

Become your Problem

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The following story illustrates that by personifying an inanimate object, we can gain some interesting new perspectives and insights. This not only helps us understand the system at work, but it also helps us resolve complex problems. The following story is really about the nature of teams.

Looking above, I can see a very bright light that seems to be focusing directly on me. What a pain! I have to squint to see what is going on. I can see a huge face with rimless bifocals and a large moustache scanning over me like it is looking for a cavity. Yikes - to be on the safe side, I keep my mouth shut. Every so often I can see a hand come over me with fingers lightly brushing over my face. I don't mind; I like giving pleasure to people, but this is getting tiring. Enough of this inspection, I want out of here. OOPs, I have no legs. I'm stuck here on this flat surface looking into the light. Although I have "arms" of a sort, they remain as flat and immovable as the rest of my body. I think, "this is going to be a long afternoon."

Suddenly, I can see a reflection off the focusing metal shield attached to the light bulb. Squinting through the glare, I can actually see myself lying on a very large, flat table. I can see that my color is mostly blue, but there is one corner that's dark green, and one section that has a bright red spot. My shape is not at all pleasing to me. I am very stocky and my "arms" look like fat peninsulas or some kind of bulbous muscle mass like Popeye used to lure fair Olive-Oil away from Brutus. Meanwhile, where my legs should be were huge gaping holes that looked like they had been blown off by some ghastly mortar round, or perhaps the crash landing of a well-aimed meteor. So, looking at myself, I am not very proud. **Oh the shame!**

I start looking around me. I can see that there are others in the same condition. They are all flat, and can't move either. They all have similar colors, but none of them are exactly the same. None of them have legs, and they all have the same gaping holes where the legs should be. Their arms are similar to mine, but not exactly the same.

I begin to notice a familiar smell. It is the peppermint the old geezer is eating to hide the tobacco smell from his suspecting wife. Who is he trying to kid? The peppermint will not

hide the smell that has permeated his moustache. But there is another smell that's familiar too. It takes me back to my childhood when I lived in the toy store inside a box. Yup, that's a cardboard smell, no doubt about it. But why is there a cardboard smell? I begin to sniff discretely toward my neighbors on the table. Who is guilty of this odor? They all smell the same, kind of musty and, definitely very old. I suspect I smell pretty bad too. **Oh the shame!** I always figured that God was merciful when He arranged things so we didn't have to smell our own breath. It was probably hard for Him to figure that out, so I give Him a lot of credit and gratitude.

As the old man stands directly overhead the glare is gone and I can see the reflection of my neighbors more clearly. They are just like me; flat pieces of cardboard with funny arms and no legs. Each one has a different shape and coloring. Some even have flat sides. I figure that comes from sitting on one edge for too long in the box.

Whoa - -be careful!! All of a sudden I am picked up and held very close to the bifocals. The peppermint smell nearly makes me black out. The geezer puts me down in a new place and puts the arm of neighbor directly into one of my "leg holes." Ahaa. I have it. I am a *puzzle piece!* I have just been mated up with the matching piece in my sector.

Now, I begin to realize that all the pieces on the table are unique, but linked together into a **system - like a Team**. Each of us has a role, but the total system is very complex and needs the proper contribution from everyone. It is interesting to note that the team could not function without the support of a card table. A missing table would make it difficult to assemble the puzzle just as a team could not function without the support of management.

Thinking about the similarities between a puzzle and a team made my head swim with ideas. For example, the Geezer started the project by getting the box out, which is just like when a team is forming with members. The first thing he did was look at the picture because he needed to have a **Vision** as he started the project. Lack of a vision would make the task nearly impossible, just as it is for any team. Then he opened the box, which is the equivalent of having the team convene with open minds.

It is interesting that after the geezer dumped all the pieces on the table and spread them out (like a first meeting) he turned all the pieces "face up" so he could see our true colors. When some of us were face up and others face down, he was unable to understand the **diversity** we all bring to the team. Without considering the unique talents of each piece, the system would not function as designed. It would struggle and falter, just as many organizations do. By seeing and appreciating the diversity of each team member, the old geezer can make our system all it was meant to be.

Some members take on a **leadership** role. They have a unique property: *corners*. They let the geezer know the extreme boundaries of the capability of our team. They also provide a kind of vision to work within. Without these leaders, the system would lack focus; there would be no real purpose.

Other pieces, the ones with one flat side, are not that way due to laziness, but because they are special too. They connect the corner pieces so the old man can visualize the overall scope of the puzzle and begin to sort out the colors. They identify the **boundaries** of our system and show the **constraints** we all must respect. Without these *management* pieces, our system would lack **control** and be all over the place. Instead, we have a sense of *purpose and direction - like a team's strategic plan*.

All of the pieces have a role to play in the system. It cannot work properly unless each one assumes the correct role. I take a position of pride near the junction of the tree line and sky. But what's this huge red dot? Could it be a mistake? Maybe I am part of another puzzle. Maybe I don't belong here. Or it could be an errant dot from the marking pen of a careless child years ago. It could even be acne! **Oh the shame!** I'll just have to wait to find out.

The wife has called old geezer to dinner, so my new friends and I had a chance to chat as all puzzle pieces do when the owner isn't around. I found out that they all enjoy being part of this system, but also rejoice in their **unique contribution** to the end result. We are organized into sections or quadrants in that some pieces are sky and others are trees or water, etc. We all need to know our role or contribution to the group. There are also some special pieces, like me, that are **links** between sections. Like the edge and corner pieces, I fulfill a role of direction for the tree and sky sections. I also provide some comic relief and confusion with my red spot. Others around me are sensitive to my difference and try not to embarrass me. I am thankful for that. Even though I am different, I have a role to play that is very important to the system.

Our system is starting to take shape and we realize that each piece has a place and that it must fit perfectly with all adjacent pieces for things to work out. You cannot force one piece to mate with another (even with a hammer or shoe heel) without damaging the system.

Finally, dinner is over and Mr. Geezer returns, this time with the wife in tow. Now, with two of them working, things are pretty hectic. For one thing, if you get picked up, it isn't entirely clear which person has you airborne. You have to guess by the body language or smell. Mrs. Geezer's hands smell like lemons; a remnant from her dishwashing soap. I keep looking into the reflection to see if I can get a better picture of our total system.

Suddenly, I see her. She is beautiful. Her shape is fantastic, and her colors are bright and clear, just like mine. But wait . . . can it be true . . . yes it is . . . she has a red spot too. Oh joy - I am not alone. Hers isn't as big and bright as mine, but for sure it's red. The minute she sees me, her eyes light up. "What a wonderful red spot you have", she said. "I was beginning to think there were only a few of us here." "You mean there are others," I asked? She reassured, "Oh yes, the old man put all the spotted ones over by the sign." "What sign is that?" I asked. She said, "We don't know yet, but it starts with CONG." "Maybe they will put us back in that part of the system before they finish the puzzle."

But things didn't work out that way. Mr. & Mrs. Geezer worked late into the night. The peppermint supply was reduced to sticky wrappers in the wastebasket. One by one all the pieces with spots were brought over to my area between the trees and sky. That left the area of the sign open to be filled in more with, "CONGRA," "YO," and "GSAW". On and on it went until shortly before midnight they had the puzzle completed. I was locked in with my new girlfriend, which felt pretty special. Also, my red spot was just one of many around me in a circular pattern. I could clearly see the outline of a fireworks shell bursting just above the tree line. I looked over at the sign, it said, "CONGRATULATIONS, YOU NOW KNOW WHY A JIGSAW PUZZLE IS LIKE A TEAM".

Finally, I was impressed to find out that puzzle pieces have a sex life. Mrs. Geezer noted each piece had four partners, and was so embarrassed she had to avert her eyes. **Oh the shame!**

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