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Are you a Problem-Solving Super Hero?

This article comes with permission from *Conflict* *Resolutionary*, Tammy Lenski.   See her Blog at <http://lenski.com/problem-solving-superhero/> (you may have to create a log-in)…  She is speaking from her previous experience as a college dean, although this definitely fits for chairs as well. I can’t agree with her more, and have had many similar experiences early in my career.  Enjoy!

Years ago, a student came to my office with a problem. I was a dean at the time and I had many appointments like this in an average day.

Sometimes they were problems with a professor, sometimes they were problems with a parent, sometimes with a boss at an off-campus job. Not uncommonly they were problems with a roommate, a friend, or someone in campus administration. Most of these problems involved conflict.

To give you a sense of what it’s like to be a dean, I’ll tell you that when I left that job to begin a new career as a conflict resolutionary, one of the good-bye gifts from my staff was a fire extinguisher “to remember the job by.”

This student came in and sat down across from me at my office conference table. She had a problem with a professor she believed had it in for her. She wanted me to talk to the professor and persuade him to give her another chance on an important test she’d failed.

With each detail she told me about her situation, I could see her problem inching its way toward me across the table. On she went and closer crept the problem until it was right in front of me, hovering on the table edge, about to tumble over into my lap.

If you’re a leader or manager, this story is probably familiar because it’s not uncommon for employees to send their problems across the table to you, too. In fact, your ability to fix problems may well be part of what led to your career advancement. It can feel very gratifying, even downright triumphant, to sort out a sticky conflict between employees. There are days as a dean when I quite justifiably could have donned a superhero cape.

But that kind of let-me-save-you problem solving heroism comes at a price: Burnout. Fatigue. Falling behind on other important responsibilities. Employees who keep coming back for more help, for more of your running interference, mistaking your problem-solving prowess for permission to hand off conflict resolution to you. Employees who don’t develop their own problem-solving skills, the very ones they’ll need for professional success and later advancement.

Sometimes, it’s not the employee who makes the mistake. Sometimes it’s us: We mistake short-term efficiency (“I’ll just get this dealt with and then it will be done”) with long-term effectiveness. Some problems just seem to keep coming back no matter what we try.

That student sitting across the conference table from me had been in my office before. In fact, she told me, I’d been so helpful to her when she had a problem with the registrar that she was sure I could help her this time, too.

It is seductive to hear this. Who doesn’t want to hear how helpful they are?

I put my hands out to stop the problem from tumbling into my lap. I covered it with my hands and could feel it trying to free itself from my grip. It was a slippery little sucker.

I said to the student, “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to take this problem you’ve just nudged over to me and I’m going to send it back across the table to you.” My hands moved across the table, then gave a final little shove of the problem toward her.

She started down at the table, frowning. “What do you want me to do with it?” I could tell she didn’t like the problem’s close proximity.

“Instead of calling your professor and stepping into the middle of this, I’m going to help you figure out what to do. He’ll be more impressed if you handle this brilliantly on your own than if I do it for you. And I’ll still be here later if you need me and you won’t have wasted my help on something I know you can ace yourself.”

You can be a problem solving superhero without doing the fixing yourself or using advice-giving as your most-used tool. It’s freeing for you, professionally useful for your employees, and saves your skill and talent for the difficult situations that really do warrant your deep involvement.

*In my years in higher education, I’ve witnessed too many times a similar scenario, where a Chair or Department Head has eagerly tried to resolve a faculty member’s problem, only to find that he/she was not given the whole story.  The unhappy result was finding themselves in a tenuous position, having taken sides much too early in a conflict, and allowing for “triangulation” by those involved.  He/she became part of the problem instead of the solution.  If handing the conflict back to the true owner doesn’t provide resolution, then the follow-up must include conversations with all involved.  These conversations may begin one-on-one and privately, but at some point, should continue with all involved together with Chair as moderator in the conversation – providing a cool head, an objective voice, and the focus of one who has the best interests of all at heart.  If that still doesn’t work as intended, you can always call me.*

*Best,*

*Kristine*

Kristine Paranica

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701-231-5114

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