**Basic Principles of the Senior Professional
In Defining and Solving Problems for the College**

<u>Step One:</u> Seek a More Complete Understanding of the Issue and the Various Perspectives On It before Making Any Judgment or Offering a Solution Option:

Most often problems or issues come to attention of senior professionals because a staff member comes to them with an issue or problem. When this happens, problem solving would be greatly facilitated if the senior professional thus approached assumed that that report was just the first piece of the puzzle and not a complete account. Regardless of how true and accurate the staff member's account is, it is most often an account that does not give a 360-degree view of the issue or problem at hand. In that light, the first task really needs to be defining and understanding the problem more comprehensively. This requires an objective and open inquiry – not one colored by premature judgment.

Thus, the first task is investigation (an investigation closer to the approach of an anthropologist or research seeking a better understanding – not a detective looking for the guilty). This more neutral and thoughtful approach to investigation is important because often issues and problems have their sources in an unexpected side effect from a policy or procedure we have (or don't have -- or at least isn't clearly defined); OR very different sets of assumptions that are causing staff to use the same words but are not in fact talking about the same thing (sometimes it is CSUN or CSU policies, processes or relationships, sometimes we can address and get changed if we are clear on what the problem is and what exactly we want to change or fix); OR like systemic or procedural issues that require a refinement or new approach to avoid similar problems in future. Sometimes it is a mistake or a misunderstanding of a common sort that just needs help to get back on track. Sometimes staff members have not explained themselves or their needs clearly or in enough detail (to us, to an ExL colleague, to University colleague, etc.) to get the help or response for which they are looking.

Other Tseng College senior professionals are most appropriate to engage in finding a College solution to a particular problem. The goal of each senior professional in the Tseng College has to be to fix the problem and move the College forward, not fixing blame, picking sides, indulging in fits of temper (and, in so doing, fanning the flames, increasing the gap between factions, and prompting others to follow your "poor example" lead). It is never acceptable to have a confrontational conversation with a colleague or a staff member in any public space. If there is a difference of view or the need to correct a staff member's performance, those are matters appropriate for a private closed-door conversation.

Senior professionals in the Tseng College are all sophisticated enough to know that what is reported to them, even with the most accurate account of what was seen, said, done, etc., is subject to the Rashamon syndrome. A story told from one person's perspective is a part of the story and not the whole story. Gathering other accounts

usually gives an increasingly complex and rich picture of the whole that is important to any effective problem solving.

It is very easy to hear from a staff member (particularly if it is someone highly valued and highly agitated - someone we trust and respect) and to launch off to solve the problem as first defined by that staff member. We can feel that it is our duty to defend our own staff, to get a solution to their problems, etc. That can lead any one of us to set up a we/they situation even if that is not at all one's intention. It can also make any one of us feel (or at least appear to be) defensive if someone else tries to resolve the problem by making an honest inquiry when what we need to be is open and collaborative to define the problem and find a solution that works for the College and its staff across unit lines.

As a senior professional, a key part of our role is finding effective and sustainable solutions and strategies that increase the College's capacities as a whole – forward-looking solutions and systemic solutions (that get the rock out of the road if we can or find the shortest sustainable way around it if we can't so we don't chew up College human capital allowing each new person coming down the path to trip on the rock and then have to invent their own way around it – or run around agitated because they cannot). Each new issue or problem really well defined and understood gives us a chance to innovate and to improve the College.

Step Two: Make Sure We are Trying to Solve the Problem at the Right Level.

Often, once the problem is clarified and well understood, there are probably several ways to solve it. To determine which solution is the one to pursue, it is useful to make sure the goal is clear. What are we really trying to get done and why? For example, suppose in an attempt to get instructors paid there is a conflict over how paperwork is flowing and whether or not person A got the right piece of paper to person B in the right way at the right time. The question is then are we trying to get a better paper flow going in the payroll process or are we trying to get Tseng College instructors paid more quickly? If the former, the solutions might be a clarification of paper flow and some new check list or flow outline. If the latter, we may start looking at options that would change our approach to instructor pay in a more fundamental way that may give us a more viable approach rather than just repairing the approach we have. Our goal should always be focused on advancing the cause in light of the broader goals and directions of the College. Sometimes that requires recognizing that a more systemic fix is needed and other times it is a simpler refinement. It is useful to consider both and then make a solid professional judgment – perhaps best done in collaboration with a senior colleague or two.

Step Three: It is Part of the Role of Every Senior Professional in the Tseng College to Perfect the Art of Making Nothing Happen (Anticipating Problems and Making Them Not Happen is Even Better Than Solving Problems Well).

One of the responsibilities of skilled senior professionals is making things not happen. We all do it. For example, if we craft a data system function to ensure students don't make a particular mistake or skip over a particular step that causes problems (the

successful result is: those problems don't occur). Senior professionals in the Tseng College need to work with one another to find solutions and strategies as we encounter problems and issues that result in the right kind of "nothing" happening, so we keep the College from spending needless time addressing recurrent, undesirable happenings.

Getting out ahead of problems requires being reflective in campus conversations; considering the long-term implications of emerging changes at the University of CSU levels; watching the action and reaction patterns of our campus partners to anticipate their concerns and what prompts certain reactions; looking at what has happened to others at other institutions who were attempting to do something similar to what we might want to do (form international partnerships, try to serve a particular market, trying to get something approved by WASC or the like, etc); and learning from their failures as well as their success so we avoid the pitfalls as best we can. Being a reflective and strategic senior professional allows one to work with other senior professionals to anticipate and then take actions or make choices that move us forward stepping around the likely pitfalls.

__Step Four:__ Make Sure that the Problem Solving has a Strong Finish.

It is not that unusual in problem solving to have a good start – identify the issue, shape a problem-solving strategy, and then have a rather wishy-washy finish. It seems to be a big part of the reason why in higher education, various committees get no results. They investigate the issue, look at options, make recommendations, but fail to actually develop an implementation plan – that is, a solid approach for getting those recommendations implemented in the context of current practices and with the current staff resources. In the Tseng College, we have a pretty good track record on this front and we need to keep that going. In that light, it is useful to ensure that implementation is well worked out (who is doing what, do they need help to do it, does one thing have to happen before another, who is going to check back to make sure the proposed solution actually works once implemented).

We need to continue to reconfirm the planned solutions (in writing is often useful) to any problem with all involved/impacted. We also need to continue to share the insights gained as we craft each solution (so we can see yet one more model of a problem-solving success to build on when the next issue or problem comes up). We need to remember (and to remind each other) to thank those involved in solving the problem – we do this pretty well but as a senior professional it is easy to get caught up in the next set of issues and forget that a few weeks later those working on implementing a solution have just crossed the finish line successfully (out of our immediate view). We need to continue to follow up to make sure that the new process was actually implemented or the new approach actually worked (or we need to designate someone else to do that and report back).

Nice, big finishes lock in the solution or change and ensures it is successfully up and running as part of organizational culture and practice.