

## The Problem is Not the Problem

I recently re-watched *The Sixth Sense*, the supernatural mystery with Bruce Willis and Haley Joel Osment. I remembered the scary bits and the surprise ending, so this time around I didn't feel a lot of suspense. What I'd completely forgotten was how the main character, psychologist Malcom Crowe, brings relief to 6-year-old Cole. As you may remember, Cole sees ghosts, who sometimes frighten and hurt him, in addition to being generally creepy and gorily grotesque.



In one of the most famous contemporary movie lines, Cole tells Dr. Crowe that he's ready to tell him his big secret. "I see dead people," he reveals. Crowe doesn't know what to make of this revelation, believing at first that Cole is schizophrenic. Later, when Crowe plays back an old audiotape of a session with a similar boy who also heard voices, the psychologist himself hears ghostly voices. The recording convinces Crowe that Cole is telling the truth, not having hallucinations.

At their next meeting, Crowe tells a tormented Cole, "I think I might know how to make them [the ghosts] go away." Cole: "You do?" Crowe nods, "Yes. I think they know you're one of those...rare people [who] can see them. You need to help them. Each one of them. Everyone wants to be heard. Everyone."

The notion that everyone needs to be understood—including souls whose untimely demise has left a wake of confusion, injustice, or discontent behind—is a powerful one. We all want to feel understood and it pains us to be misunderstood. The genius of M. Night Shyamalan's script is that it reminds us of that fact. Shyamalan weaves a thrilling yarn about the psychological disturbance that personal misjudgment creates, especially if it's our postmortem legacy.

We all have our own beliefs about a possible afterlife and the best preparation for whatever that entails. Far be it for me to opine on that score. What I can say, as a psychologist, father, spouse, and youth leader, is that we too often jump into problem-solving mode when all the person we're trying to help really needs is to be heard.

"The cable company just send another bill for the same month! I've already paid that bill! It's a damn automatic withdrawal!" screamed my wife recently. My innocent (and ignorant) reply: "Well, one of us is going to have to call the cable company tomorrow." Her angry (and exasperated) retort: "Thanks a lot! Tell me something I don't know, doctor. How about finding the time for me to make that call?"

Whoops.

My problem-solving, and the not-so-subtle suggestion that my wife would have to be the one to make the call tomorrow, thus adding to her already long to-do list, predictably backfired. Sometimes I can't

help myself. I automatically shift into problem-solving mode. Maybe I have a greater tendency to do that because of my Y chromosome. I'm not sure.

What I do know is that a better response would have been: "Oh, man. The cable company drives me crazy, too. You'd think it would be enough for them to suck money directly out of our bank account each month, but no. They have to burden us with more paperwork. It's so frustrating."

Everyone empathizes differently, so what you might say would sound different. But the above paragraph is notable for two things: (1) It contains adjectives that describe feelings (e.g., crazy, frustrating); and (2) It contains no solutions.

If what you say, in response to someone else's strong negative emotions has *zero* adjectives that describe feelings and/or *one or more* solutions, then you have not provided empathy. That person will not feel understood. They will not feel heard. Instead, they will feel annoyed. And their reaction will prove that you've done nothing to help. Nine times out of ten, upset people—including children—know what to do to solve the problem that created the upset feelings. They are venting not because they are fishing for solutions, they are venting because they want to be heard.

Like the ghosts in *The Sixth Sense*, the youth you serve will haunt you until you listen—really listen—with compassion. Next time a child or staff member comes to you with a complaint, a confession, or a conflict that's made them upset, switch gears. Avoid the temptation to problem-solve right out of the gate. Lead with empathy. Once the person has been heard, they may ask you to help them problem-solve or they may just thank you for listening.

In most leadership scenarios, the problem is not the problem. The real problem is failure to empathize. Everyone wants to be heard. Everyone.



Dr. Christopher Thurber serves on the faculty of Phillips Exeter Academy, a coeducational boarding high school. He is also the father of two boys and co-author of the best-selling [Summer Camp Handbook](#). In 2007, Chris co-founded [ExpertOnlineTraining.com](#), with a vision to become the world leader in online education for youth development professionals. Additional resources for camps, schools and families can be found on [CampSpirit.com](#). To book workshops or contact Chris directly, e-mail [chris@campspirit.com](mailto:chris@campspirit.com).