"*Hot*"-"*Warm*"-"*Cold*" Feedback as DATA

Context: We are wired by nature to be problem-solvers. Because our *brains* continuously drive a "trial and error" learning cycle that at this deep level we don't have to think about it remains invisible. (Much like a computer's OS-operating system.) But when we make that problem-solving cycle visible at the organizational level (e.g., calling it "PDSA." - *Plan, Do, Study, Act*), some of the things we haven't had to think about now become important factors.

Exercise Goal: To provide a way to "see" some of the unconscious assumptions we make about *trial & error* approaches to solving a problem.

Group Size: Any size. Because the game is run twice, two persons are chosen to be "IT's"; and six persons (two sets of three) are picked to be "consultants." The rest of the group act as observers.

Physical Setting: Room or other large space (such as a wide hallway) in which there is a clear wide space to allow sufficient room for "searching."

Materials: Three, different, small objects (e.g., matchbook, coin, bottle cap, etc.), six slips of paper for clues, each group member needs pencil and blank sheet of paper.

Process: Before the exercise starts the facilitator should hide the three different items in different places in the room. Three partial clues should be prepared for two of the items. For instance, if the object is under a water pitcher on a table in the far corner of the room, one clue might be "It is near a window and a wall"; another – "It is 23 inches above the ground"; and the last "It is under something brown."

- When the group enters the room, explain that they are going to play the kids game of *Hot-Warm-Cold,* in which someone has to find an object from clues that indicate how close he/she is to it. "Hot" = close and "Cold" = distant.

- Choose two "IT's" and six "consultants." Ask both IT's to leave the room or area. Give one clue for the first object to each of the first three consultants. They are not permitted to talk or share these clues with each other. (Thus, like in the story of the *Blind Men and the Elephant,* each is partially in the "right," but may be totally in the "wrong" as far as his/her understanding of the whereabouts of the object.)

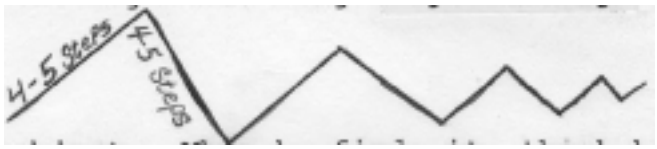
- The rest of the group, usually standing around the room, are instructed to draw the outline of the room on a sheet of paper, and then, as each IT searches for his object, to draw the path that he/she follows. Tell them that to give them practice you are going to bring the first IT in for a trial run.

- Call the first "IT" to the door. (His/her task is to find the one object for which there were <u>no</u> clues prepared. This object should be hidden under something in plain view e.g., a coin under a yellow ashtray.) Tell him/her to find a coin hidden under a yellow ashtray. He will most likely, stand at the door, look around till he spots the ashtray and then walk straight to it. Thank him, ask him to step out again

for a moment, and check with the group to see if they all have drawn his "track" which should be close to a straight line.

- IT should then be asked to return to the door, and this time to find Object 2. He/she will be provided no additional clues, except that there will be a panel of 3 consultants who, whenever he/she stops and raises a hand, will each indicate how close he thinks "IT" is to the object by saying *"Hot," "Warm," "Cool," "Cold,"* or "*Don't Know*."

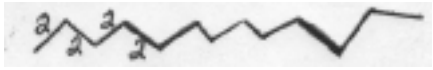
The anticipated behavior for IT is that he will search for the object in large zigs and zags…



…until he homes in on the object. When he finds it, thank him and tell the group you will repeat the process using the other "IT," who was not in the room during the previous game.

- When you leave the room to get him or her, you give the second IT different instructions. Tell him to never take more than two (2) steps in any direction without raising a hand to solicit helpful information from the consultants.

- After the object is found, and the group looks at their drawings, this IT's "track" should show more, but shorter, zigs and zags.



When IT #2 has found his object the trainer should bring the total group back together for discussion

LEARNINGS:

Ask the group to compare their drawings of the three problem-solving journeys they tracked.

Among the understandings that can be brought out here:

- "Straight line" solutions are only realistic when you know where the answer lies.

- The longer one waits to check his position relative to where he wants to be, the greater the "error" can become.

- Frequency of checking, asking for help, admitting a problem, should be *rewarded* rather than punished.

(An interesting analogy to draw is to the "planning and accountability" process we use with the captains/navigators on ships and planes, compared to that which we apply to our programs. In the first situation we assume that the initial plan the captains/navigators choose is their best "guess." And we recognize that there are a lot of factors that they cannot control (e.g. wind, waves, rocks, etc.) and therefore

we do not hold them accountable for sticking to their original plan. Instead we reward him for checking frequently; finding out where they really are; determining what unanticipated conditions caused them to be there; and then taking those conditions into account, if possible, in laying out a new route (plan) (guess) to the original end destination.)

- The more points of view one can involve in the checking process, the greater the chance of getting a realistic or complete picture.

This can be related to the need to involve different stakeholders or groups in planning, and/or the need to increase vertical and horizontal engagement of staff in planning.

- One can also raise the issue of how much to trust consultants to have the *right* answer.

This issue came up serendipitously during one run through of this exercise in a hotel meeting room when I made a mistake in a "partial clues" I gave to one of the consultants. (I think I had put matchbook under the edge of a carpet, and wrote that it was "2 feet from a wall" not thinking that there were a lot places in the room that met that criterion.)

As a result, as the other two consultants provided IT with accurate *Hot, Warm, Cold* position assessments, the responses of the one with the faulty instructions were almost always positive once IT neared a wall.

And soon we began to notice how before long IT began to "hear" only the feedback that confirmed how "right" he was, and never questioned why the other consultants might have differing views.