

The Deeper Need

Address the deeper need of emotional validation before offering solutions to problems says Jason Liem

WRITER
JASON W
BIRKEVOLD
LIEM

When was the last time you were upset about something? Perhaps you had a friend or colleague who was trying to help you with a situation. They sat with you listening as you described the problem. They then offered you suggestions as to how to solve your problem. Instead of feeling helped you found yourself getting irritated. You couldn't fathom where the irritation was coming from, because after all they were only trying to be helpful.

Perhaps the roles were reversed, and you were the friend who was the listener. That you were the one who offered suggestions and solutions. But to your dismay instead of your friend being grateful you discovered that you have somehow managed to upset them even more.

When we look at either scenario it seems the person who is upset seems to be asking for help, and the person who is listening offers help. Unfortunately, instead of feeling helped the upset person seems to be even more agitated.

The Need for Emotional Validation

Yes, it's true the upset person has the need to find a solution to their problem. But what we often fail to recognise is that there is a deeper need to be met before the need of a solution. And that is the need for a person to feel emotional validation. People want to know that it is acceptable for them to feel what they are feeling. They want their friend or colleague to recognise this.

From a rational and logical perspective we may roll our eyes. There's a problem and here is the solution. Solve it and move on! Unfortunately, human beings generally don't



work in this way. We are emotionally-based creatures and to steam-roll over emotions (again unintentionally) leaves most of us in an unresolved state of mind.

This can be problematic when we go straight to offering solutions. What is implied (although unintentionally) is that there is no longer a reason to feel upset because you now have an answer to your question – a solution to your conundrum. The upset person picks up on the subtext that their feelings no longer have any legitimacy since the problem can be resolved. It is this subtext that adds fuel for even a greater emotional fire.

Become a Sounding Board

My suggestion to those who want to improve how they can help others work through problems is to change how they respond after a friend or colleague shares their thoughts and feelings.

Instead of going immediately into solution mode, such as 'How about doing it this way...'

or 'Have you considered...?' we could respond by reflecting back their feelings. For example, you could say something along the lines of 'I guess I would be angry if I faced that same situation'. 'I can understand being upset if I was in your shoes'. 'I think it's natural to feel worried.'

Once a person feels that it is 'normal' to feel what they are feeling, there is a sense of relief and emotional validation. They relax and start to think less about their feelings and more about 'how to solve' their situation. When the listener reflects the emotion, a person is feeling he/she will feel listened to at a deep level. This is usually the tipping point that moves a person from a problem – oriented mindset to a solution – oriented one.

When a person is feeling worried, angry, frustrated or scared, as much as you might want to 'solve' their emotions, the responsibility does not lie with you but with them. People need to sort out their own feelings.

It is helpful to remember when a person comes to talk to you about a problem, it's because they trust you and know you're someone who really listens. The truth is they are talking to you because they want a sounding board – someone to help them work through their thoughts and feelings.

Most of the time we logically know what we have to do to move forward. But we need to first address the deeper need of emotional validation before the need for a solution. Once that is accomplished, we can more readily move into a reflective and solution-oriented mindset.

about the author



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs to individuals and to teams. Learn more at www.MINDtalk.no.

