INNOVATION

Five Things I Know About Solving Persistent Problems: *Stop What Isn't Working*

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THE INFLUENCE GURU

If your past solutions had worked, the problem would no longer exist. Five ways to open up a new set of possibilities.

1 Stop doing what you've tried in the past.

Make a list of everything you've tried up to the present and then choose to stop doing any and all of them, even if you believe they are the right things to do. If they had worked, the problem would no longer exist. Your solutions have now become part of the problem system. If you do something different from what you have done in the past, the other person (or object) will eventually need to give you a different response – which may lead to a new set of possible solutions.

2 Identify your limiting assumptions and reverse or move past them.

Examine your previous solutions carefully for evidence of the assumptions behind them. Ask yourself, "What would I do if I didn't believe X to be true?" Try reversing some of your most common assumptions and then generating ideas for solutions. See if you can identify the boundaries of the area where you're searching for solutions (categories, groups of people, etc.) and move beyond those limits.

3 Look for and disrupt ongoing patterns.

Don't ask, "How did the problem start? Instead, ask, "How does the problem continue?" Focus on preventing the continuation of the problem. The system that supports the persistence of the problem is different from the one that existed when the problem began.

4 Reframe the problem.

Find a way to reframe the problem as an opportunity for creative thinking. Use the sentence-starter, "How can we…" rather than "Why can't we…" There are usually many ways to frame a problem. Try generating a list of 10 – 15 different ways to look at it, then choose one that's different from the current frame, has no solution embedded in it, is an unusual way to look at it – and generate solutions based on that frame. Then try another. Our solution set is limited by the way we have framed the problem, so expand your framing and you'll have more solutions to choose from and develop.

5 Use a metaphor as a bridge to solution.

Transform the problem into a metaphor and develop solutions in another context, then apply them back to the reframed problem. Don't worry if they seem odd or silly at first – ask yourself, "How might that solution work in this context?" Sometime going far away from a problem enables you to return with a very different perspective.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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