

Problem solving

Managers are faced with a never-ending flow of problems – deviations from the norm. During the course of a week, hundreds of spontaneous, minor problems are usually tackled with minimum fuss, using years of accumulated knowledge and experience.

At times, however, a major problem will arise. On such occasions, the wise manager uses a classic problem-solving strategy as outlined in this fact sheet. When you have a serious problem, implement the following nine steps:

1. Identify the symptoms

When you sense that trouble is brewing in your business, it's usually the symptoms of a problem that emerges first – bickering among employees, equipment breakdowns, changes in behaviour patterns, uneven performance, poor attendance at staff meetings, missing petty cash, litter, etc. These symptoms can indicate a major problem lurking below the surface.

2. Define the problem

You are aware of the symptoms – now try to define the problem. This is often difficult to identify. Try to state the problem in a single sentence – this will help you to identify the actual nature of the problem. It could be that you are trying to deal with more than one problem. Remember, don't confuse the symptoms, the causes and the problem.

3. Specify your objectives

Be clear about what you are setting out to achieve in tackling the problem. Compare the existing situation with the desired state – where you are now and where you would like to be. Then state the transformation necessary to move from one state to the other.

4. Analyse the problem

- First get the facts. Ask questions of all parties, pay attention without prejudice, and read for guidance in policy handbooks, precedent file, or the journals. You might never have all the facts but it is essential to have enough of them.
- Order and simplify your information, distil and reorder the material to get at the core of the issue and the real problem.
- Check your facts for accuracy and relevance, and discard as required.
- Assess the data without prejudice, preconceived ideas or emotion.

5. Generate alternative solutions

Problem solving requires a choice of options. To find the best option, you must consider several possible solutions. By formulating many options, you will be less likely to overlook the best course of action. If necessary, use brainstorming and creative thinking techniques to foster the free flow of ideas.

6. Evaluate the various alternative solutions

Evaluate the options you have now generated. List the advantages and disadvantages of each. Mentally test each option by imagining that each has already been put into effect. Think of the consequences – anticipated and unanticipated – of each alternative. Focus on the two or three that appear most promising. The focus now shifts to decision-making.

7. Choose the best solution

You may now have identified several alternative options, but you need to select the best option. In making your final selection, you could call upon previous experience, advice from others (including employees, intuition, experimentation, or scientific tools such as linear programming or simulation modelling). Compare your short listed options, perhaps even allocate values or points to each, and arrive at a final decision.

Remember, the best solution will normally be the one with the most advantages and the fewest disadvantages and, ultimately, the most desirable.

8. Take the necessary action

Now it is time to plan carefully how best to implement your decision. You will need an action plan. Since most decisions affect or involve people, you should communicate and consult with those affected to gain their support. These may include employees, clients and suppliers. Decide what has to be done, how, by whom and when. Identify areas which might go wrong and how the results will be reported or evaluated.

9. Monitor the results of your solution

Routine follow-up checks and evaluations will ensure that you have solved the problem. Check the symptoms again – have they disappeared or at least been reduced? Establish control measures to compare actual with planned results. Take corrective action where necessary. If the problem has not been solved, you will need to repeat the process, this time from a completely new perspective.

Further information

The following fact sheets provide further information on these issues:

- Become a better decision-maker
- Risk management