

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Two Minutes to Stop Looking at Your Work Problems Like a Clinical Psychologist.

There's a better way.

We got the following complaint from "Norman," a senior partner at a well-known law firm:

“My years of experience SHOULD count for something! Key people at my firm who are younger don’t take me seriously. They are immature. They won’t listen.

“I could retire. But why should I? So much of my identity is tied up in being a partner of this law firm.

What would I do if I retired?

I feel like the guy in the ‘Old Man River’ song from the George and Ira Gershwin’s musical, ‘Porgy and Bess:’ “I’m tired of living and scared of dying.”

Norman’s complaint is framed as an existential psychological crisis—tired of not being taken seriously yet not willing to let go of the income and social status associated with law firm partnership.

Is the Issue Psychology or Social Systems?

In defining the problem, Norman has taken on the role of unlicensed clinical psychologist. The problem is younger partners are immature and do not listen. The problem is Norman’s identity is so tied to his job he cannot let go.

What is the implication for Norman by defining his problem as a psychological issue?

Norman's life will be better if THEY change or HE changes.

How likely is that to happen?

We asked Norman to consider this alternative analysis:

“Your perception of “their” lack of ability to listen is not a function of you OR them. It is a problem of poor relationship dynamics. You are part of this problem.

The key to change is not to change yourself or to change your younger colleagues.

The key is to alter the social dynamics.”

Viewing problems as a psychologist leads to a binary conclusion: either they change, or I must change.

Viewing problems through a system dynamics perspective leads to this conclusion: If I can change one part of the dysfunctional communication system, perhaps the system will change.”

The Case of “Negative Norman”

One of the reasons Norman was such a great attorney is that he could identify legal problems before his law firm peers and his corporate clients. In every major decision, Norman approached things as a skeptic.

Skepticism is a useful perspective to have as an attorney. It certainly helped Norman. But this skeptical attitude towards life was also creating problems for Norman's present and future.

Some younger General Counsels preferred not to deal with Norman directly. They found him too negative. Within the firm, young associates called him Negative Norman since he could tell you what was wrong with your work. He seldom issued compliments to young attorneys for work done well.

As young attorneys joined the firm, they were warned by their slightly older colleagues: stay away from Negative Norman.

In our work with Negative Norman, we suggested he examine the communications issues as an open social system. His mission is to “unfreeze” the system:

We recommended that Norman use the word “appreciate” as often as possible, even if he didn't particularly feel appreciative.

Under Norman's old way of communications, if a young Associate named Sandy suggested an idea, Norman might say, “Sandy's ideas are easy to say but actually hard to implement. She doesn't seem to be sensitive to the implications of X, Y, or Z.”

With a mandate to use the word “appreciate” as often as possible, Norman’s response now became: “I appreciate that Sandy took the time to come up with her suggestion. It has the positive value of 1, 2, and 3. At the same time, there are the X, Y, and Z factors that need to be considered. Is there a way of minimizing the problems while taking advantage of Sandy’s great perspective?”

The simple suggestion to use the word “appreciate” forced Norman to unlearn his past habit of success of being skeptical.

We also asked Norman to use the word “appreciate” whether or not he “felt” appreciative. Our mission was to use the word to change the communication system and not to change Norman’s personality.

Good Intentions Do Not Work.

The world is full of good intentions. We never questioned Norman's good intentions. All we did was inserted a simple language structure into his communications: ‘appreciate.’

That simple change began to unfreeze previously frozen communication patterns.

Once he saw that the simple word “appreciate” could unfreeze relationships, he began using it more often on his own.

In time, what started out as a “word gimmick” became owned by Norman and is now associated with Norman. Young Associates now refer to Norman as “warm” and as a “great teacher.”

We altered social perception. We did not change basic personality structure.

Below is another Norman story:

Norman used to take a correctly typed contract given to him by his assistant as a “given.”

His attitude was “That’s what we pay this person to do. Why make a big deal someone simply doing the job the person is being paid to do?”

Norman's new mission, however, was to use the word "appreciate" as often as possible.

Now Norman reviews typed documents, leaves his office and tells the assistant how much he appreciates the fine work being done on his behalf and on behalf of his clients.

He is rewarded with a bright smile.....and a dramatic reduction in assistant turnover.

The Importance of Systems Thinking.

This simple case of Norman provides key ideas behind a systems approach. Our intervention did NOT focus on changing personality or values. It first helped Norman focus on focusing on one habit of success.

Learning and unlearning are not two sides of the same coin. They may be different coins entirely. Changing past behavioral habits is difficult. It will not take place with good intentions. It requires structure.

Srithika & Bhattacharyya (2009) argue that unlearning taps into organizational and personal resistance, distrust, power dynamics, and other sources of conflict. An "Appreciative Inquiry" approach like the one we did with Norman is more suitable in negating these negative consequences. Appreciative Inquiry begins with the assumption that something is working well rather than focusing on what is not working. By focusing on positive outcomes, anxiety, fear, and stress is reduced.

In Norman's case we did NOT focus on how to change his values or how to change other people. We simply suggested that Norman ADD the word "appreciate" to his already successful skeptical approach to problems. He now had to integrate skepticism and appreciation rather than reject a behavioral habit that has worked so well for him in the past.

Summary and Conclusions

We began this piece with the existential issue faced by so many senior-level people in professional service organizations:

“I’m tired of my lack of influence within the firm but afraid to give up the income and social standing of partnership.”

We provided a conceptual structure that forced him to verbalize appreciation yet retain his skeptical approach.

This framework is consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry framework.

That simple suggestion forced him to unlearn old habits of skepticism and insert new words. In Norman’s case, changing the phrases and the words from negative to positive changed the dynamics of his relationships with peers and those who reported to him.

No Need to Change Your Feelings:

It is important to remember that we never asked Norman to change his feelings.

We only asked him to change his verbalizations. As Negative Norm received positive reactions to his new verbalizations his feelings indeed began to change. We changed the communications system.

Reference

Srithika, T. M., & Bhattacharyya, S. (2009). Facilitating organizational unlearning using appreciative inquiry as an intervention. *Vikalpa*, 34(4), 67-78.

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Stybel Peabody provides companies with “leadership and career success” for valued senior level talent. Core services include retained search (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership development coaching, and executive-level outplacement.

For a free 30-minute consult, contact:

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