

A Tale of Two Light Bulbs

Stephen R Balzac

A friend of mine was telling me over coffee about a problem he was having with a light fixture in his house. It seems that every light bulb he put in would burn out in short order. No matter what he checked, everything seemed to be working correctly, with the notable exception of the instantly expiring light bulbs. Eventually, he got a bright idea: he put in a compact fluorescent bulb. He assured me that this was not because he'd run out of incandescent bulbs, but because he really didn't want to call in an electrician and be told the problem was something obvious. Oddly enough, though, the compact fluorescent bulb did the trick. It worked perfectly and hasn't yet burned out. While my friend has no idea why the incandescent bulbs don't work in that light socket, he did solve his major problem: lighting the room.

Now, the obvious point here is that it's all about finding the right fit: just because someone looks like they fit into your team doesn't mean that they actually fit in. Like many things that seem blindingly obvious, it's not quite correct. There are three valuable lessons to be learned from this experience.

The first point is that feedback is only useful if you pay attention to it. After a few bulbs burned out, the solution was not to curse and keep screwing in more light bulbs unless, of course, your goal is to become a punch line in some sort of elaborate light bulb joke. Once it becomes obvious that what you're doing isn't working, there is no point in yelling or complaining about it. Light bulbs are notoriously unimpressed by how much or how loudly you curse at them. People are not much different. Yelling at someone produces grudging change at best; you're more likely to just convince them to go elsewhere. Trying something different, however, can yield surprisingly good results. The best leaders pay attention to how people are responding to them, and adapt their leadership style as



Stephen R Balzac

their employees become more skilled and capable. On the other hand, if you find that people on your team are getting burned out, it's time to try something different. You need a different team or a different style of management, possibly both. To put things a different way, a consistent lack of fit can alert you that something is wrong with your team, no matter how good it all looks on the surface. The lack of fit might be you!

The next point is that it's easy to become focused around solving the problem in a very specific way, as opposed to accomplishing the goal. My friend was burning out light bulbs and poking around with a volt meter, because he was busy trying to understand why the socket wasn't working. It might have been the socket. It might have been a box of bad bulbs. It might have been something completely different. In a very real sense, none of those things mattered: what mattered was that he wanted to illuminate the room. Taking a different approach allowed him to do that. By keeping the perspective of the overall goal, it becomes

easier to brainstorm multiple different solutions, to innovate instead of simply fix what's broken.

Finally, rooms are rarely lit by just one bulb. Indeed, looking around different rooms I almost always see multiple light fixtures, lamps, sconces, etc. It's easy to get caught in the mindset that each socket must hold the same kind of bulb. It is also a common misconception that the best way to build a team is to have a group of people with similar skills. Certainly, that makes it easier to divide up the work and to make compare one person's contribution against another's. However, it also makes for a team that is more limited, less able to solve a variety of problems.

At the risk of stretching this analogy out of shape, if the reason the incandescent bulb was going out turns out to be something that eventually involves every socket in the

house, my friend could easily find himself in the dark. Similarly, one software company hired only engineers who were expert algorithm developers. When

customers complained that the product was unusable, they were in the dark about what to do. They simply didn't understand how to address interface problems. While having both incandescent and compact fluorescent bulbs won't help in a power failure, in other situations you are far more likely to have at least something working. Similarly, a more varied team might not solve every problem they encounter, but they will solve a lot more problems.

While all these lessons are important, there is also a "zero-eth" lesson: had my friend called an electrician, he would have saved himself a great deal of time and aggravation and illuminated the room much more quickly. Instead, he was stuck until he accidentally

hit on a solution. How often do business problems get dealt with that way?

While having both incandescent and compact fluorescent bulbs won't help in a power failure, in other situations you are far more likely to have at least something working. Similarly, a more varied team might not solve every problem they encounter, but they will solve a lot more problems.

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses get unstuck and transform problems into opportunities. Steve is a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play." Steve's book, "[The 36-Hour Course on Organizational Development](#)," published by McGraw-Hill, is available at Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and other book stores. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.