

Creating a Performance Mindset with Three Words

by Paul Reali



Paul Reali is a trainer, facilitator, writer, and activist. He is the founder of *OmniSkills, LLC*, in Charlotte, NC, and is the author of *H2 Solve Wicked Problems: Getting Started with Creative Problem Solving*. To learn more about CPS, visit creativeproblemsolving.com or e-mail paul@omniskills.com.

“Don’t bring me a problem without proposing a solution,” was perhaps my favorite expression during my early days as the leader of an entrepreneurial startup. It was my second formal leadership position, and while I was much better at the role by then, I might still be forgiven for being so wrong.

The intention was good: to prevent complaining, blaming, and buck-passing. And the policy did have positive effects. It minimized the “it’s your company; you need to fix this” mentality, and changed it to “this is our company; we need to fix this.” I’m certain that it increased engagement by giving people more control. And it tapped their intrinsic motivation because the problems people brought to me were by definition things they cared about.

On the other hand, it prevented some problems from being brought forth because people did not always want to solve a thing or did not know how to solve it. Also, I was likely to find holes in the proposed solutions, or to discard them, and solve the problem differently. This could be disheartening to them, which at the time I did not understand. The problem would be solved, wouldn’t it? Isn’t that what they wanted?

Well, no. And it was my policy that caused the dissatisfaction. Had I asked people to freely bring me problems, and then solved them (either with or without their help), all might have been fine. But I wasn’t asking for just problems: I was also asking for solutions. The problems were external to them, but the solutions were *internal*:

they came from inside that person who was standing in my office. By discarding or changing the solutions, I was making an inadvertent negative judgment about the person.

Everything that went wrong with my “bring solutions” policy did so because I was asking for solutions *too soon in the process*.

The process in question here is Creative Problem Solving (CPS), a method for finding novel solutions to problems. CPS requires that a problem be clearly identified and framed before attempting to solve it. What my staff were calling problems were not actually “problems” in the sense of CPS or even of performance improvement. What I was hearing were complaints (“I don’t have enough time to do this task”) or data (“Three people this week said they had not received their confirmation on time”). Since the problems had not actually been identified, the “solutions” tended to be early ideas, unformed and unready, and often addressing the wrong problem in the first place.

Now in my third company leadership role – and more to the point, now that I know and

“Everything that went wrong with my “bring solutions” policy did so because I was asking for solutions *too soon in the process*.”

practice CPS – I have a different policy. The goal of the new policy is to encourage a *real* solutions mindset. Thinking about solutions means thinking about performance: how to get things done, how to get them done better.

“Since the problems had not actually been identified, the “solutions” tended to be early ideas, unformed and unready, and often addressing the wrong problem in the first place.”

The new policy is actually a method, and it has just three words: “How might we...” “How might we...” – or HMW, for those who love an abbreviation – turns a complaint or a piece of data into a quest for solutions. The “we” invites participation, which increases engagement and taps intrinsic motivation – and keeps leaders like me from unilaterally fixing embryonic solutions at the expense of those things.

Consider this statement: “I don’t have enough time to do this task.” Using “How might we...” as a frame, we would articulate the actual

problem more clearly and generate solution-oriented statements like these: “HMW free up some of my time?” “HMW reduce the time it takes to do this?” “HMW determine if someone else should do it?”

Another example: “Three people this week said they had not received their confirmation on time.” Using “How might we...” to re-frame, we generate statements like these: “HMW make sure all confirmations are delivered?” “HMW confirm that confirmations are received?” Note that in this case, these two questions would produce radically different solutions: one addresses a problem with the *delivery* of the confirmation, the other addresses a problem with the *receipt* of it. Framing the questions in different ways helps us to identify what the problem actually is.

A solutions mindset is a performance mindset. With three words, you can help move your organization or team (or family) from complaining to solving and performing. Your mission, then is to bring this question back to the office: “How might we bring ‘how might we’ into our workplace.