

Enhance Your Problem Solving Skills

Problem solving is closely related to decision making. The processes are much the same. The first step in problem solving is to define the problem by evaluating the difference between the current situation and the desired goal. In other words, a problem is the difference between the goal and the result. The sooner you observe and correct any deviation between the goal and result, the smaller the problem will be.

Part of defining the problem is also identifying the causes. At times, the apparent problem is not the real one; it is merely a symptom. The real problem may be hidden beneath defensive accusations, confusing data, complex processes and procedures, or poorly constructed reports. Be sure you address the causes rather than the symptoms.

For example, one individual on your team may continually bombard you with questions. You need to ask yourself: *Is that* really the problem? Or is it a symptom of a lack of training? Or is the real problem that this person once received a harsh reprimand for a decision and is now hesitant to proceed without prior approval? You can usually narrow down inadequate performance to one of these three root problems: training, environment, or motivation.

After you define the problem, you need to decide whether it is even a problem that must be solved. Some problems resolve themselves in a short time without any action. Other problems are not worth your time to take action to solve. Spend a hundred dollars' worth of your time on hundred dollar problems, not twenty dollar problems. If a problem is not worth your time, assign the solving of it to someone else who is paid less than you are. Of course, you need to make sure that it will be solved before it becomes a more costly problem.

When the problem does require your attention to be solved, use this time proven formula for approaching the problem:

1. *Define the problem.* Make sure the real problem is defined clearly and relates to an important organizational or personal goal. Address *causes*, not effects or symptoms. You may find that a number of negative symptoms may all have the same root cause. By dealing with the root cause, you may solve more than one problem at a time.
2. *Set a deadline.* Set a deadline for making the final decision about a solution to be chosen. Allow adequate

time to gather information, suggestions, and opinions from others.

3. *Identify the purpose to be met by the solution.* Refer to specific organizational and personal goals as guidelines for deciding exactly what the solution must accomplish. This prevents investing too much time and material in solving a relatively minor problem. Specifically state any criteria that must be met, including budget, time frame, quality requirements, efficiency, and simplicity.
4. *Compile and study information.* Collect and assemble information in a logical and useful form, and study the facts to be sure that you understand everything involved.
5. *List possible solutions.* List all of the possible solutions. Make no attempt to rule out alternatives; use free association, visualization, and creativity to

generate as many solutions as possible. Consider the possibility that a given solution could cause other problems. Decide if other actions will need to be taken to ensure a net positive effect, or if another solution altogether needs to be considered.

6. *Make a choice.* Look over the list of possible solutions that you have made. Cross out any items that you know immediately you do not want to use. For each possible solution left on your list, answer the question, "What would happen if I chose this solution?" Then choose the one that appears to have the best possible chance of success.

7. *Take action.* Decide what action must be taken to implement the solution. The action may be simple and require the attention of only one or two people,

or it may have several steps and involve the whole department. Make sure that every person understands what to do, how, and why. Then make sure the predetermined steps are followed.

8. *Request feedback.* Keep open the lines of communication between yourself and those who must carry out your decision. Be open to their ideas, and do not judge feedback based on your preconceived ideas about the person giving it. Let your team members know you are interested in their problems but that your instructions will be carried out. When necessary and practical, be willing to modify the plan when the feedback you receive indicates a need for adjustment.

