



Root Causes

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My laptop has been giving me fits for ... oh, I don't know ... nine months. I knew a replacement was in order, but I've got work files that I need while I serve as your Bridge Executive. So, I limped along. The ports (headphone and thumb drive) got loose and worked only intermittently. The battery wouldn't hold a charge for more than five minutes, so I needed to dash to an outlet when changing locations. The touchpad stopped working and actually lifted up, making it impossible to close the laptop lid properly.

It's five years old, I told myself. They get obsolete quickly, I said. Turns out, they also catch fire. Well, they *can* catch fire, but thankfully a colleague identified the root cause of all my problems: a spicy pillow. When the battery starts to degrade and chemicals mix that shouldn't, the battery will swell like a pillow. That's what caused the loose ports and the touchpad to lift. When heated – for example, by always keeping the laptop plugged in and charging – the battery can catch fire. My colleague, who is both an executive presbyter and a platinum level Geek Squad technician, diagnosed the problem quickly and removed my battery for safety. I still need to keep it plugged in, but everything else has started working. Now, if I can get over my procrastination, a battery replacement will be the easy cure to a long period of marginal computer operation.

I was ready to give up on my computer because of a series of seemingly unrelated problems. Yes, it's still five years old and it's growing obsolete, but it will be able to serve its purposes for some time ... now that we've identified the root cause of the problems.

When I worked with Presbyterian World Mission, we focused with our global partners on the root causes of the problems they identified. Here's an example: in some communities, girls seldom graduated from school. While we could have focused on promoting the benefits of education or examined the teaching methods or curriculum, we needed first to understand WHY they stopped going to school. Was it cultural? Was the journey to the school dangerous? In some places, there were inadequate toilets. In others, the girls were expected to carry water for the household from a significant distance, allowing no time for school during the day. Trying to solve the problem of graduation rates for girls without context would have led us down a path of futility. Relying on the expertise and social awareness of our global partners was essential.

We can do the same root cause analysis in our own contexts. Like my laptop, we need to move beyond each identified problem to assess whether there is an underlying condition at the root of them all. If we find a deeper, foundational issue, we can stop expending energy playing "Whack-A-Mole" with everything that pops up. If we have fewer people to serve on our committees AND our budget is shrinking AND it's harder to afford full-time staff AND the building is requiring expensive repairs due to deferred maintenance, we could get frazzled trying to address each problem individually. It's good – and hard, I know – to pause and ask whether there's something at the core of all of them. Hopefully, then, at least some of our energy can shift to the root cause.

The Presbytery, too, will be looking at itself during our transitional phase. When we move from the congregational level to the mid-council level, the same concerns carry forward. We, too, look at staffing our committees AND budgets AND office space. Because you are the Presbytery, the concerns you face are the same concerns we all face collectively. Your transitional executive will create space to explore root causes. Then, instead of catching fire, we can refocus our energy more productively. May God be glorified in our exploration!