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Practical Problem Solving

The ability to solve corporate problems can save a company from strikes, walkouts, lost revenues, worthless setbacks, and numerous other devastating conditions. While we hope that our company never faces any of these, the fact is that they happen daily in companies around the world.

Controlling or preventing these conditions from taking place relates to how one participates in solving problems when they arrive. There is no question as to whether or not problems will come. The question is how and what direction they will appear.

7 Steps to the Successful Problem Solving Process

When a company has a problem, someone is influenced by it. For many it might be the employee; for others it is the customer. Whoever is affected really doesn't matter. What does matter is how the problem will be examined and solved. Over the next two months, we will look at seven steps to successfully solve problems.

Step #1 - Define the problem or state what is wrong
Gathering detail as to what is wrong helps give a proper definition. This process points out signals or signs and tests each for validity. To bring this about, the following process helps to define the problem.

- *Give Detail*

Before a problem can be examined thoroughly, it must be defined with great detail. It is a shame for someone to invest many hours trying to solve a problem which is distorted or slanted by one's view. A clear definition enhances the problem and gives detail to the real situation.

- *Explain and expand the problem*

Each problem must be expanded to include more information than just the normal details. Information must be gathered to pinpoint the problem at particular times. For example, answer these questions:

1. Specify and explain exactly what is happening and to whom.
2. Locate exactly where this is happening.
3. What is the occurrence of each problem?
Is there a particular time of day when this happens more frequently?
4. Is this problem serious?

- *Test each sign for validity*

Testing each sign or signal can expand what is known about the problem and help to eliminate some of the potential causes. Every signal listed, even though it is specific, is only a possible signal.

Sometimes things can go right only by first going very wrong.
Edward Tenner
Technology Consultant

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To test each means moving away from generalities into detailed facts. We must become fact finders and rule out those items which are not true.

Step #2 - Collect data and gather information

Potential risks are the bottom line to any solution given to solve a problem. These risks can be minimized only after information has been gathered concerning the problem. Some of the data gathered should involve what decisions have been made thus far concerning the problem.

Step #3 - Seek and coordinate opinions

Seeking opinions from others allows you to gather ideas which are missed during a problem situation. Opinions should be gathered from all levels of contact to the problem if the problem cannot be solved quickly. For example, if a company is

having a problem with shipping out widgets, then every manager involved in the process should give input. This input should be gathered quickly and be listed, tested, or discussed. Those ideas which are not workable can be discarded. It is foolish to not gain input from capable on-site employees.

Next month we will look at the remaining steps to the problem solving process.

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