson initially wrote of the six basic difficulties in theoretical problem solving³, which I adapted as rules to consider when solving communications problems so you can be more creative. Consider any of these as you move from any box toward Box 1.

1. Recognize there's a problem. It is simply too easy to create messages which are based on our own self-interests as a company or organization. Don't be blind to the problems in the minds of the target audiences. Worse, don't miss the opportunity to learn what they think directly. Worst of all, don't decide to ignore it.

Being sensitive to problems in general is also the richest source of opportunities. You might learn that a target audience needs this or that, and 'this or that' may turn out to be your Next Big Creative Idea. As the cliché goes, *Necessity is the mother of invention*.

2. Define the problem. Albert Einstein said in his 1938 classic *The Evolution of Physics: The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution*. Later, he said *The problem defined is a problem half-solved*.

When defining your problem, write it as a problem instead of a general statement. For example, *Compliance is a general statement. Patients don't take their drugs regularly is a problem*. The latter example also helps inspire creativity: so what would we do to encourage patients to take their drugs more regularly?

⁴ Watson, C.E. *The Problems of Problem Solving*, from *Business Horizons* 19 August 1976, pages 88-94.

3. Identify the real problem. In reality, you'll rarely have a single, simple problem. More typical, you'll have several external and internal problems. Two pieces of advice: separate internal problems from external ones, and solve the internal ones first. Second, don't solve a lot of problems at the same time. The technical word for a lot of problems is a mess. You cannot solve a mess. It's similar to a rubber-band ball. In a figurative way, you have to pull off all of the rubber-bands which make the ball, place the individual bands on a table, and ask yourself which rubber band (problem) do I have to solve first?

Because we often have so many problems to deal with, let's also give ourselves a break and NOT focus on problems which we can do nothing about. I often hear these Herculean problems: *It's a bad economy, We have very strong competition, Our product is third (or sixth!) to market.* These problems are either the cause or the effect of the problem. What's the real problem causing this situation? Or, what's this situation causing our target audiences to do in response? For example, the problem isn't *Strong competition*. Trust me friends, you'll always have competition. The problem is *Our product has no differentiation*, and as communicators, we can be creative with our solutions.

4. Thoroughly understand the problem. Truly, shame on us if we don't do this. Whether it's a lack of information or knowledge, or a reliance upon assumptions without justification, we can't solve a problem unless we understand it. Through understanding comes insights, which as we know, creates ideas. We only get these insights by using one of the basic elements which makes us human, but one which we often forget to employ: curiosity.

5. Address how to eliminate the problem. I often see clients and companies work tremendously hard on its strategy and creativity, but then allow – or are surprised by – a lack of infrastructure or resources. Some things we can't predict, but we can plan ahead. And a final point here: don't let the how become too complex. Try to keep the problem as simple as possible, the same thing is true with the messages and idea.

6. Generate as many creative ways as possible to solve the problem. Here, we come full circle. This is where good understanding of the problem creates the strategic insights which guides the creative process. Your brain is the most brilliant problem-solving tool ever created. When it knows the exact problem, it can create many possible solutions which in tandem achieves the business result and solves the communications problem. Once you have a significant number of ideas, you can always stand back and select the best idea. Here too the Point A-Point B analogy is helpful. You can mentally place the best ideas between Point A and Point B, and ask yourself: will these ideas compel the target audience to change their belief, opinion or behavior?

If after all this, you still believe that your job is to focus on the positive and to communicate the opportunities, then I'm sure we can agree on my grandmother's wisdom: *All problems are ultimately opportunities.*



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