

Quick Tools for Problem Solving

How do you make a decision? Usually what you get is a problem with incomplete information and unknown or conflicted variables. This is compounded by your inability to clearly see into and predict the future. Somehow you have to weigh the options and cope with the uncertainty. Of course if you had all the information or were clairvoyant, the problem would be easy to solve. Is there anything out there to help you navigate through the maze?

Here are a few ideas to put into your problem solving toolkit.

Try changing your “thinking views”:

Convergent thinkers bring ideas together to focus on a single aspect of the issue to identify a solution and bring closure.

Divergent thinkers do just the opposite. Thoughts are spread out in all directions to take in a broader view of the problem.

Both types of thinking are necessary to arrive at an effective solution to the problem. Generate alternatives, ideas, options, outcomes and scenarios in a divergent mode then narrow them down to an effective and concise fix. (Note - Good divergent thinkers are truly a rare and valuable find! Be on the look out for these folks in your organization and realize the potential significance of their abilities.)

Clearly state and define the problem:

1. Restate the problem using different words:
For example-
Initial statement: How can we decrease wait times in the Emergency Department?
Restated: How can we keep wait times in the Emergency Department from increasing?
2. Turn the problem over to identify barriers:
Initial statement: How can we improve staff attendance?
Restated: How can we prevent staff from attending?
3. Broaden the focus:
Initial statement: Should I change jobs?
Restated: How can I make my work more challenging and satisfying?
4. Boldly redirect the focus:
Initial statement: How can we increase revenue?
Restated: How can we decrease expenses?
5. Why, why, why, why, why?
Get to the bottom of the issue by repeatedly asking why.

Beware of short cuts!

It's only human nature to unconsciously simplify the problem solving process. Be aware of tendencies to:

- Be satisfied with the first solution that appears “good enough” rather than considering all alternatives to select the one that is best.
- Hold onto initial impressions and disregard information to the contrary.

- Be influenced by how the information is presented.
- Stop thinking when confronted with “authority.”

And finally...

An open mind is the best advice when it comes to problem solving. The best answer may be directly in front of those with eyes open to new options, willing to take an extra step and anxious to except the challenge to continuously improve.

Read more about it:

The Thinker's Toolkit by Morgan D. Jones. Three Rivers Press, New York. 1998

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