Competency Center

Problem Solving

Problem Solving Defined

Problem solving requires gathering the best information possible, and based on that information, making the best decision possible. Effective problem solving within the corporate environment often requires collaboration with others and a willingness to allow them to contribute to and share in the satisfaction of crafting an effective solution. The most effective teams are those that work together to frame problems and agree on the best way to solve them.

Effective problem solving involves four key components:

1. *Defining the problem*: Identify the issue or opportunity and determine whether or not action is required. Use foresight in order to predict what the problem may lead to and how it might impact the organization. Resist the urge to define the problem in terms of a proposed solution or diagnose it based only on its symptoms.

2. *Identifying the desired results*: Define the objective and precisely what the organization wants to accomplish. Identify any barriers to success and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. Align agreed-upon goals with the defined business, organization, department, or industry needs.

3. *Using business goals to drive decision making*: Analyze data in the context of overall business objectives and ensure goals are defined, agreed upon, and communicated to everyone in the organization. Generate alternatives to ensure desired results.

4. *Employ data-driven standards*: Data-driven standards help prevent the bias and subjectivity that can lead to the wrong result or poor decision making.

Impact

To survive in today's competitive environment, companies must formulate effective strategies and execute those strategies flawlessly. Connecting decisions and solutions to a company's bottom line can generate enormous value for a company.

Techniques for Development

Individuals can choose from a variety of problem-solving techniques and approaches, including:

- *Analogy:* Identifying a solution that solved a similar problem and using that solution to solve the current problem.

- *Brainstorming:* Identifying a large number of potential solutions and combining, developing, or expanding each idea until an optimum solution is found.

- *Reduction:* Transforming the problem into a different problem for which real solutions already exist.

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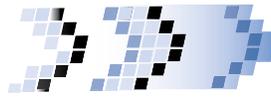
- *Root cause analysis:* Identifying a problem's root cause and, if possible, eliminating the underlying issues rather than only addressing the symptoms.

- *Trial and error:* Testing potential solutions until an optimum solution is found. Trial and error is often used in situations where there is little information available, and is best used for solving simple problems that have few consequences from solution failure.

Leaders are responsible for planning and executing strategy. To improve their problem-solving capabilities, they must:

- *Avoid over-reliance on leadership "gut feelings"*: Leaders must understand that the best decisions are educated decisions and should never depend solely on intuition, which often results in inconsistent and ineffective solutions.

- *Think creatively*: Creative solutions move the company to the next level. Time constraints should not prevent access to creative abilities.

- *Seek out complex tasks and projects*: Lead or organize a discussion of complex issues; enlist the input and opinions of others; serve as a mentor or volunteer in helping others to resolve complex problems.

- *Gather information from qualified individuals*: Even if others' views conflict with data and information already gathered, their knowledge can be very valuable.

- *Understand the organizational culture and values*: In order to garner the support, trust, and respect of those in the organization, leaders must be deeply invested in the company's culture and value system.

- *Be realistic about their abilities*: Leaders who lack self-knowledge may risk misinterpreting available information.

- *Understand how to invest in business objectives*: Successful, results-driven organizations spend money in the right places and tie each business investment back to specific goals and outcomes.

Related Reading

- *The Achievement Habit* by Bernard Roth, Business Book Summaries

- *Move from Problem to Solution* by Betty M. Parker, *Talent Development*

- *Prepare Tomorrow's Leaders Today* by Scott Steinberg, *Talent Development*

- *Think Smarter by Michael Kallet, Business Book Summaries*