

Basic Guidelines to Problem Solving and Decision Making

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Much of what managers and supervisors do is solve problems and make decisions. New managers and supervisors, in particular, often make solving problems and decisions by reacting to them. They are "under the gun", stressed and very short for time. Consequently, when they encounter a new problem or decision they must make, they react with a decision that seemed to work before. It's easy with this approach to get stuck in a circle of solving the same problem over and over again. Therefore, as a new manager or supervisor, get used to an organized approach to problem solving and decision making. Not all problems can be solved and decisions made by the following, rather rational approach. However, the following basic guidelines will get you started. Don't be intimidated by the length of the list of guidelines. After you've practiced them a few times, they'll become second nature to you -- enough that you can deepen and enrich them to suit your own needs and nature.

(Note that it might be more your nature to view a "problem" as an "opportunity". Therefore, you might substitute "problem" for "opportunity" in the following guidelines.)

1. Define the problem

This is often where people struggle. They react to what they think the problem is. Instead, seek to understand more about why you think there's a problem.

Defining the problem: (with input from yourself and others)

Ask yourself and others, the following questions:

- a. What can you *see* that causes you to think there's a problem?
- b. Where is it happening?
- c. How is it happening?
- d. When is it happening?
- e. With whom is it happening? (HINT: Don't jump to "Who is causing the problem?" When we're stressed, blaming is often one of our first reactions. To be an effective manager, you need to address issues more than people.)
- f. Why is it happening?
- g. Write down a five-sentence description of the problem in terms of "The following should be happening, but isn't ..." or "The following is happening and should be: ..." As much as possible, be specific in your description, including what is happening, where, how, with whom and why.

Defining complex problems:

- a. If the problem still seems overwhelming, break it down by repeating steps a-f until you have descriptions of several related problems.

Verifying your understanding of the problems:

- a. It helps a great deal to verify your problem analysis for conferring with a peer or someone else.

Prioritize the problems:

- a. If you discover that you are looking at several related problems, then prioritize which ones you should address first.
- b. Note the difference between "important" and "urgent" problems. Often, what we consider to be important problems to consider are really just urgent problems. Important problems deserve more attention. For example, if you're continually answering "urgent" phone calls, then you've probably got a more "important" problem and that's to design a system that screens and prioritizes your phone calls.

Understand your role in the problem:

- a. Your role in the problem can greatly influence how you perceive the role of others. For example, if you're very stressed out, it'll probably look like others are, too, or, you may resort too quickly to blaming and reprimanding others. Or, you are feeling very guilty about your role in the problem, you may ignore the accountabilities of others.

2. Look at potential causes for the problem

- a. It's amazing how much you don't know about what you don't know. Therefore, in this phase, it's critical to get input from other people who notice the problem and who are effected by it.
- b. It's often useful to collect input from other individuals one at a time (at least at first). Otherwise, people tend to be inhibited about offering their impressions of the real causes of problems.
- c. Write down what your opinions and what you've heard from others.
- d. Regarding what you think might be performance problems associated with an employee, it's often useful to seek advice from a peer or your supervisor in order to verify your impression of the problem.
- e. Write down a description of the cause of the problem and in terms of what is happening, where, when, how, with whom and why.

3. Identify alternatives for approaches to resolve the problem

- a. At this point, it's useful to keep others involved (unless you're facing a personal and/or employee performance problem). Brainstorm for solutions to the problem. Very simply put, brainstorming is collecting as many ideas as possible, then screening them to find the best idea. It's critical when collecting the ideas to not pass any judgment on the ideas -- just write them down as you hear them.

4. Select an approach to resolve the problem

When selecting the best approach, consider:

- a. Which approach is the most likely to solve the problem for the long term?
- b. Which approach is the most realistic to accomplish for now? Do you have the resources? Are they affordable? Do you have enough time to implement the approach?
- c. What is the extent of risk associated with each alternative?

5. Plan the implementation of the best alternative (this is your action plan)

- a. Carefully consider "What will the situation look like when the problem is solved?"
- b. What steps should be taken to implement the best alternative to solving the problem?

What systems or processes should be changed in your organization, for example, a new policy or procedure? Don't resort to solutions where someone is "just going to try harder".

c. How will you know if the steps are being followed or not? (these are your indicators of the success of your plan)

d. What resources will you need in terms of people, money and facilities?

e. How much time will you need to implement the solution? Write a schedule that includes the start and stop times, and when you expect to see certain indicators of success.

f. Who will primarily be responsible for ensuring implementation of the plan?

g. Write down the answers to the above questions and consider this as your action plan.

h. Communicate the plan to those who will be involved in implementing it and, at least, to your immediate supervisor.

(An important aspect of this step in the problem-solving process is continual observation and feedback.)

6. Monitor implementation of the plan

Monitor the indicators of success:

a. Are you seeing what you would expect from the indicators?

b. Will the plan be done according to schedule?

c. If the plan is not being followed as expected, then consider: Was the plan realistic? Are there sufficient resources to accomplish the plan on schedule? Should more priority be placed on various aspects of the plan? Should the plan be changed?

7. Verify if the problem has been resolved or not

One of the best ways to verify if a problem has been solved or not is to resume normal operations in the organization. Still, you should consider:

a. What changes should be made to avoid this type of problem in the future? Consider changes to policies and procedures, training, etc.

b. Lastly, consider "What did you learn from this problem solving?" Consider new knowledge, understanding and/or skills.

c. Consider writing a brief memo that highlights the success of the problem solving effort, and what you learned as a result. Share it with your supervisor, peers and subordinates.