The Decision Series: (1) What is the Problem?

Themes in this Series

1) **What is the problem? What are we deciding?**
2) Discussion, decision, implementation
3) We need a consensus
4) It's too complicated
5) What did we decide? Who will do what?
6) Why process is important

The Case

Our Lady of Confusion was a highly regarded skilled nursing facility. In good times and bad, it had maintained its stellar reputation. In recent years, however, small cracks had appeared in the façade of excellence. What was the problem? Management tended to blame leaders of certain units for not managing their operations effectively, and there was some evidence to support this view. Medicine felt that the patient mix had changed over the past ten years, and that the facility's skills sets, systems and processes no longer matched a more complex reality. This assessment was also accurate.

These divergent views were never effectively reconciled, in part because the facility's departments operated in silos and never collectively asked: what is the most important problem? What was particularly striking, but not all that unusual, was that the leadership did not have a forum for addressing this kind of question.

The Problem

The hardest part of solving any problem may be defining or naming it. As the case study tries to demonstrate, understanding and agreeing upon what the problem is becomes the platform for successfully solving it. This is a big deal. A strong case can be made for the premise that the most important "product" that leadership and management produces is decisions.

Solving the wrong problem – or being immobilized by not being able to define the problem to be solved – has a lot of negative consequences, many of which were surfacing at Our Lady of Confusion. Three of these consequences stand out:

- A culture of drift develops over time, an acceptance of the notion that we are not moving forward, a real motivation killer, especially in mission and values driven organizations
- Ambiguity fueled by divergent problem definitions fuels conflict and breakdowns in basic systems and work processes
- Silos are reinforced because "we just can't work with those people," i.e., people who don't even share our view of what the problems are.

Solution: Naming the Problem

If you have read this far, you are more than half-way there. You are ready to answer checklist question number one: Do we have a problem in accurately naming our priority issues and problems as an organization? The remaining checklist:

- ✓ Do we have a forum/meeting setting to get all of the right people in the room to formulate our issues/problem definitions? If not, let's do it. (This may seem awkward, and, in conflict averse organizations, is going to take some people out of their comfort zones. It is a small price to pay, and people will quickly get used to it and embrace it.)
- ✓ Set a basic groundrule: no blaming, no blame shifting. This is about problem solving, and problem solving is about the future, not who did what wrong in the past.
- ✓ Make the problem explicit through discussion, including asking the critical question: what happens because of this problem?
- ✓ Once the problem and its consequences are made explicit and there is broad agreement, begin the process of exploring the range of responses