

THE BIG HOW

WHERE STRATEGY MEETS SUCCESS

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THE BIG HOW



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CHAPTER 1

THE BIG DILEMMA

Look before you leap. You've heard it many times and tossed it into the pile of clichés, easily dismissed. Still, the simplest of sayings are often the truest...and the hardest to follow.

Because we don't look first, we subject ourselves to false starts. We leap again and again, as if as if next time we'll land exactly where we need to be.

What's with all the hurriedness? Why is it that false starts are avoidable, but leaping before we look is hard to resist?

We're anxious, impatient, and zealous. We're busy, and our priorities abound. We focus on the immediate want, and not the goal. And, too often, our initial assumptions are off. We walk right by the very place we should be digging.

Sometimes it pays to take a second look at what we assume are problems. We see them through narrowed optics that don't account for all the viewpoints to consider. Problems we think are cause for immediate attention are often symptoms of a bigger problem.

Before we dive headlong into solving mode and identification of a strategy (what this book is all about), pause with me for a few moments. Ponder the problem that hides in plain sight. This is the

core problem upon which all others hinge, and I'm going to share with you a simple and effective way of identifying it.

Things don't often present themselves as challenges or problems unless they ultimately effect a struggle, leading to a dilemma. A dilemma is this: a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, especially ones that are equally undesirable¹.

Said more plainly, something isn't a problem until it's a problem—a moment in time when we are forced to choose between two or more options, sometimes both objectionable.

Dilemmas come in all forms. It might be a work dilemma, a personal dilemma, a relationship dilemma or even an existential dilemma. But, what all dilemmas have in common is that they push us to choose. And choice often means change. This is the kind of change that leads to doing something that takes us outside our comfort zones.

DILEMMA



CHOICE



CHANGE

*A dilemma leads us to make a choice,
which brings about change.*

Dilemmas, in effect, push us toward choices. Of course, there is always the choice to do nothing. But even choosing to do nothing is a choice that leads to outcomes.

If you agree that this basic logic holds for dilemmas, choice and change, would it not serve us to take a step back and fundamentally understand the dynamics of a dilemma? I'm talking about the parts of the dilemma that are both true and important. I'll give you a highly condensed, but profound example:

Once upon a time, there was a young boy who was shy, reserved and quiet. He wasn't like most other boys. Every day, he would go through life surrendering to his fear of speaking up and being heard. As the boy grew older, he would try to compensate for his overwhelming shyness and reserved nature. He would work hard and try harder, but he would often experience setbacks and missed opportunities as a result of what he generally thought was his own level of motivation or inability—not being smart enough, trying hard enough or working tirelessly enough. There were times when he would blame others, grow angry and even turn his anger inward, all to experience even greater disappointment and sadness. It wasn't long before the boy, who was now a man, began to experience even greater turmoil.

The man, as a boy, had adopted and internalized the idea that it was ultimately incumbent on him to seek the approval and affection of others in order to be happy, successful and accepted. Deep down, he had somehow assumed that he was simply a shy and reserved person, and that there was nothing he could do to fundamentally change this.

What he learned in time, and upon deeper reflection, was that his reserved nature was not the problem. The real problem lay in not giving himself permission to passionately value himself, and without the need for approval from others.

The nature of his dilemma had to do with the choices he would have to make in order to find happiness and fulfillment. His choice came down to actions that would either place the perceived needs of others before his own, or the validate first his own feelings and

ideas, before acting. He already knew that he had consistently found disappointment in the former. And so, because he now understood the nature of his dilemma, his choices (in order to bring about positive change) became clear to him.

As you can see, perspective is everything when it comes to assessing a dilemma. Perspective involves self-reflection, introspective thinking, seeking out the opinions of others and time. The bottom line is to know your dilemma. Know it inside and out. If you know it, determining your choices becomes a surmountable, and even a satisfying endeavor.

IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE OF A DILEMMA

One of the key reasons both organizations and people get off track with strategy (if they have one at all) is that they don't identify the true root cause of their dilemma. Why is this? More often than not, the answer is simple—because they don't take the time and effort. They make false assumptions or superficial judgments without stopping to dig a little beneath the surface and see what's at the heart of what's bothering them. It's not rocket science. Most of the time, it's just parsing through multi-faceted situations, looking beyond one's own point of view, and seeing the bigger picture.

The goal in working through any dilemma is to see it for what it is. This isn't about pointing out problems. Rather, it's about uncovering the underlying dynamic that has led to a dilemma in order to effectively and efficiently solve it once and for all.

I'll share with you two hypothetical examples of two very different everyday problems that will illustrate the difference between a perceived problem and the underlying dynamic that equates to the true problem.

PROBLEM 1: MY DOG, LUCY

Situation: I'm a dog owner with a dilemma

Problem: My dog, Lucy, is always running away

Symptoms (evidence of the problem):

- Every time I open the door, she runs out.
- Whenever I take her outside to walk, she's constantly getting away from me to chase after cars or other dogs.
- She seems unpredictable and difficult to control anytime we're together outside of my home.

Underlying Dynamic or True Problem: I lack the knowledge, understanding and consistency in how to train and/or exercise discipline with my dog both for her own safety and for my own peace of mind.

On the surface, the problem manifests itself in the form of Lucy, my dog, running away. And, if I stopped there, my choices would be very limited, a dilemma of undesirable choices:

- Scold Lucy every time she runs away
- Not let Lucy outside as much
- Give Lucy up

None of these limited options would be satisfying or effective.

However, the true nature of the problem goes further back. The dynamic that has allowed this problem to manifest itself is the fact that I never took the time and energy to gain an understanding of how to train Lucy and set firm boundaries with her. How do I uncover the true problem?

I ask these types of questions:

- Why is Lucy running away? Is there a trigger? If it's habitual with her, then why? Is there a deeper cause?
- Is Lucy's running away a symptom of something larger that I'm not seeing or that I'm dismissing?
- Is there a bigger dynamic going on here that's leading up to Lucy running away?

In my line of self-questioning, what I'm looking for is a problem or larger dynamic that is within my control—my ability to affect or to have an impact to change the outcome in my favor. In this case,

it leads me to the fact that Lucy has never been trained, nor had any significant discipline introduced to her by her owner, me. Suddenly, there's a root problem or cause that I have the ability to impact. And that leads me to a choice that will probably involve change in order to impact a favorable outcome.

Here's a very different and more challenging problem.

PROBLEM 2: A BUSINESS SEGMENT IN DECLINE

Situation: Department store retail is in decline

Problem: More people are shopping online, and fewer people are willing to shop in large, mall-based, luxury department stores

Symptoms (evidence of the problem):

- Lower year-over-year same store sales (brick-and-mortar)
- Less foot traffic in stores
- The declining success of short-term in-store promotions
- Marketing campaigns that fall flat (including celebrity product lines and endorsements)
- Failing (fewer) department store chains and industry consolidation
- Greater demands from retailers on clothing- and merchandise-manufacturers
- Steady or increased online sales performance of the same department stores
- Fierce competition from smaller, more nimble specialty retailers

Underlying Dynamic or True Problem:

A retail industry that's largely clinging to models and methods of the past for procuring, merchandising and selling clothing, accessories and other soft goods to today's shoppers.

Yes, one could look at the symptoms of current brick and mortar department stores and think the problem is with the new

competition—the Internet. If so, one might assume the solution be found in using different versions of the same old tactics to lure customers back into stores, or in catering to Millennials and younger shoppers in order to get them to spend more. However, this sort of thinking places the solution solely in the realm of tactics, and within the framework of a false assumption of the true problem.

To be clear, tactics are individual actions. They are often confused with strategy. Strategy, on the other hand, is an overall approach that unifies actions to reach a greater end. Strategy is the way a problem is solved. If you were to attempt to assign a strategy to this situation, there either would not be one, or it would be no different than the sum of the current and disjointed tactics, which are clearly *not* working.

The deeper problem, in my opinion, and having studied this particular subject on behalf of clients, is the department store model itself. It no longer accommodates today's shoppers (and hasn't for some time). Items are still hard to find, there's no sense of gratification in shopping because it's dependent on slow processes, limited numbers of colors & sizes, long wait times, fewer customer service representatives than ever, and outdated service models. These are just some of the reasons why shoppers have migrated to the online model. It's a better and more gratifying alternative.

This problem is more nuanced. There are several facets to it but, again, the key to identifying the problem is the same. It involves parsing through the larger dynamics of the situation to uncover the root problem—one that has the potential to be within one's reach.

Understanding the true nature of the problem in this scenario, one's options open up in different directions. For example, a department store could choose to change its model, it could spin off a series of smaller stores targeted to younger audiences, it could try the store-within-a-store concept, or it could venture into a hybrid model of both a smaller retail store concept combined with the best elements of the online shopping experience. Regardless of the strategic approach, these are all options that pivot on the dynamic of defining and understanding the true nature of the problem.

You may already understand the nature of your problem. However, I would add a word of caution if you've spent very little time trying to see it for what it is. There are plenty of situations where people misidentify the nature of their struggle and end up taking actions that either have little or no impact on the real problem. Or worse, one can unintentionally make a negative situation even more miserable. The point is to make sure you know what you're up against before you prescribe yourself a unified approach (i.e. strategy) and a corresponding set of actions. You'll be glad you did.

Allow me to provide one more example. This one isn't so hypothetical. It's from my own professional circumstances. It took me years to work out this problem, but is fundamental in demonstrating how we oftentimes make assumptions about problematic situations without stopping to examine their true nature.

IMMATURITY AND THE QUEST FOR PERSPECTIVE

When you're young and green, you assume a job is a series of activities or tasks you're to fulfill. On the surface, this is true. Early in my career, I thought my duty was to get to know each job task and discover (or mimic) the best way to carry it out.

However, what I ultimately discovered for myself is that this can be a very limiting situation. By getting better at carrying out tasks, I was basically ensuring my entrenchment in work positions. Early on, this became a pattern for me. I was good to great at my job, but bored or discouraged or miserable because I wasn't challenged. Although there may have been room for me to grow, I was ensuring that I was seen as best suited for the position to which I was assigned.

I thought, throughout various part-time positions, that my problem was that I was not working hard enough, not learning well enough or not being good enough at assigned tasks. At times I also thought that I was in the wrong job. If I didn't like it, or I couldn't learn anything useful from it, then I was passing time in a dead-end situation. I was collecting a paycheck and nothing more.

What I failed to identify was the real problem. And, false identification of my problem led to working harder to do even better

at my assigned tasks. This caused me to second guess myself (a lot), which in turn, led to me sometimes not being effective at even basic assigned tasks. You see the pattern.

Over the years, I have discovered that my true problem was not seeing myself or my job as being a part of the greater success of the organization. I didn't sense a responsibility to look beyond the tasks of the jobs I had to the bigger needs of the businesses for which I worked. I wasn't compelled to feel a sense of ownership.

Seeing my true problem required a shift in my perspective. Could I have been better trained and motivated in the right direction? Sure. Could someone have pulled me aside and told me what I was doing was self-limiting? Of course. But, the true source of my problem was both within my realm of understanding, and within my ability to do something about in order to better my situation.

Until you can identify the true problem at hand and from a perspective that empowers you to change the situation, you'll be challenged to make the right choices which can ultimately lead you to constructing a strategy that will move you beyond a present dilemma.

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