Chapter 5: Pseudo-Solutions

"A Sure Thing"

"Everything has two handles, one by which it may be borne, another by which it cannot"

— Epictetus

> Normally when disputants declare a situation to be a problem, they have a ready proposal to change it. Some may or may not work. Others literally can't fail. This chapter explains why.

Disputes often involve some sort of "problem;" and disputants ordinarily have an agenda they claim will deal with it. Sometimes they offer consequential proposals. Other times, however, they propose "solutions" that sound good, but mean nothing. These *pseudo-solutions* say nothing more than "Solve this problem by doing something that will solve this problem!

Some find it hard to believe that persons of consequence would propose such counterfeit problem solutions. Believe it. Offering such pseudo-solutions has numerous advantages. Besides sounding convincing and appearing to address urgent problems, they allow those offering them to:

- avoid the possibility of failure,
- evade devisive details and
- dodge talking about who is going to pay

Real solution proposals, on the other hand, require:

- the risk of failure,
- saying exactly what is to be done; and, often as not,
- spending money.

> "... one way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness."
>
> — Harold Pinter

Wily disputants know the risks of suggesting something that can fail. They understand that details might anger significant constituencies. They realize that actual solutions usually cost real money. They also know that pseudo-solutions sound quite convincing to the undiscerning or impetuous.

Perhaps you've noticed, for example, that politicians promise to fix problems; yet once they are elected, the problems often persist. Often this is because they've offer the electorate pseudo-solutions for real problems. They vow,

for example, that they are going to make government more cost-effective by cutting waste. That can't fail. If waste is cut, government becomes more cost-effective.

> **Note!**
> Don't confuse pseudo-solutions with solutions that are sloganistic. Because of the way they are worded, pseudo-solutions literally can't fail. Sloganistic solutions, on the other hand, encourage various interpretations because of their haziness. Refer to the chapter on slogans for more details,

Evaluating Solution Proposals

Here is a two-step guide for evaluating any solution proposal.

Step 1) Decide if disputants are recommending pseudo solutions.

It's easy to distinguish "pseudo-solutions" from potentially workable ones. Just use the "Can it Fail? rule. That means, ask of the solution-proposal, **Can it fail? No** identifies pseudo-solutions. **Yes** identifies real possibilities. Consider the following problems and paired "solutions" and see if you can identify the pseudo-solutions.

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
1. That party is too noisy.	a. Quiet it down.
	b. Call the cops.
2. Kids aren't doing homework.	a. Motivate them to do it.
	b. Assign lunch detentions.
3. Trains are seldom on time.	a. Improve on-time performance
	b. Purchase more locomotives.
7. Govt. is wasting money.	a. Eliminate government waste.
	b. Decentralize purchasing.
9. Too many are using illegal drugs.	a. Teach them to say "No!" to drugs.
	b. Spend 10% more on drug education.

All the "a" solutions cannot fail. Their success is dead certain. Logically, none of these problems could continue if the proposed pseudo-solutions were achieved. As we said before, they say nothing more than "Solve this problem by doing something that will solve this problem!" Consider, won't trains be more on time if their on-time performance is improved? Won't government money wasting be curtailed if government eliminates waste?

The "b" proposals, on the other hand, can fail. We might purchase more locomotives only to find that trains run more erratically. We might decentralize purchasing and find government waste is unaffected. In short, the proposed solutions could fail. So at least they are possible solutions, not word games.

Step 2) Consider if either, or both, disputants are using pseudo-solutions for purposes of domination.

Pseudo solutions sometimes help keep people under control. Consider corporate officials who advocate pseudo-solutions for very real problems. This burdens employees with missions of unquestionable concern but allows corporate authorities to evade real commitment. "Reduce accidents by improving safety!", "Increase efficiency by decreasing waste!", employees are instructed. But these can't fail directives may obscure management failures like the role of unsafe machinery as a cause of accidents or the absence of equipment necessary to increase efficiency. In short, pseudo-solutions are a prime way for people in positions of responsibility to pass the buck.

> "When an idea is wanting, a word can always be found to take its place."
>
> — Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Pseudo-solutions also are particularly effective if offered to people more interested in appearance than substance. The following is a true story:

> An educational psychologist from the state's largest school district was summoned to a state senate hearing as a witness. State legislators were concerned that special education funds were being wasted because her district had been placing youngsters in special education classes when they didn't belong there. The psychologist was asked to describe what the district was doing to solve this problem. She began by describing the district's new intake process, the tests used and the assignment procedure. Right in the middle of her testimony, a senator interrupted and said, "Look, cut the technical jargon and tell us what is being done!" The clever psychologist thought for a moment and then said, "Appropriate screening tests are being used in an efficient placement process to remedy the problem!" The senators were satisfied.

Placing non-handicapped youngsters in special education classes couldn't happen if, as the psychologist claimed, appropriate screening was being efficiently used. That is what made her response so reassuring. It couldn't fail. Of course, in real life the tests might be inappropriate and inefficiently administered.

Chapter Highlights

Pseudo-solutions simply restate a problem positively. They can't fail, but don't tell us what to do either. Pseudo-solutions are predictably popular in disputes. After all, those who use them offer fail-safe advise, and evade the details, like who is going to pay

To determine if a solution proposal is a pseudo-solution simply ask: "Can it fail?"

"Yes" indicates a legitimate proposal that may, or may not, work. "No" indicates a pseudo-solution.

Other Related Chapters in This Text

Keywords for Further Data Base Search

slogans   propaganda
consensus   analytic statements
rhetoric   conceptual relation

Test Yourself

Here is a table similar to the one in this chapter. Test your understanding of pseudo-solutions by placing a check mark on each solution proposal you think flunks the Can it fail? Test. Unmarked proposals should, then, be real potential solutions. There is no regular pattern here. Remember, too, that situations one person understands to be "problematic" another might regard as perfectly acceptable.

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
1. The college's core curriculum is insufficiently rigorous.	Make the curriculum more demanding.
2. Unmarried teens are having too many babies.	Provide free condoms and diaphragms.
3. Drug money is corrupting the police.	Legalize recreational drugs.
4. The poor don't have enough to eat	Insure adequate nutrition regardless of income.
5. Rich nations are not financially helping poorer nations.	Increase the foreign aid budgets of the ten most developed countries by 20%.
6. The news media has a liberal bias.	Assure more balanced coverage.
7. American government is dominated by big business	Increase representation for ordinary Americans.
8. The new minorities are rejecting assimilation.	Make English the official language of the United States.
9. There is systematic racism in the administration of criminal justice.	Hire more minority police, judges and probation officers
10. "Lower class" culture perpetuates poverty among urban minorities.	Use federal funds to build and staff free 24 hour care centers (orphanages) that are carefully designed to inculcate middle class values

Answers:

The proposed solutions to items 2, 3, 5, 8, 9 and 10 all could fail. Items 1, 4, 6 and 7 are pseudo-solutions.