

You're Laying Off Your Best Problem-Solvers

By W Burnett

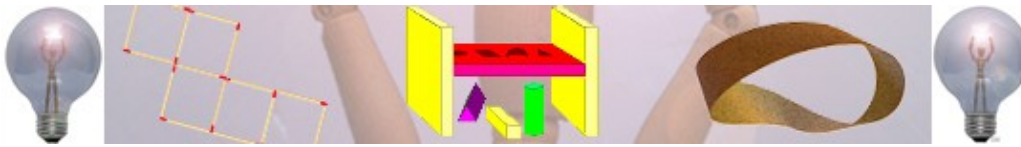
If you ask most people “Who was the most important physicist of the 20th century?”, they’d most likely say “[Albert Einstein](#)”. But if you asked physicists the same question they’d likely answer “Richard Feynman”. Feynman won the [Nobel Prize](#) for physics. Apparently, he could have won it again, a time or two, had he been more interested in publishing his work. If laymen remember Feynman at all, he is remembered for quietly demonstrating before reporters that an O-ring on the [Challenger Space Shuttle](#) caused the catastrophic explosion which destroyed the space craft.

Feynman’s career started with a boost because he was such a great problem-solver. When Robert [Oppenheimer](#) was staffing for the Manhattan Project to build the atom bomb in the middle of World War II, he needed a great problem-solver. Feynman had just received his PhD from Princeton when he received the call from Oppenheimer. His first assignment was to visit the [Fermi laboratory](#) outside Chicago. The scientists at Fermi had heard this ‘wiz-kid’ problem-solver was coming and conspired to try to stump him upon his arrival. They had a physics problem and for more than a month their best minds had been unable to solve the complex mathematical equation. When they showed the problem to young Richard Feynman he asked a handful of question and then gave them the solution. They were impressed. When he showed them the problem was really two separate problems, then everyone in the room could easily solve it. Feynman had that extraordinary talent of a great problem-solver to see the problem in the broadest possible context. This let him see it from angles which had not appeared to his colleagues. During the Manhattan Project, both Oppenheimer and [Neils Bohr](#) call upon Feynman repeatedly to solve the most difficult problems they faced. Much of that work is still classified.

When companies face market problems a popular strategy is to initiate a layoff. When this happens your HR department focused on ensuring you retain your ‘high potential’ people? Unfortunately, most companies definition of ‘high potential’ leaves out your best problem-solvers. Before you stop reading because you think, “Oh that’s not us.” I suggest you consider this. [Bain and Company](#) and others, have shown, layoffs of this sort almost never achieve their goals. In fact, layoffs done for cost-cutting reasons almost always hurt the firm in the long run. Bain points out that following layoffs the remaining staff will be less innovative and employees will tend to be unable to take bold steps in solving problems. Irrespective of what reasons the company gives, in the back of their minds people believe layoffs have something to do with performance. But, they cannot link the performance ‘problem’ with the individuals being let go. As a defensive reaction to this confusion they become risk averse. This means less innovation and weaker problem solving efforts because both imply risk.

One principal cause of the layoffs failure phenomenon is the company inadvertently loses its best problem-solvers. The company is laying people off because it has internal problems. First priority should be to solve these problems. To do that the company needs to hold onto, but unleash, its best problem-solvers. Because great problem-solvers understand problems thoroughly, they appear to be more willing to take risks than the average employee. They certainly are inclined to take the ‘right’ steps which often are bold riskier steps.

Taking the time identify your best problem solvers is easy to do, and putting their talents to work against you most pressing problems and innovation opportunities will pay huge dividends for the firm. When we join in to help, we do all the heavy lifting giving you the freedom to deliver the mandated downsizing without worrying that your problem-solving assets have left the building.



Layoffs are usually broadly distributed across many departments. Managers are instructed to identify individuals to meet the department's layoff quota. Senior management believes there is a careful analysis of role and performance leading up to the decision. If you asked an individual manager to justify her choices, she could give you good reasons for her staff selections based on function or performance. However, studies have shown that staffing decisions, not directly linked to objective performance criteria, are highly biased.

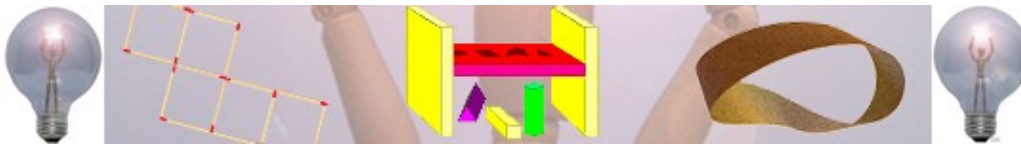
[Dr Robert Sutton](#) of [Stanford University](#), for example, explains that most companies screen people to be much like the company insiders who are making the staffing decision. This is true in the selection decision at the time of hiring, as well as the selection decision when determining which insiders will be retained when a layoff is ordered. In any company with a structured management hierarchy, climbing the organizational ladder requires good people skills, intelligence, leadership, and a high level of EQ (Emotional intelligence Quotient). Retaining people who fit this description is reinforced in how 'successful employees' are described by many management consultants, and by many Human Resource 'experts'. This practice is compounded by a natural human characteristic we all share. We feel most comfortable with people who are most like ourselves. This is an unconscious bias, but one that has been repeatedly confirmed by psychologists in study after study. We naturally gravitate to people who think, talk, act, and hold the same beliefs as we do.

Thus, when it comes time to select people to retain during a layoff, we identify intelligent people with high EQ's, who work well on teams, have good people skills, and foster teamwork. We feel confident these are the right people to keep. And no doubt, the best of these people should be retained. Making this decision with these criteria is doubly reinforced. Internally, our subtle natural bias to maintain associations with compatible people reinforces it, and externally it is reinforced by the talent values of 'leadership' and 'good people skills' espoused by Management and Human Resources.

The problem with layoffs comes when managers start selecting the people who get the ax. On a cognitive level they look for people whose characteristics are opposite from the 'ideal' described above. These are people who: don't evidence high EQ; don't have good people skills; prefer to work alone rather than on teams; whose communication skills are weak; and who can be irritating to manage because they often don't do exactly as they are told. On a non-cognitive basis, these are people who you don't feel comfortable with, hence that hidden bias works to support the manager's decision to lay them off.

People who are extraordinary problem-solvers have a passion for problem solving. This passion explains why they became such good problem solvers. They have the ability to see the problem in the broadest context and can filter the hundreds or thousands of details that surround the problem down to the handful of crucial factors. That is, they can define a problem with precision and elegance. Feynman did this with superb expertise. An innovation expert formerly from [Proctor and Gamble](#) recently said, "95% of the great solution is defining the right problem".

Most of us are not so gifted at defining problems and often want to include peripheral elements that seem important to us, but turn out to be much less crucial than we think. Problem-solvers witness this repeatedly. As a result, great problem-solvers develop a belief that most of us don't add much value to solving problems. They develop a dislike for working in teams. It's not that they don't value other people's knowledge. They seek out that knowledge. But they only want



access to the relevant knowledge, not all the rest of it. Teams give everyone equal opportunity, and from the problem-solver's perspective this is misdirection and a waste of time.

In situations where one of us has authority over the problem-solver, a teacher for example, and pushes these non-relevant factors into the equation, the problem solver starts to develop a disdain for authority. This disregard for the voice of authority is one of the most common traits among great problem-solvers and is what has allowed some of them to pursue projects in the face of repeated calls for them to abandon the effort¹.

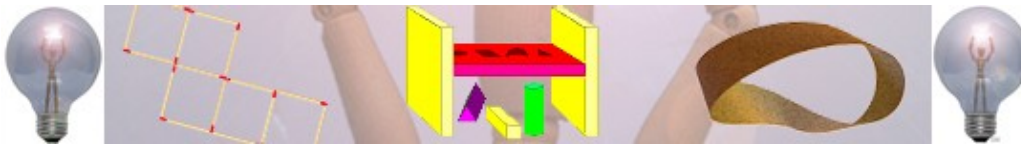
Great problem-solvers also have the annoying habit of being right most of the time. This is especially noticeable when others don't agree. Over time great problem-solvers develop a high degree of hubris. To them, it is not who said it that matters. It is only what is said that matters. If the problem-solver thinks the manager's instructions will hinder a solution, there is a good chance the manager's instructions will not be followed. Great problem solvers follow their own internal compass, and are more likely to do what they feel is right, even when the difference is small.

Lastly, great problem solvers often share personality traits defined by the term 'low self-monitor'. A low self-monitor is not very adept, or doesn't pay attention to, incoming non-verbal communication signals – body language. The good problem-solver can also project the wrong signals. You've probably run into people like this. Take the situation where a problem-solver is struggling to communicate an idea to her peers, and thinks to herself, "come-on, don't be stupid, figure out a way to get this across", while displaying the facial expression that goes along with "don't be stupid". But while she is directing the thought internally toward herself, the unconscious expression of it to her audience has an unintended effect. The other people read the expression as directed toward them and see her as arrogant, insincere, and condescending. From that point forward it doesn't matter how good the idea is, communication has broken down. A good problem solver has this handicap not just with peers, but very commonly in stressful situation when dealing with managers.

The same can be true of verbal communication. Richard Feynman, our problem-solving physicist tells a story in his book, *What Do You Care What Other People Think*. He had been nominated to the task force to investigate [the Space Shuttle Challenger](#) disaster in 1986. He was not comfortable with his role, nor working in Washington DC. His wife had talked him into accepting the appointment, and in the end, he was credited with finding the O-ring problem that caused the disaster. After a few weeks on the task force, and feeling the odd-man-out, a new member joined, a local Washington DC government physicist named [Dr. Keel](#). Feynman felt immediately at home with a fellow physicist. When they first met, they chatted briefly when suddenly Dr Keel jumps up and says something like, "I have never been so insulted in my life, I don't want to talk to you anymore". Feynman was surprised and couldn't imagine what he might have said that unintentionally upset Keel. Later he supposed he had verbalized something he'd always wondered about. He'd naturally just assumed that a fellow physicist was a man of integrity and probably said something like, "How can someone with integrity be successful in Washington?" Feynman supposed it would be easy to take the meaning of the question quite differently – "You're obviously successful in Washington, hence how could you have any integrity." It was not at all what Feynman had meant.

In a nutshell, great problem-solvers usually have some combination of these traits which limit

¹ Without this characteristic, masking tape, the laser printer, the computer monitor, even the computer itself may never have been invented.



their ability to ‘succeed’ in a hierarchical, highly structured organization. They don’t respect authority, they do what they think is right rather than what they’re told, they prefer to work alone and avoid teamwork. It is not that they are openly disrespectful. They nod and agree with you, but somehow do something different from what was expected. They also are poor communicators and, because they are often frustrated, they tend to engage in negative water-cooler talk. Although their water-cooler complaints are usually around not being able to advance a solution to a problem, rather than complaining about bosses, pay, or work conditions. These ‘gifted’ people are natural high-profile targets when it comes time to layoff staff.

However, the company would be far better off if it identified this talent and pulled it out of the regular workforce and directed it against the problems the company faces. Finding people who are extraordinary problem-solvers is not easy. 3M says there is probably one in a thousand truly extraordinary problem-solver². And, they work hard to blend in. Separating the great problem solvers from the rest of the population is difficult because the behavior we see in people can be very misleading.

At [WBurnett LLC](#) we have a passion for problem-solving talent. We have great interest in helping you to identify your best problem-solvers. It is our expertise, and we do all the work. Our first priority is to ensure you know who these people are. If you can use them internally we can help construct programs that maximize their value in terms of ROI. They are valuable in both problem solving situations, but also dramatically raise the precision of innovative thinking when something new is needed. If you must layoff some of these people, we want to assist them in understanding where they can thrive.

WBurnett LLC has over 25 years experience leading innovation teams. The first step in constructing a good innovation team is to identify the great problem-solvers in the company, and weave them into the team. To find that talent we have developed an inexpensive way to find the needle-in-the-haystack. It allows great problem-solvers to identify their talents. Employed well, every one of these problem-solvers will be capable of contributing extraordinary value.

Contact us and we’ll help you deliver your best possible problem-solving results. And, rather than using external consultants, you’ll be using your own people, allowing them to grow as you grow. Moreover, you can avoid the debilitating effects so often reported in post-layoff analyses.

² If you are just looking for unusually good problem solving skills there is probably more like one in a hundred. This is the ‘problem to manage’ talent pool with a great deal of know-how.