
The Mathis Group's Messenger

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Problem Solving in the 21st Century

In today's world, everyone has the challenge of trying to solve or fix problems for themselves and others. At home, school, and the office, problems are everywhere. Strengthening your problem solving skills in the workplace will help you to reduce worker problems, strikes, walkouts, lost revenues, decrease setbacks, and fix problems faster.

It was once a common thought that those in authority would solve the problem or have all the answers. That is not the case any longer. Usually, the employees have a better view of the problem and solution due to the fact that they are closer to the problem than corporate executives. When allowing employees to tackle the problem, you must be careful to not limit their thinking. Putting restrictions on how employees attack a problem situation could be fatal to its resolution. Do not be afraid of their suggestions just because it is new or would result in a change of the current system.

There are seven steps in the successful problem solving process.

1. Define the problem or state what is wrong

Gathering detail as to what is wrong helps to give a proper definition. This process helps with detail by pointing out signals or signs and testing each signal for validity.

- Give detail--enhances the problem and gives detail to the real solution
- Explain & expand the problem--Specify exactly what is happening and to whom. Locate exactly where this is happening. What is the occurrence of each problem? Is there a particular time of day when this happens more frequently? Is this problem serious? To what extent?



- Read the sign and signals--prepare a list of possible causes which are bringing about this situation

- Test each signal for validity--expands what is known about the problem and helps to eliminate some of the potential causes. Move away from generalities into deep, detailed facts.

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. Decisions can range in four types:

- Typical or ordinary decisions--decisions which are made as a normal part of a business day
- Team decisions--made by a group of participants. The group must have an extensive amount of data on the problem and its consequence.
- Single alternative decisions--consist of yes or no decisions and only involve one or two alternatives.
- Complex decisions--uses an extensive amount of data on the problem (just like team decisions). This process also has an enormous amount of input from other people giving advice based upon their expertise.

3. Seek and coordinate opinions

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

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Don't be afraid to take a big step if one is indicated. You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps.
David Lloyd George (1863-1945)
Statesman

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from the shipping department, then every manager involved in that process should give input. This input might be gathered quickly and should be listed, tested or discussed, and those ideas not workable can be discarded. However, it is foolish to not seek input from capable on-site employees.

4. Analyze each alternative

It is guaranteed that each solution will have risks. These risks can come with the way the solution is carried out and its future success. One way to analyze the alternatives is to play that "What If" game. The "What If" game means to ask yourself "what if we do this?" What will be the outcome, the price tag, the effect on others? Will this change or make the present problem go away? You should also list all the reasons why the alternative will not work. Doing this can be beneficial toward solving the problem. Looking over all the reasons why each solution is not workable can give new insights. It is possible to solve some of the small concerns and then be able to implement the entire alternative.

5. Make a decision and gain commitment

The best decision will normally float to the surface and can be distinguished from other fatal options. Have a group discussion concerning the best possible decision. Narrowing down the alternatives and discussing each with the group allow more information to be gathered. With this method there are fewer surprises and less loss in the long term. Gaining commitment from those involved can help implement this in the company at a faster rate and increase the potential for success. Each decision has strengths and weaknesses, but to make this problem go away it will take the help of numerous others. Discuss the worst possible outcome. Knowing the worst possible scenario can help one mentally prepare for the future. It is hard for one to make a decision unless he/she has weighed each decision by the potential outcome.

6. Make plans to implement the new strategy

Coordinating this situation means gathering the needed manpower to bring about the change in a quick and painless process. Many in this stage will put together small groups or committees who will oversee different aspects of the task. To implement the change the following must be accomplished:

- Dates must be set
- List all the steps of the process
- List any materials or supplies that must be ordered
- How will the process be monitored and followed up?

Challenge employees to come up with their own better ways to do their jobs. You may be surprised at how valuable some of their suggestions are.

7. Evaluate and make adjustments

Evaluating and making adjustments is a never-ending situation. Once a problem has been solved, one must make sure this problem has not been replaced with another one of equal or greater depth. Looking after vulnerable areas will guarantee that a problem will be removed or noticed as soon as it surfaces. This limits the amount of destruction if a problem does come about. Checking out possible causes can be looked at as quality control. In each case, a constant advancement of problem solving will continue.

Now that we have looked at the steps for successful problem solving, we will dig deeper next month on different behaviors that can block solutions.



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