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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 them "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 needed to be working on was finding some relatively unknown and therefore cheap players who could hit and get on base. (Watch the film clip www.youtube.com/watch?V=HiB9L3dG-Aw.) For us, the point is, if we don't understand what the real problem is, everything we are doing is probably going to be a waste of time.

When I look back at a 40-year career of working in libraries, I am struck by how often we spent our time on things that were not really critical to OUR specific libraries. Instead, we spent time figuring out ways of doing what our colleagues were doing at other libraries. Figuring out what OUR most important problems were and then solving them is what we should have been doing and is the key to success (of

course scouting out what the competition is doing to solve these same problems is a smart thing to do). But, how do we identify our most important problems?

For some unknown reason, except perhaps this is what retired librarians have time to do, I was browsing a 2011 issue of the OCLC electronic newsletter, *Above the Fold*, and read a short but illuminating article about how to identify the most important problems facing a group or individual: "Why You Need to Ask Why." You can link to this article from the Idea Champions, The Heart of Innovation, Web page (See the article at <http://oclc.org/WIA/DKm>.)

They begin with a story about a problem faced by the National Park Service in Washington, DC: bird droppings on the Jefferson Memorial. Now if I can get you to envision that like **Brad Pitt**, in the *Moneyball* book/movie, a meeting was being held by Park Service executives and the workers assigned to keeping the Memorial in good shape for visiting tourists. You can imagine the maintenance workers were probably talking about what cleaning detergents could be used to clean the building, or hiring workers to scare the birds away, etc. But the executive in charge had the courage to ask "But Why" are the birds pooping there? The answer was the birds liked to eat the spiders crawling around on the building and so they set up house at the Memorial. Again, But Why are the spiders there? The answer was

the spiders liked to eat another type of insect, midges, which lived there. But Why were the midges there? It turned out the midges liked the kind of lighting provided on the Memorial at twilight time — it seemed to be the ideal environment

for mating. So, what was The Problem at the Jefferson Memorial? The lighting at twilight time. 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 would we take this serious since North Korea doesn't have the delivery capability and it is doubtful that it would have a warhead capable 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 laying 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...? 🌿



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