



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03VEV
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
SEPTEMBER 01, 2017

ARTICLE **LEADING TEAMS**

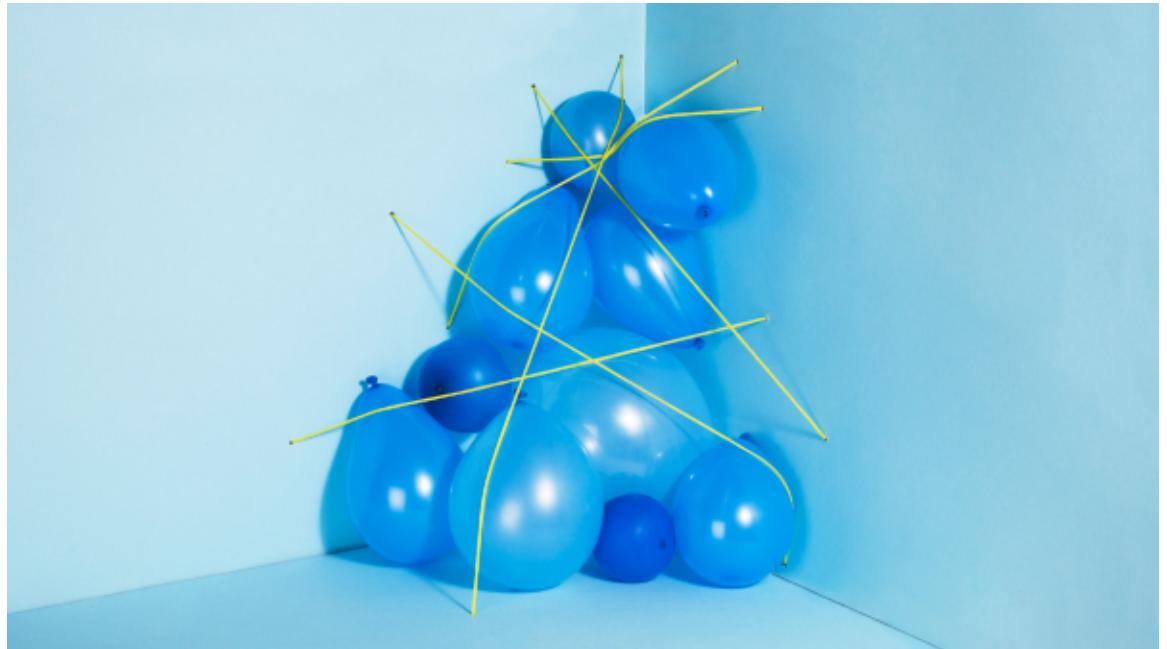
The Problem with
Saying “Don’t Bring Me
Problems, Bring Me
Solutions”

by Sabina Nawaz

LEADING TEAMS

The Problem with Saying “Don’t Bring Me Problems, Bring Me Solutions”

by Sabina Nawaz
SEPTEMBER 01, 2017



It’s time to retire the saying “Don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions.” Even though advocates of this approach believe it reduces whining, [increases empowerment](#), helps employees manage up, and [boosts careers](#), it’s fraught with challenges.

Not every problem has an easy solution. Tackling the complexity of most significant business issues can take a pool of talented people with diverse points of view. What’s more, [according to Wharton](#)

[professor Adam Grant](#), solution-only thinking creates “a culture of advocacy instead of one of inquiry,” where each person comes into the situation locked into their way of solving the problem and lobbies hard for that particular solution rather than considering multiple perspectives.

The “bring me a solution” approach can also cause employees to shut down in fear, breed a culture of intimidation, and prevent some problems from surfacing until they’re full-blown crises. Consider the example of one of my clients, James (not his real name), who is the president of a company working on a disruptive service in his industry. He often has an unpleasant reaction when staff raises problems. His team members told me that if they raise an issue or risk, James often hears failure and reacts by losing his temper and raising his voice. The outbursts hurt morale and often cause his team members to lose enthusiasm toward projects and become hesitant to mention problems to James. As a result, James’s team only provides him with good news about initiatives they’re working on, leaving James blind to any potential issues. They also spend a lot of time in each other’s offices, licking their wounds after James’ outbursts, instead of being productive.

If saying “don’t bring me problems” is so troublesome, why do so many managers continue say it? A key reason is because they want to avoid a culture of complaining. But communicating about the potential pitfalls and roadblocks for an initiative is different from complaining, and it can take a more positive form. When issues are communicated properly, it creates an environment where people feel safe to bring you bad news early, giving you precious lead time to avert a crisis.

Here’s how you can encourage your team to bring up problems in a more productive way:

Make it safe. Modify your behavior so that people aren’t afraid to bring you bad news. When I worked at Microsoft, our reviews with Bill Gates often included detailed discussions about problems. Gates says in his book *Business at the Speed of Thought* that one of [his most important jobs as CEO was to listen for bad news](#) so that he could act on it. Discussing potential issues with him and others in the company also helped us to see problems in a new light.

James, on the other hand, equated someone bringing him a problem with a lack of ownership. After discussing this in a coaching session, James began to understand the part he played in creating a culture where people only brought him good news — or, worse, covered up bad news. To combat this, James is learning to pause, paraphrase the concern, and then ask questions about the problem. Doing so has helped him to discover things the rest of his leadership team had known for a while but had been too afraid to bring up to him.

Require problem statements instead of complaints. Although you should want people to alert you to potential issues, they need to learn how to distinguish between raising a valid concern and simply complaining. *Complaints* are stated in absolutes, such as *always* and *never*, rather than in concrete facts. They lack accountability and often have villains (them) and heroes (us). And they often don’t look beyond the surface of the issue. For example, “Group Blue never hits their deadlines, and we’re

always left holding the bag” is a complaint. It makes an absolute statement, identifies a villain, and doesn’t show any accountability on the part of the speaker.

Problem statements, on the other hand, provide objective facts, examine underlying factors and causes, and reveal everyone’s role in creating the problem, even the person presenting it. A problem statement for the same issue would be something like this: “In the past six months, Group Blue has missed deadlines four times, by an average of 6.5 days. In two cases we were also unprepared to meet the deadline. However, in the other two cases our group completed our part of the project on time, but we had to work weekends to integrate Blue’s late work so that it wouldn’t impact the customer.”

When the issue is presented in the form of a problem statement, it’s much easier to spot the pattern of repeated delays. Because the presenters acknowledge their part in the problem, you know they’re open to being part of solution, not just blaming others. This allows everyone to dig in deeper and identify the root cause of the issue. Perhaps Group Blue needs more resources or isn’t receiving the information they need to complete their work on time. Or maybe the way projects are scheduled fails to account for unexpected events.

Find the right person or people to solve the issue. When an employee brings you a problem, consider its scope and that person’s ability to solve it. If they can singlehandedly tackle the challenge, maybe they just need your approval before proceeding. Or they may need you to [coach them](#) on how to think about the situation and broaden the field of potential solutions.

If the size of the problem is beyond their ability to solve, someone else might be better suited for the challenge, or people across departments may need to collaborate. In some cases, the problem might be so important or visible that you need to stay involved. Based on the situation, you can [coach the individual to stretch their abilities](#) and tackle the challenge; thank them for raising the issue and assign it to the appropriate people to resolve; or bring together several groups to address it.

Your employees are always going to encounter problems. By inviting people to surface problems early, often, and constructively, you reduce fear and increase empowerment and the speed of problem resolution. As Harvard Business School professor [Frances Frei](#) says, “Identifying problems can be a solo sport, but finding solutions rarely is.”

Sabina Nawaz is a [global CEO coach](#), leadership keynote speaker, and writer working in over 26 countries. She advises C-level executives in Fortune 500 corporations, government agencies, non-profits, and academic organizations. Sabina has spoken at hundreds of seminars, events, and conferences including [TEDx](#) and has written for [FastCompany.com](#), [Inc.com](#), and [Forbes.com](#), in addition to HBR.org. Follow her on [Twitter](#).
