THE INSTITUTE OF
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No.34

Leadership Essentials

Problem Solving

Leaders demonstrate ownership by being solution focused

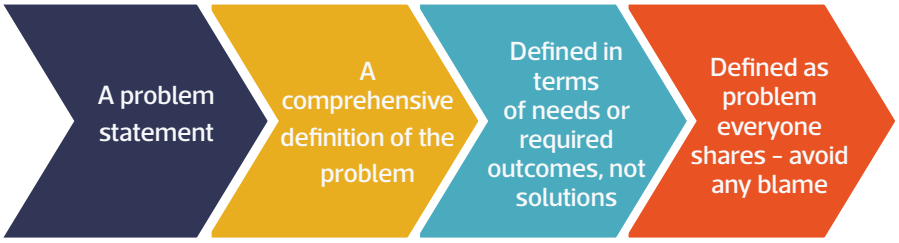
"A problem occurs when there is a gap between what we want to happen and what is actually happening; something differs from normal or something goes wrong. Problems at work vary in size, complexity and severity. Defining the problem accurately is an essential first step to a solution." (Kepner, and Tregoe, 2013)

Defining the Problem

It is easy to overlook or misunderstand the true nature and cause of problems at work. This can often lead to:

- Confusion
- The wrong problem being dealt with
- The symptom is removed but not the cause of the underlying problem
- Missed learning opportunities

Defining the problem is the most important step of problem solving. To do this, you need to diagnose the situation properly so that the real problem is accurately identified, and not its symptoms. If you identify and describe your problems well, you will make them easier and less costly to solve. The way your problem is defined and understood has a major impact on the number, quality, innovativeness and type of solutions that are proposed. You need to define:



Involving your team in doing this by asking insightful questions can help you to get a deeper understanding of the issue and its impact:

- What is the problem?
- What is the gap between 'What is' and 'What should be?'
- What can you see, hear, feel, taste that tells you there is a problem?
- When was this first observed? When is it not observed? When could it have happened but did not?
- How big is it? How many are there? How many could there be but are not? Who does it affect? Who does it not affect? How many could have it but do not?

How should problems be solved?

There are eight steps in the problem solving process:

1. Define the problem Investigate exactly what has gone wrong; Do not be influenced by people with ready-made solutions; Getting the definition accurate is crucial so that you do not find that you are solving the wrong problem collecting possible answers to questions that have not been asked.

A good 'problem statement' is a clear and precise description of the problem being addressed. It should focus on one problem only, and should not suggest a solution.

2. Gather relevant information Gather detail on the people, activities, processes, equipment, systems, time-scales and conditions under which the problems occur.

3. Identify possible causes Causes usually relate to people, systems or equipment. Be careful not to blame the computer when it could be that the operator is not trained.

Asking 'What has changed from the norm?' helps to identify the cause.

4. Identify a possible solution Work out a way to test exactly what it is you are looking for and how you will know if you are right.

5. Test the possible causes Go back over the information you have assembled in steps 1-4 to test it, on paper, if the cause finds a good match with how, where and when the problem occurs, to what extent it occurs, and who is affected by it.

6. Work out the solution There may be a number of possible solutions (which may not be mutually exclusive) with some more appropriate than others.

7. Making the decision Identify and assess all possible alternative solutions. See 'Leadership Essentials No.33 Decision Making' for further information.

8. Monitor the results How well did your solution work? What have you learnt?

Gap Analysis

Gap analysis is a common procedure for determining needs and identifying problems before action planning. It helps you to decide what steps you need to take in order to move from your current situation to a desired situation in the future. It can help your team to:

- Identify specific problems to address
- Understand the situation causing the problem more clearly
- Ensure that the problem being solved is the right one
- Identify the way forward
- Take the most important step - determining the actions you think will help close the gap

There are three steps in a gap analysis:

1. Assess your current situation – in factual, specific terms.

2. Identify your desired future state – including objectives you need to achieve and time frame; the more clearly you define your desired future state, the better your end result will be.

3. Identify and describe the gap - assess the factors that contribute to it; the distance that needs to be covered; how far and how fast do you need to go to achieve your goal (remove the gap)?

Intuition in Problem Solving

Intuition is an ability to understand or know something immediately based on your feelings, not through rational processes such as facts and data.

There are two main problem solving styles:

In analytical/ rational problem solving, you think about the problem, consider several alternative courses of action, and choose the one that best fits your objective. (Kepner & Tregoe, 2013)

In intuitive problem solving, you rely on your experience, judgment and instinct to assess a situation quickly and take action (Cholle, 2011). Intuitive problem solvers normally have skills such as:

- Recognising the early signs of problems or opportunities
- Sizing up situations rapidly and seeing the big picture
- Quickly assessing the likely outcome of each possible opportunity
- Decide and act without deliberate analysis

Intuition is particularly useful for generating and considering all possible alternative solutions to a problem.

Quality Circles

A 'Quality Circle' is a small group of employees who meet regularly to focus on problem-solving and taking corrective action to improve quality in their area. It is considered best practice for membership of a quality circle to be voluntary and for the 'leader' of the quality circle to be selected by the members themselves.

Dos and Don'ts of Problem Solving

DO

- Keep asking the key questions: what, when, where, who?
- Gather as much relevant information as possible.
- Define the exact nature of the problem.
- Keep a record of the information you collect & collate for re-checking.

DON'T

- Forget to ask negative questions: What not? When not? Where not? Who not?
- Neglect to test possible causes against the data gathered.
- Jump to an apparently obvious solution without evidence.
- Evaluate ideas too quickly.

References

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