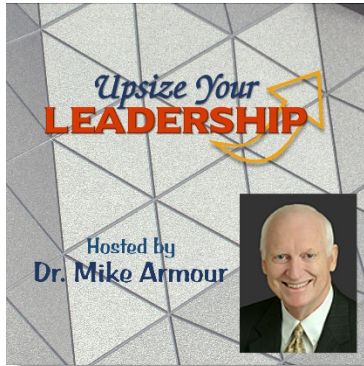


# How to Guide Problem-Solving Conversations

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

**Episode UYL2103**

**Podcast Date: March 17, 2021**



As a manager or leader, you're probably hit routinely with questions from people wanting you to help them solve a problem. In my experience, most of us are prone to listen for a while, then start offering suggestions or asking for more details.

May I suggest something for you to consider? What if you had a template – a basic structure through which you approach these requests time and again? I want to offer you just such a template today. It's simple. It's easy to learn. And it is a powerful tool to have at your disposal. Learning to rely on it will surely help Upsize Your Leadership.

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I began fulltime executive coaching two decades ago. In the years since, I've been presented with literally thousands of problems my clients faced or challenges which they needed to solve. Eventually I learned that I needed a systematic way to step through the problem-solving discussion with them. Otherwise, we could wander hither and yon, which was not a wise investment of our time or of the money which they were putting into my coaching fee.

Once I had considerable coaching experience under my belt, I began to analyze the problem-solving conversations with clients which had proved most fruitful. From my examination, I quickly identified a set sequence through which I had guided the conversation. I therefore simplified this sequence into a formula which I could easily recall. And it became my problem-solving template for every time I found myself in conversations like this.

Originally, I thought of it as my CIA formula, each letter representing one step in the process. Being a former intelligence officer, CIA was easy enough to remember when I wanted to recall the formula. As I applied it, however, I quickly noticed that I added one more step to the initial formula. And because the additional step started with an A, I now refer to it as my CI-double-A formula.

## **Clarity**

The C stands for clarity. When you are helping someone solve a problem, the first thing you need to do is to determine how much clarity the person has around the issue which they are presenting it. Until they have clarity themselves, they can't convey clarity to you as their collaborator. And if you do not have clarity, you can hardly offer your best counsel.

When people bring you a problem, they commonly describe it in generalizations. A client recently said to me, “I have a team member who won’t follow instructions. Even when I give him detailed instructions on what to do, he never brings me what I want.”

It would have been easy enough to start asking questions such as, “Have you tried this? Have you tried that?” But those are not the right questions to ask. I did, in fact, need to ask questions. But they needed to be questions which led to clarity on several fronts. I needed to know such things as what the person does specifically which seems to be a violation of instructions. How often does it happen? When did it start happening? Is it with every thing he is asked to do, or only on certain kinds of tasking? The more information which I have along these lines, the more precisely I can paint a mental picture of what is happening.

My probing questions not only give me greater clarity, they often lead to breakthrough recognitions by the party with whom I’m conversing. As they discuss the issue in greater detail, they begin to see patterns which had previously escaped them. And this is true regardless of what kind of problem they are trying to solve or challenge which they are trying to meet.

I could devote several podcasts to the type of questions to ask to gain greater clarity. But that’s not the purpose of this episode. What I want you to take away today is that clarity – both in your mind and in the mind of the other party – is your first goal.

## **Insight**

With that clarity, your second objective is Insight. The I in the CI-double-A formula is for insight. Now that we envision the troublesome issue more clearly, what can we see which was not apparent before? What are the deeper issues than the one with which our conversation began? What courses of action can we now see as possibilities, perhaps courses of action we had not even contemplated before?

I often transition to this phase of the conversation by simply asking, “From our discussion of this matter, what implications do you see?” Notice that I generalize myself at this point. I don’t ask about a specific class of implications. I just ask for implications in general. The answer I receive may be implications as to root causes of the problem. Or implications for courses of action. Or implications about further fact-finding which is needed. What I’m seeking at this point is a sense of the implications which the other party sees.

That’s because I want to capitalize, if possible, on the other party’s insight. That will engage the person more fully than if I merely set out implications which I see. I’m therefore going to do everything possible to help the other person draw out the right implications from what we’ve discussed.

On their own, however, they may not have seen some implications which I recognize as significant. In that case, once I’ve gained the other party’s insight, I will set out appropriate insights of my own. After all, the other party turned to me for advice, and at this point I’m offering a form of advice.

## **Action Plan**

The purpose of building insight is to get us to an action plan. The first A in the CI-double-A formula stands for Action Plan. It spells out at how the core problem or challenge is to be addressed. At this point it may not be a comprehensive plan. But it should at least establish the

first steps to be taken. Sometimes the Action Plan is little more than 1) Do this; 2) Evaluate the feedback; 3) Use the feedback to make a mid-course correction; 4) Do something further based on the mid-course correction. But at least it's a plan of action.

I took on my first consulting gig in my twenties. My client was a friend who owned a chain of restaurants. He had a sign over his desk which read, "It is quite difficult to make mid-course corrections with a stationary object." He quoted those words often to store managers who were facing a tough problem, but had taken no action. "I'm thinking about it," they would say. My client would reply, "You're not learning anything new while you're thinking. You only learn something new from feedback. And the only way you can get feedback is to try something. Even if what you try turns out to be a mistake, you'll still know more than you know now." You can't make mid-course corrections with a stationary object.

## **Accountability**

A plan of action, no matter how brilliantly conceived, is worth nothing unless we carry through on it. So, the second A in our formula is for Accountability. When we help someone develop an action plan – whether the person is an employee, a coaching client, or a friend – we need to hold them accountable for follow through. With an employee this follow through can obviously be more rigorous than it can be with a friend or family member. In these more informal relationships, accountability may be restricted to nothing more than asking periodically, "How are you coming on the plan?" When accountability is lax, action plans languish. Even the most exceptional insights are worthless unless we do something with them.

So there is our formula. Clarity. Insight. Action Plan. Accountability. That's the problem-solving roadmap. I use it routinely in coaching. But not just in coaching. I use it in every day life. Let me encourage you to do the same, especially in your problem-solving role as a manager or leader. C-I-A-A. It's a winning formula.

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