Chapter 5

The Challenge of Problem Solving*

WHAT'S IN THIS CHAPTER?

- A Model for Problem Solving
- The Nine Steps to Effective Problem Solving
- The Role of Intuition in Decisions and Problem Solving
- Other Elements to Consider
- The Leader's Connection
- Activities

Every time you make a choice or take an action, you are making a decision. We make hundreds of choices every day, from deciding what to wear to preparing for a big presentation. That is why developing problem-solving skills is so important for both new and existing employees, especially considering the research we covered in Chapter 1, which showed that problem-solving expertise is lacking in those currently entering the workforce.

*Thanks to Greg Trulson for his contributions to this chapter.

Compared to one hundred years ago, our daily lives force us to make many more critical decisions than our forbearers had to make. How many phones, computer software programs, television programming devices, and other communication instruments have you had to learn to operate in the last year just to find answers to even simple questions, never mind gathering information for important decisions? For solving problems in a sometimes chaotic world, what techniques can we use to determine what success would look like? This chapter serves as a review of ways to do that and presents a method for defining problems and solutions.

Problem solving requires creativity, adaptability, and the willingness to confront the uncertainty and ambiguity of complex scenarios. With any decision, consequences factor into the equation. Depending on the circumstances, the decision-maker can experience paralysis because of how the decision may affect others, the decision-maker, and the organization. To prevent stagnation, learning and assessment techniques are instrumental for moving forward with decisions. Tools and models offer step-by-step approaches for gathering information for optimum results.

A Model for Problem Solving

Models are ways to organize information within a familiar mental image. They provide structure for looking at a situation. Having a model, a planned way to analyze the situation and take action, can assist a problem-solver who is overwhelmed and cannot decide where to start. It may also mitigate his or her fear.

There are many problem-solving models, none perfect for every situation. We will describe Greg Trulson's model in this chapter. Trulson's model offers a flexible framework to assist in the decision-making process.

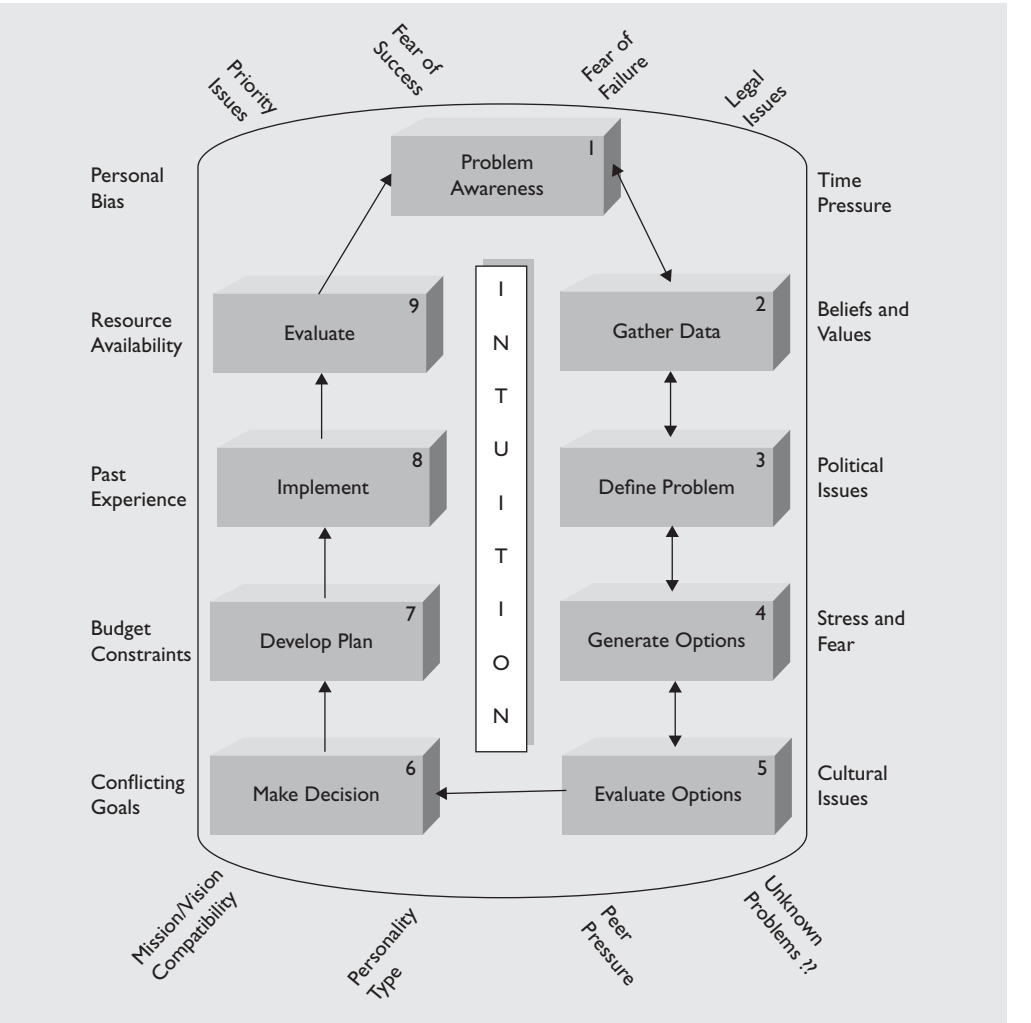
Trulson wraps decision making and problem solving together, even though each has its own unique elements. That is, problem solving is primarily concerned with the definition of the problem, whereas decision making addresses the development of choices to solve the problem.

As we cover the model, keep in mind that the process is flexible and open to modifications depending on the circumstances. The bi-directional arrows shown between several steps in Figure 5.1 indicate that you may have to return to a previous step for further discovery. You may want to skip to the section on The Role of Intuition (shown in the center of the figure) and come back to the steps of the model later.

The Nine Steps to Effective Problem Solving

The nine steps in the problem-solving model are described in the following paragraphs.

Figure 5.1 Problem-Solving Model



Step 1: Problem Awareness

Something isn't right. You've turned on your intuitive radar and scanned the environment to discover suspicious symptoms. The military would call this step raw intelligence gathering. Family counselors would call it family assessment. The goal in this step is to connect the dots and make sense of patterns that emerge from the data.

Step 1 is easy when the symptoms of a problem are obvious. The difficulty comes in challenging the status quo and exploring new approaches. This is the

"head in the sand" stage. Sometimes, people are afraid to try alternative possibilities and ignore the obvious. New alternatives require work. Sometimes, teams and individuals would rather put out fires than confront the root cause of a problem. Or if the root cause is a mystery, frustration gets in the way of logical thought.

Crisis-to-crisis decision making is also common. "Do it now" instead of "Take the time to do it right" produces a self-reinforcing cycle of solving a problem by repeating the same steps that didn't work last time. Those responsible for errors may have doubts. In order to overcome anxiety and meet a deadline, they assume that the only answer is to do the same things over again. Albert Einstein once said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Substantive organizational transformations require changes in the system. As Newton's first law of motion says, a body in motion tends to stay in motion until acted upon by an outside force. Here's a good example of this tendency:

> Brad's department has had significantly higher turnover than similar groups in his division. He uses the human resources (HR) department to recruit candidates. The department has voiced concerns over the continuing costs of providing replacement candidates, not to mention the relocation expenses and the disruption of productivity that comes from the revolving door of hired and departing employees.
>
> Brad is a little inconsistent when candidates interview and rarely spends the appropriate time preparing questions in advance. The sessions often are just conversations about outside interests like golf and favorite sports teams. Brad believes the key selection criteria boils down to finding well-dressed, highly enthusiastic people with good chemistry and a great handshake.
>
> The HR department is taking heat for not providing a continuous stream of qualified candidates to fill the vacated positions. HR has scheduled Brad for a class on management coaching to help him develop the skills to counsel his underperforming team members. Is the HR plan on track?

In this example, HR does not dig deeper to expose of the real problem. The next step they should take is to gather information about root causes.

Step 2: Gather Data

This step provides a foundation for defining the problem. The symptoms in Step 1, combined with the data gathered in this step, can result in a hypothesis about the underlying problem.

A classic example of gathering data occurs after an airliner crash. Investigators are anxious to recover the "black boxes" that contain a record of the aircraft's technical performance and cabin recordings. This data is combined with other input to help determine the cause of a crash and reduce the chance of a similar calamity in the future. In the same way, you have to gather your organizational black box information.

Often, there is a tendency to not spend enough time asking relevant discovery questions. It is also possible for people to spend too much time on this step to avoid moving on. This may be an indication of procrastination and low tolerance for risk taking. At some point, the accumulation of more and more data can threaten the decision-making process.

Another issue to be aware of is the tendency for most people to look for information that supports their own conclusions. People are not always aware of their own biases and may believe they are neutral.

Like a detective trying to solve a crime, one must ask lots of questions and consider all the evidence. An interesting source to help format questions comes from Rudyard Kipling:

"The Elephant's Child"

"I kept six honest servants,

(They taught me all I knew)

Their names were What and Why and When

And How and Where and Who."

To apply Kipling's wisdom, try forming discovery or solution-focused questions:

- What symptoms do we have? What symptoms don't we have?
- What or who has failed? Who has not failed?
- Where do we have the symptom? Where don't we have the symptom?
- When did it start? When was everything O.K.?
- Why did this fail and not that?
- What has changed? How has it changed?
- When was it changed?

- Why is it doing this and not that?
- Why did it start then and not before?
- Why did it show up here and not there?
- What's strange or peculiar?
- What are your feelings about the situation?
- Who does it impact? Who doesn't it impact?

The answers to these and many more questions provide insight to define the problem in Step 3.

Step 3: Define Problem

Clearly defining the problem is the most critical step in the process. Problem definition is often much more difficult than solving the problem once it has been defined. The quality of the decision will be a direct reflection of the energy committed to understanding the situation. Making the right decision but seeing the wrong problem ends up being a waste of time; even a less than perfect decision on the right problem would be more beneficial. Take the appropriate time here to ensure you are working on the "real" problem and not just a symptom.

> In problem solving, clearly defining the problem is critical.

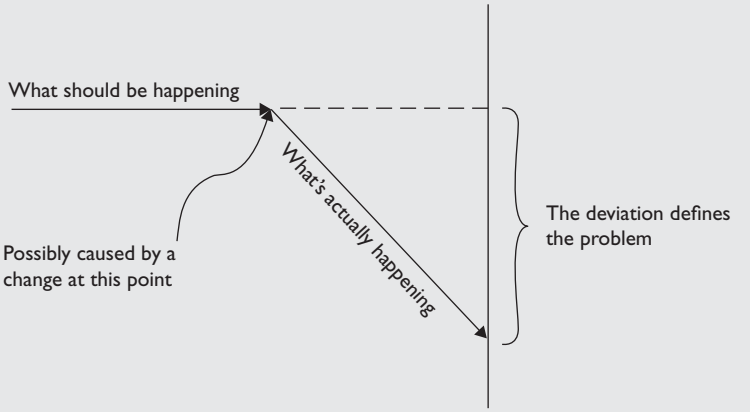
Data gathered in Step 2 is analyzed to prove the hypothesis that a problem exists. Analysis paves the way to determine problem cause(s). In Step 3, careful thinking is required to isolate and separate symptoms to find the "seed"—the problem. This requires postulating the suspected causes of the problem.

The definition of the problem comes from finding the root cause. Again, according to Newton's first law, things generally stay on the same course unless something changes. Figure 5.2 depicts a situation and the riddle that needs to be solved to find root cause.

Now it is time to put your Sherlock Holmes hat on and determine the causal influences that brought about the problem. Some of the potential sources might be:

- New or different policies
- New or different procedures
- New or different suppliers

Figure 5.2 Root Cause



- New or different parts
- New or different materials
- New or different personnel
- New or different equipment
- New or different facilities
- New or different reward systems
- New or different control systems
- New or different working conditions
- New or different feedback systems
- New or different leadership
- New or different competitors
- New or different regulations
- Anything new or different from the past
- Misinformation

Once the cause is determined, a problem statement must be written that is concise and allows everyone to focus clearly on alternative ways to solve the problem. At this stage, part of the iceberg below the waterline becomes apparent. The problem statement lays the groundwork to generate options in Step 4.

Step 4: Generate Options

After the problem is defined in explicit terms, creating the most effective range of options requires creativity. The basic process of problem solving/decision making is essentially the same for individuals or teams, although trying to solve a problem in a group is not always the way to go. Some decisions need group input; some may be made based on the knowledge and perspective of one individual.

For team decision making, the techniques of "Teaching Ways to Gain Group Agreement" are included after Activity 5.4. Specific benefits of and more strategies for team decision making are discussed in Chapter 6. Using a variety of methods helps teams manage options. Once choices have been narrowed down to a manageable number, it's time to evaluate the merits of each of them in Step 5.

Step 5: Evaluate Options

There is always a degree of risk and uncertainty when selecting the option to implement. It requires full consideration of the options and a close look at the pros and cons of each. Good analysis reduces the risk of implementing a decision that has been evaluated insufficiently, lowering the risk of surprises that may surface later.

Step 5 is achieved best by the team that helped develop the alternatives, although guests can be invited. Consensus is easier with those who have gone through the process earlier. Evaluation may require another meeting, depending on the time allotted for solving the problem. It is important to move on and not rehash alternatives. The risk at this stage is continuing to belabor the decision and avoiding action.

"Outsiders" can be invited to give feedback on the options being considered. Often they say something like: "Have you thought about…?" and suggest unexplored solutions, which is possible because they're not so close to the problem.

STRATEGY

To be sure all options are being given full scrutiny, you might want to assign the role of "devil's advocate" (a Socratic approach) to a team member during the discussion. This person opposes all options and suggests the disadvantages and questions the value of each alternative. Being assigned the role includes the instruction and understanding of "no ridicule," since the devil's advocate is providing a service to the team. If everyone evaluating an alternative can see nothing wrong with the option, be careful! It is a rare alternative that has full unconditional support and someone may be withholding his or her critical view because it's politically dangerous.

Always consider the option of doing nothing. It could very well be the alternative that makes the most sense. Hurricane forecasters use the term "cone of uncertainty" to describe the probabilities for the track of a storm. What you are doing at this point is forecasting the "cone of probabilities" for a successful implementation of a solution. To help you understand the implications of each option, the group must discuss the following questions:

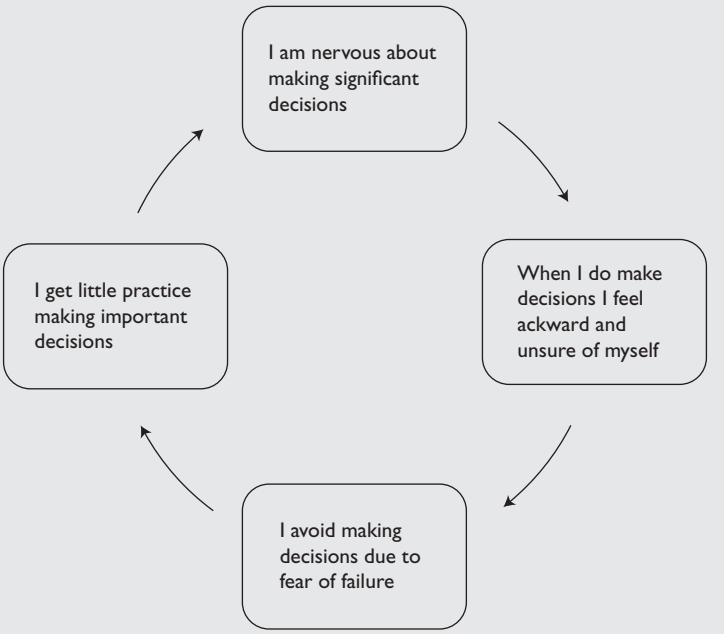
- Does the solution line up with our core values as an organization?
- Is there time available to implement the decision?
- Is the solution practical and something that could be implemented?
- Do we have the budget?
- Is there a high probability of acceptance by those impacted by the decision?
- Are the team resources available to implement the decision?
- Is there a reasonable risk/reward potential?
- Will the decision impact customers positively or negatively?
- Will new precedents be set in the organization?
- What other groups or departments will be affected by the decision?
- What are the major obstacles to be overcome?
- What are the pros/cons of the solution?
- What will the effect be on our competitors?
- Will the solution create bigger problems than we are solving?
- What are the potential unexpected consequences of implementing the decision?
- Is the solution legal and ethical?
- Will the implementation help the organization achieve its goals?

Perhaps the answers to most of the questions are not necessary to explore, but if the answers cause alarm bells to ring, take the opportunity to revisit options until you're fully confident about the choices you've made. Assuming a few alternatives have been selected, move to Step 6, making the decision.

Step 6: Make Decision

When all alternatives have been reviewed and analyzed, it is time to decide among the options. Ultimately, you or the team has to ask one final but serious question: Is the implementation of the decision going to solve the originally defined problem with manageable downside risk?

Figure 5.3 Overcoming Indecision



Indecision or slow decision making is often the kiss of death. Delays born out of the need for perfection or fear of failure can destroy all work done to this point. Figure 5.3 depicts the vicious cycle of indecision that must be overcome.

The best way to break the cycle is to start making decisions based on the information gathered in Step 5. A forced-choice technique might help if options have been narrowed down to a few good choices and you or the team are feeling perplexed about the decision.

QUICK DECISION TOOL

1. What is the optimum benefit that could result from this choice?
2. What is the worst possible result with this choice?
3. Is the benefit of Number 1 worth the downside of Number 2?
4. Could you ultimately accept the results of Number 2?

Two other techniques are to:

1. Ask what decision you would make if you were forced to make up your mind in three minutes.
2. Flip a coin and see whether the winning decision resonates with all you know about the decision. If it doesn't, that choice is not the better option.

When all the information is in and options, intuition, and consequences have been thoroughly assessed, it's time to select the best option. Absolute certainty may still be elusive, but with the time, effort, and work put in, it's necessary to make the call. Congratulations are in order for progress to date on Steps 1 through 6.

Step 7: Develop Plan

Once you've made a decision, notify all those who will be affected by it and will be involved in the implementation. To make sure each part of the plan has an owner, assign responsibilities and detail the steps required. You will also need to develop the measures that will be used to assess the results. What will things look like when you are successful? How will you know you have achieved your goals?

No matter how skilled you are at making decisions, it requires both formal and informal conversations with others to gain the needed "buy-in." This step might also be called "sell the plan," since much of your time will be spent gaining support. Often the solution to the problem spills across organization boundaries and involves departments that were not involved in the decision-making process. Be ready to educate others about the decision and champion your case throughout the organization.

For large-scale decisions, a champion, serving as a single point of contact, needs to work with those responsible for doing what was agreed to. From now on, reasonable speed is required in the implementation. Long delays will dampen enthusiasm and become yet another problem to solve. Step 8 gives you some guidance moving the project along.

Step 8: Implement

You have the budget and resources allocated. You've published the plan and assigned responsibilities. It's time to launch your decision.

The best decision ever developed is of no value if it isn't put into action. There's little risk until you reach this step. Thousands of great decisions die at this point

because of procrastination and fear the decision might be wrong. President John F. Kennedy captured the essence of this moment during the Cuban missile crisis (Sorensen, 2005):

> "The essence of the ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer often, indeed, to the decider himself . . . there will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process . . . mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved."

Your intuition is telling you to go ahead and you have to trust that all of your life's experiences have prepared you for implementation. A simple formula explains the critical need for successful implementation of the decision.

$$Ed = (Qd \times Id)$$

The overall effectiveness (Ed) of a decision equals the quality of the decision (Qd) times the implementation of the decision (Id). Be ready for second thoughts after you activate the plan. You are likely to second-guess your decision. Look past this and press on to the final step, where you evaluate and celebrate your success.

Step 9: Evaluate

All decisions must be tested in reality. The ultimate measure of all your effort comes when you assess whether the problem you set out to address has been solved. The best solutions on paper often have to be modified for the real world.

Put the decision under the evaluation microscope to determine whether the symptoms you originally identified have been resolved. Or have some unintended consequences surfaced? Keep management informed about your progress and make sure status reports provide feedback for all those who are contributing to the implementation.

Decision errors will happen and, when they do, admit the mistake without too much fanfare and move on. If the problem persists, try another option you considered in Steps 3 through 5.

After you have achieved success, pat yourself on the back, and be sure to recognize all those who contributed to the success of the effort. You might host a special event for everybody to celebrate, with special prizes awarded to those who went

above and beyond. If you succeeded in an individual decision that you made, celebrate the accomplishment by treating yourself to something special.

The Role of Intuition in Decisions and Problem Solving

The problem-solving model we've just covered relies on a very rational, logical, sequential process. Bear in mind, though, that intuition also plays a large part in the problem-solving and decision-making process. If a purely rational step-by-step approach would always suffice, we could simply use computers to solve all our problems.

Intuition is not a magical sixth sense but a subconscious process that assists us in the decision-making process. Reasoning occurs beneath the surface of conscious thought as your mind finds links between past events and elements of the problem you are facing.

We've all had that blinding flash of brilliance while we are in the shower or on a beach. Somewhere along the way, our minds started processing information about a problem and, in that moment, a solution emerged.

It is possible to increase your intuitive capability with a little work on your part. Some of the things you can do are listed here:

- Really listen to people and reflect on their viewpoints.
- Pay close attention to the big picture of personal and professional events.
- Read diverse materials.
- Listen to internal thoughts that surface while you are at rest or walking.
- Attend events you've never experienced before.
- Read case studies for vicarious learning experiences.
- Seek training on creativity and intuition.
- Keep a private journal with no concern for spelling or grammar.
- Find some new friends.
- Join new associations and attend meetings.
- Take time out to be by yourself and listen to your heart.

All of these ideas provide your mind with new experiences it can use to serve as a launch pad for intuitive ideas.

Other Elements to Consider

More Than Just Following Steps

The vast majority of the decisions you make would rarely need all the steps in the Nine Steps model. For the most part, your intuition helps you navigate through life. However, when the importance of the decision is high and the risks are significant, use the model to guide you through the process.

The valid concerns in the outer ring of Figure 5.1 can either derail or add value to the decision-making process. Some have been touched on already; such as time pressure, political issues, fear of failure, personal bias, past experience, budget constraints, mission/vision compatibility, stress and fear, peer pressure, and unknown problems. All of the concepts are topics of books in and of themselves. However, a few that are shown deserve to be highlighted.

Legal Issues

Legal issues can put a halt to what may appear to be a creative solution. For example, consider this scenario:

> A team recently interviewed a candidate with adequate credentials, degrees, and experience. The candidate had some learning disabilities that members thought could be managed by special accommodations. The talent management recruiter walked the candidate to his car. While the manager was out of the room, the team continued discussing how adjustments could be made for the candidate to succeed. Everyone was aware of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires accommodations for disabilities when people can do the job with reasonable assistance. The team was about to finalize the decision, but when the talent management recruiter returned she told the team that the candidate had a DUI conviction within the last year. Since the job required transporting children, DUIs within five years of application were against state law and local policy.

Suggestion: Include HR, your legal department, and contract managers if a decision might have any legal implications.

Cultural Issues

Knowledge and awareness of cultural diversity has recently been included in performance evaluations in progressive companies. With the increase in international commence, worldwide information exchange, and diverse populations in the

workplace, cultural sensitivity is important. In *Diversity Training* (Wildermuth & Gray, 2005), the U.S. Census Bureau reports that, between 1995 and 2050, the American population will increase as follows:

- White, non-Hispanic people, 7.4 percent
- People of Hispanic origin, 258.3 percent
- Black, non-Hispanic people, 69.5 percent
- Native Americans, 83.0 percent
- Asian and Pacific Islanders, 269.1 percent

Suffice to say that listening, inclusion, collaboration, accepting differences, and understanding are necessary skills and abilities to allow decisions to be made that take into account the richness that cultural dimensions provide.

Beliefs and Values

As we discussed in Chapter 2, thoughts are defined by beliefs; actions are taken based on values. For example, consider this scenario: If someone believes that new trainees should be treated just the way she was—thrown into the fire—then this same person may also value independence and treat new staff members with a hands-off approach. If this colleague or co-worker is a supervisor, and your project involves a mentoring program with new staff being mentored by supervisors, you'll have a hard time convincing this person that mentoring and coaching help people to become independent and that support helps confidence in the long run.

Personality

Personality is discussed more fully in Chapter 7. However, when it comes to decision making, personality conflicts often arise when some people are big-picture folks and others are intent on getting the details. Also, by nature, some are more concerned with organizational results and some with the harmony of the team. Some act quickly. Some prefer thoughtful consideration and time to think. All perspectives are good. Somewhere along the way, they all must mesh together for the good of the organization.

Who Should Make the Decision?

One of the tenets of decision making is to have the right person solve the problem, and that might just be the person with the problem. "How can that be?" you might ask. After all, if this person knew how to solve the problem, wouldn't he or she just solve it? That may be true; however, by asking the right questions, the person who

has the problem may be able to solve it with the team's help or individually with the help of the decision-making model in this chapter. One strategy would be to have the owner of the problem lead discussions as a facilitator. If several own the problem, people can take turns. The best-case scenario is to allow problem owners to be problem-solvers.

Questions

- What process do I presently follow to solve problems?
- How can I improve?
- What step of the model is the most difficult for me?
- When have I questioned a decision I have made?
- When has a decision turned out well?

Tips

Like a child, be

- Boundlessly creative and curious
- Totally honest
- Courageous to the extreme
- Spontaneous; living in the moment
- Trusting
- Fun-loving and playful

The Leader's Connection

Possibly, the sagest advice that can be offered to leaders is to avoid thinking that you have to solve the problem alone or thinking that you can always solve problems from your perspective only. Leaders are often intuitors, leaving the details to others. Sometimes you need the details, as well as the workforce harmony, the organizational perspective, and the insight of others. Look at the ways to gain thoughts and insight listed in "Ways to Gain Perspective and Insight" in the Activities section of this chapter.

One strategy for leaders to encourage more collaboration is to ask team members to go through Steps 1 through 6 of the model prior to a problem-solving discussion. The team members can present their analysis independently or in assigned subgroups. The conversation then becomes a coaching opportunity for the leader

and a great way for the team members to gain confidence and self-esteem. Any individual can practice this approach as well.

Questions

- How often do I make decisions independently?
- What is the method I use to involve others in decision making?
- Once I accept a decision, do I implement it?
- How often do I have the sense that the root problem is still elusive?
- What was one of the best decisions that was made cooperatively? How did we do it?

Tips

- Follow the tips in the previous Tips listing.
- Use the problem-solving tools in this chapter.
- Embrace the diversity of your team.
- Ask your direct reports to use the model.
- Encourage creative thought and intuition.

ABOUT THE NEXT CHAPTER

The next chapter is about teams. When you communicate one-on-one with a person, it is sometimes easy, and sometimes difficult. Skills and practice help ease the way for effective discussions and problem solving. When you are in a team, the communication challenges are multiplied and the solutions to engaging effectively are increased as well. Chapter 6 looks at team challenges and communication solutions.

Activities

Notes to Reader: The activities in this chapter are designed to be done individually or in a training environment. Whether you are in a group with others or working on your own, you may go back to these activities at any time and learn from them on an individual basis.

Notes to Instructor: Suggestions for using these activities in a learning environment are included at the end of the chapter.

Purpose: To practice problem solving with actual issues or concerns.

Background: The problem-solving model in this chapter walks you through how to solve a problem, taking into consideration the process to follow, not just making a quick decision. Of the activities in this section, one is for real problems, one uses a learning tool to think about the process, and one gives a scenario for practice. If you conduct the activities, they will require time to complete. You may not be able to finish in one sitting. It is important that participants choose a problem that can be solved without approval from anyone else in the organization. If a problem is systemic, figure out what part of the problem the person can help with and how he or she can make things happen. This will allow everyone to complete the entire process. After people become familiar with the nine steps, they can use the model for problems that require more assistance and cooperation from others.

Overview of the Problem-Solving Model

Use the explanations for each step of the model that were provided in Chapter 5. There is a brief description below of each step.

1. *Problem awareness:* What do you think the problem is, and what is the root cause?
2. *Gather data:* What data do you need to be sure that you are correct in identifying the problem? (For instance, say that you think the problem is turnover. What are the turnover statistics? How do they differ from previous years? What is the norm for turnover in your business?)
3. *Define the problem:* After discussion, define the problem. This may be difficult to do. (Perhaps you discovered what you believe to be the root cause of turnover. It may be hiring practices. Then you might want to revise your original view of the problem and define it differently.)
4. *Generate options:* What can your department do about the problem? What are some ideas to resolve the issues? (Using "hiring" as the problem, and assuming you are not HR, one option may be for all members of your team to be

on the lookout for potential recruitment areas and to submit names of candidates you think qualify for the job. This is a big problem [turnover] narrowed down to a sub-problem in which you can execute resolutions. Another small problem might be "We cannot get in touch with team members when we need to reach each other." One option might be to create an electronic shared calendar. Another might be to have a whiteboard showing where people will be for the day. Another option is to have a five-minute team meeting in the morning to touch base with each other regarding the day's activities.)

5. *Evaluate options:* Which options are the best? What can you do immediately? What might take more time? How can you prioritize what might be done? (Expanding the shared calendar option, this is a task that can be completed by a person in the department. Action steps would include ensuring that accurate information is provided to that person by a certain time.)
6. *Make decisions:* Decide on the best solutions. (If this is your first time using the model, you might choose only one solution that can be implemented. You will obtain more timely resolution with only one solution, and you can determine how the model worked and ways you could improve next time.)
7. *Develop a plan:* Create an action plan with people assigned to tasks and due dates. Set up meeting dates for progress reviews in person or with online conferences to determine when actions are met.
8. *Implement:* Like the Nike commercial, "Just do it!" This, of course, would be according to your well-thought-out plan.
9. *Evaluate:* How did it go? Were you able to solve your portion of the problem? If not, why not? If so, celebrate your accomplishments.

Activity 5.1. Practice the Model

Instructions: Make a list of problems that you would like to solve. Choose one. You will not be solving the problem. You will be using the problem to determine what you might do at each step of the problem-solving model. This is for learning purposes and to discuss an issue by using the model to try it out.

Activity 5.2. What Is the Problem?

Instructions: Read the scenario about Brad and turnover in his department in Chapter 5. Complete the nine steps of the problem-solving model using the scenario. You can make things up to fill in the story. After you have completed the activity, see Greg Trulson's Scenario Notes at the end of the chapter. He created

more background, just as you can do. Don't look until you have completed your process!

Activity 5.3. Tech Confusion

Instructions: In the case below, identify the steps that were taken by the salesperson to solve the problem. What steps are missing?

Tech Confusion

Susan was about to head off to college with a dinosaur-aged laptop computer. She needed to acquire a new computer and was overwhelmed with all the choices of equipment. Her Internet searches and visits to the electronic retailers only deepened her confusion and immobilized her. One of her friends had the decision made for her by overeager parents and Susan wasn't sure she liked the brand her friend received.

Susan decided to visit one last retailer before throwing in the towel and heading off to campus with her old computer. When she entered the computer department she was shocked to see the number of laptop options they had available. While standing there, she was approached by one of the sales personnel who looked like a character from central casting. What she expected was a tirade of features for each machine, which would only have created more confusion.

To her amazement, the salesperson seemed like he had been to the Rudyard Kipling school of sales. Instead of pointing out a specific laptop, he started asking questions and actually listened to her answers. "How will you use it? How often?, Where will you use it? Do you store lots of music and pictures? What types of classes will you attend? What is your budget?" and many more pertinent questions. After listening to her answers and crafting additional probing questions to determine her needs, he offered a limited pallet of options for her to consider. "Based on your needs, I suggest you consider two models that will fit your requirements. Let me tell you why…."

Susan made her selection with confidence and headed off to pursue her dreams.

Notes to Instructor: If you are working with a large group, you can conduct the activities with teams. Ask people to form groups of five. To identify problems to tackle in Activity 5.1, ask each team to brainstorm problems that they would like to solve in the organization. Ask them to choose problems that are in their control and do not require many levels of approval for follow-up. One problem can be addressed per team; the team members should agree on the problem. Have the nine-step model posted or hand it out. Give teams enough time to work the problem through Step 7. See the techniques described on the next page for the discussion phase.

Teaching Ways to Gain Group Agreement

The methods described below can aid in group decision making.

Brainstorming

The word brainstorming was coined by Alex F. Osborn, the co-founder of a large advertising agency. The focus of the process is to develop creative ways to solve a problem, as opposed to critical or evaluative thinking.

The facilitator of a session explains the reasons for the event and reviews the rules to be followed. The number of participants is best kept from six to twelve. The idea of deferred judgment of ideas is critical for the approach to be effective. Full participation of the group members must be accomplished without letting anyone dominate, while encouraging the quiet participants to contribute. If time allows, the facilitator should use an icebreaker with the group to encourage creativity before the ideas are generated. The success of a brainstorming session depends on the group following these rules:

1. Generate as many ideas as possible/quantity without concern for quality.
2. Combine ideas and piggyback parts of ideas.
3. Visibly record all ideas for everyone to see as they are developed.
4. Refrain from criticism or evaluation of ideas until the idea generation is complete.
5. Encourage very creative, even far out, ideas without ridicule.
6. Set a time limit and leave some time for the group to reflect on the ideas.

The evaluation of the ideas does not take place until the end, and preferably at a later time. The delay will often help participants develop additional ideas before they start the evaluation phase. Ideas are critiqued and reduced to the final accepted solutions for analysis in Step 5 of the model.

Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique was developed by Andre Delbecq and Andrew Van de Ven while at the University of Wisconsin. This technique is designed to achieve equal participation by all participants and lessen the chance for individual domination or dysfunctional conflict within the group. The technique follows a prescribed series of steps:

1. Each member generates ideas silently, often on 3 x 5 cards. A time for this phase will usually be limited to 10 to 15 minutes.
2. The facilitator gathers all the ideas from each group member one at a time in a round-robin fashion and records them visually or posts the 3 x 5 cards on a board.

3. Each idea is discussed for clarification and understanding. New ideas may come to mind as this step proceeds, and they are posted as well.
4. A letter is assigned to each idea that is posted and the group members use a numerical weighting system to rank order the ideas. The most common approach of forced ranking asks the group to silently vote by ballot using a scale from 1 to 10 points, with 1 being the best.
5. The preliminary vote is tabulated and the rankings are discussed. If clear winners surface, skip to Step 7 of the problem-solving model. The options may be narrowed down for the next round of voting.
6. Repeat Steps 4 and 5 of the process to reduce the options down to the target number of ideas for further evaluation.
7. The final vote is disclosed and the top option is put through Step 5 of the problem-solving model.

Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique was originally developed by the Rand Corporation. The technique was named after the Oracle at Delphi in Greece in the 6th Century BCE, who received written questions from afar. This technique also has been called "absentee brainstorming," since it parallels the same idea-generation process but through electronic or snail mail means. The approach allows people to think without others jeopardizing the integrity of their ideas. There are generally five steps in the process:

1. Questionnaires are distributed to each participant explaining the goals of the process and asking them to anonymously generate suggested solutions to the designated problem.
2. The questionnaires are returned to the facilitator and the ideas are combined and tabulated.
3. If necessary, the facilitator talks to the contributors to gain clarification of their ideas prior to the next round of emails or mailings.
4. A second and possibly third and fourth round might be used to narrow down the solutions. Much like the nominal group technique, a forced ranking might be applied to determine the top suggestions.
5. A final report is distributed to all participants presenting the results and thanking them for their participation.

Scenario Notes

Here are some suggestions regarding the scenario about Brad and turnover in his department.

Step 2

- The HR department:
  - Reviews exit interview data derived from departing employees
  - Reviews performance appraisals for ex-employees
  - Compares turnover statistics prior to Brad with current trend
  - Reviews Brad's personal appraisals done by his manager
  - Interviews Brad concerning the turnover
  - Discovers Brad cancelled attending two company-sponsored seminars on interview skills
  - Discovers the turnover increase corresponds with Brad's arrival
  - Discovers that Brad did not use the structured interview process that is company policy

Step 3

- The problem is redefined from a turnover problem to improving the interview and selection process Brad uses, plus the enhancement of his coaching skills.

Step 4

- Direct coaching of Brad by his manager
- Brad attend a seminar(s) concerning interviewing and coaching skills
- Brad could shadow a successful counterpart manager during an equivalent hiring process
- Brad could use self-study courses followed by intensive coaching by his manager

Step 5

- Coaching and attending a seminar or several seminars were the options chosen.

Step 6

- Brad will be directly coached and observed by his manager following the attendance at the company-sponsored structured interviewing seminar.

Step 7

- Brad will register for a seminar within two weeks.
- Brad's manager will conduct a coaching session before the seminar.
- Meetings will take place every two weeks for continued coaching and for follow-up.

Step 8

- Brad attends a seminar and debriefs with his manager upon return.
- He starts using his newfound skills in upcoming interviews.

Step 9

- After an appropriate time, HR will assess the turnover in Brad's department to be sure the training and coaching helped him overcome his lack of interviewing expertise.