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Back Talk-What's the Problem?

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Ten years ago Michael Lewis published an enormously important book about baseball and life entitled: Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game and which was later made into a movie starring Brad Pitt.

In an early scene Pitt, playing the Oakland A’s general manager Billy Beane, is having a conversation with his management team, e.g., his scouts, coaches, etc. Their team is in the dumps. They have lousy players. They can’t win games. They have lost three key players and the scouts, coaches, etc., are telling him what needs to be done. In the midst of all of this Beane keeps asking “What’s the problem?”

When they say the problem is they need to find the best players working for other teams, he still keeps asking “what’s the problem?” Finally he tells them, the problem is their team doesn’t have the money needed to hire the super players they seem so intent on identifying. Therefore, the problem they set up house at the Memorial. Again, But spiders crawling around on the building and so there? The answer was the birds liked to eat the midges, which lived at twilight time — lighting provided liked the kind of ideal environment it seemed to be the ideal environment for mating. So, what was The Problem at the Jefferson Memorial? The lighting at twilight. What was the solution? Wait until dark to turn the lights on. As a result the midges went elsewhere, the spiders went after them, and the birds followed suit.

The authors of this article then ask, “What problems are you facing that could be approached differently simply by asking WHY ... and then WHY again ... and then WHY again ... until you get to the core of the issue?” Following this simple procedure, they suggest will prevent you from spending time “solving the wrong problem.” They recommend asking WHY five times.

As I write this, one of the top news stories concerns the announcement by President Obama that the U.S. will spend one billion dollars improving anti-ballistic missile defenses.

(1) But Why? Because North Korea’s new leader announced a few days ago that his country would launch a preemptive nuclear strike if it didn’t get its way. (2) But why do that when there must be easier ways of doing significant damage anyway? (3) But why, since we know that to be true and since only a year or so ago after intense study it was determined we could deactivate some existing antiballistic facilities in Alaska, would we still want to spend a billion dollars on building a new capability? Possibly because we think threatening the North Koreans with total destruction will cause them to back down. (4) But why not do what we have done in the past: give the North Koreans some food and relax some of our trade restrictions instead since this would be cheaper than taking their threats seriously? Or maybe the President is looking for an opportunity to appease the Pentagon, which is facing serious spending cuts, and the Congressional representatives for the states where less money will be spent by taking out a billion in military expenditures. (5) But why do that when there must be easier ways of buying the Pentagon and these Congressional representatives off? Because the real problem is posed by China which has missiles and nuclear warheads capable of launching a preemptive strike, but we don’t want to be the one to launch a new arms race, this time with the Chinese, and so we can increase our capabilities in the name of dealing with the North Koreans.

Well, perhaps I should stick to library work. And I will let those of you still in the information business use this simple but effective technique to identify the most important problems and their solutions. My wife has just announced that I am supposed to broil skinless chicken breasts and steam zucchini for dinner. But why...?