

A Senior-Level Problem

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This fictional story is an example of a senior-level manager spending time on problems that are not senior-level problems. Often, especially in technical endeavors, senior-level managers devote time and energy to “identified problems” instead of the real problems. The senior-level manager needs someone to describe the situation and help point the manager in the right direction.

To set the stage, the persons in the story are:

Sam: the senior manager

Mike: the middle manager

Pete: the program manager

Art: the senior architect

Carol: the contractor

Art walked out of Sam’s office. His posture said it all. The migration to the cloud wasn’t working.

Art’s admin assistant nodded towards Carol and pointed her into Sam’s office. Carol paused in Sam’s doorway and waited for him to acknowledge her.

Sam: Yes, come in. I guess it’s your turn. What bad news do you bring?

Carol: I bring some news, but you decide if it is bad or good or whatever you want. You choose.

Sam didn’t respond with words. His rolling eyes thundered through the room.

Carol: How is the cloud migration going?

Sam: It isn’t. It’s completely stalled. Fundamental problems with the technology have us dead in the water.

Carol: Want to share? Maybe I can help. Maybe I can bring in some people with expertise in that area?

Sam: Art is qualified, more than qualified. Still, it isn’t working.

Carol: This falls under Mike and Pete, right?

Sam: No, no, no. This is an architecture issue. It all has to do with, uh, well, let’s see where my notes are.

Carol: Maybe I misunderstood, but Mike and especially Pete have counterparts in the infrastructure group who are instrumental in the cloud migration. Right?

Sam: Well, yes. There are people on Mike and Pete’s level who implement our architecture.

Carol: So, what do Mike and Pete have to say about them?

Sam: About who?

Carol: About their colleagues in the infrastructure group?

Sam: I don’t follow you. What are you talking about?

Carol: Mike and Pete's counterparts. They are key to implementing this. How often do Mike and Pete meet with them? What are they reporting to you and Art about the progress, the work?

Sam: I don't hear anything from Mike and Pete about this. They have plenty of other things to keep them busy. They don't have time...

Carol: Pardon the interruption, but the cloud computing migration seems to be on your mind a lot. And we are discussing it right now.

Sam: Yes, but...

Carol: So here and now, the cloud migration is the most important thing. Right?

Sam: When you put it like that, I guess...

Carol: Have you seen or heard anything that indicates that Mike and Pete are talking to their counterparts about the cloud migration?

Sam's silence answered the question.

Carol: Have you told Mike and Pete directly that they should be talking to their counterparts and reporting back to you on what is happening with the cloud migration?

Sam paused.

Sam: I don't have the time to tell them everything they are supposed to do. They should know this. They just don't...

Carol: They aren't here right now.

Sam: What do mean?

Carol: I am here with you now. You can influence what you do more than you can influence what anyone else does. Let's use your most powerful position here and now to accomplish the most good.

Sam: I suppose you have some great lesson to impart or something.

Carol: We'll get to that later. Let's focus on the here and now. Let's try a reframe.

Sam rolled his hands in a "let's get on with it" motion.

Carol: First, you don't have the time. Yes, you do. Perhaps you don't know how to manage your time. You fix that for yourself. Second, you don't know how to split your many tasks into tasks that you can assign to others. That is called delegating. Again, fix that for yourself. If you wish, I can work with you on it, but that is up to you. These are your problems first and the problems of others later. Finally, you don't know how to explain the work and your expectations to those who work for you.

Sam: You expect me to fix that for myself, huh.

Carol: That's the easiest and quickest way, and it is something you can do without anyone else involved. If you wish, I can work with you on it. You decide, and I suggest that you decide now.

Sam: Fine, you woke me up. I'll do better or something. Now back to the cloud migration.

Carol: Cloud computing? Load software on a computer and connect that computer to a network. Of course it's more complex and failure prone than that, but it has been done many times before. Hire a company that does this all the time and move on to the next thing.

Sam: Your company does this I suppose?

Carol: We have smart people like everyone else does. No, that isn't our main line of business. I am happy to recommend some companies to you. Simple. Get it done. But that isn't the real problem, that is just the identified problem.

Sam: Now I suppose you'll tell me what this "identified problem" is?

Carol: That is the problem everyone is discussing. It isn't the real problem. It isn't the problem someone in a senior position like yourself should be spending your time on.

Sam: And what should I be doing?

Carol: That is your choice, but I think you should first address the real, senior-level problem.

Sam: Which is, in your humble opinion.

Carol: Since you asked, finally, the real, senior-level problem: you, Mike, and Pete are not doing your jobs. In particular, you are not speaking clearly, if at all, with others.

Sam: Example please or do you have a bunch of those in hand waiting for me?

Carol: Communicate expectations clearly. First, say, "I need you to do... Second, I need you to be... "

Sam: That's it?

Carol: Maybe. The second is a bit abstract and not likely to happen anytime soon. The first is direct and can be evaluated much easier.

Sam: For example?

Carol: For example, "Mike and Pete, I need you to go to the office of your counterparts in infrastructure and ask them some questions." Art and I can create a list of questions. "Report back their answers to me at 9AM the day after tomorrow."

Sam: Wait, that's pretty quick. Shouldn't they have a couple of weeks not a couple of days? They have a lot to do already.

Carol: Priorities. You keep telling me this cloud migration is a top priority. Act like you say what you mean.

Sam: Well, maybe if they have a conference call and...

Carol: I recommend against that. If they go to their counterparts' office they will have a much better understanding of what their counterparts are facing. Plus, it will put their counterparts at ease to be in their own space.

Sam: Knowing you, there is something behind all this, right?

Carol: I don't know. I suspect that the persons in infrastructure don't know you or Mike or Pete or Art or anything about anything you do. Your cloud migration is another email in their inbox. Meet those people. Let them know you exist and you are working as hard as they are working. Hire some people who do this type of technology everyday. Let them look at your technical problems. I think those will be taken care of in a day.

Sam: It's the other stuff, what you called the real, uh

Carol: Senior-level problem. The type of problem you should be addressing.

Sam: Yeah, something about, well, what was it about?

Carol: Let's make a list of sorts, okay?

Priority—Focus. We are here, now, and discussing this one item. This one item is the most important thing here and now.

You first—You can influence yourself much more and much quicker than you can influence anyone else. What can you do here and now? Let's concentrate on that.

Management at a senior level—Manage your time. Split tasks into things you can delegate and then delegate.

Communicate—(1) I need you to do... (2) I need you to be...

The End