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## Problem Solving Tips

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By Doug Stanearth

Five years ago, a couple of instructors that I was working with and I were brainstorming about different ways to promote our training programs more easily. Up to that point, I had spent my entire career in training focused primarily on helping individuals become more successful by helping them strengthen certain skill sets such as public speaking, management skills, and selling skills. We noticed that out of our classes, about 80% of participants were individuals, about 15% came with a friend, and about 5% came as a group. We knew that these groups who attended together leveraged the results of the programs significantly, because they held each other accountable for implementation of the skills. They also discussed the class within the office setting. What we didn't know was why more teams weren't registering.

We decided to use the problem solving process that we teach in our classes to see if we could come up with different ways to increase group enrollment.

Step #1: Identify the Specific Problem and Create a One-Sentence Description.

This step sounds easy, but it is actually the most difficult and the most critical step as well. If your problem statement is too vague, then you will likely struggle with trying to come up with valid solutions. Also, if the problem statement is too encompassing, then a solution might be too complex to easily implement. For example, if we decide that the problem we want to overcome is poor customer service, then the group is likely to spend countless hours trying to first define customer service, and then coming up with every solution under the sun to try to fix the customer service problem. The success of the solution would be hard to measure. However, if we broke customer service into more specific parts such as eliminating rudeness from our call center agents or increasing repeat sales from existing customers, then we could more easily solve a complex problem.

In the example above where I mentioned that our instructors wanted to increase group participation, our original problem statement was related to increasing repeat business from first time clients. After a little investigation we found that companies that sent two or more people to our classes were 30 times more likely to send people in the future than companies that sent an individual. When we identified that trend, we created a more specific problem statement which was, "In what was can we increase group participation in our classes?"

## Step #2: What are the Possibly Causes

A common error at this point in the process is to jump right into looking for solutions to the problem before trying to identify the root causes of the problem. This usually results in a "band-aid" solution or a solution that just treat symptoms. It would be like reaching under your dashboard and clipping the wire to your "Check Engine" light. Sure you won't see the light anymore, but the underlying root cause and root problem in the engine is still there.

Take some time to identify what some of the root causes of the problem are, and your team will come up with solutions to these root causes much more quickly.

In our example, we started looking at the way our company marketed our programs and found some glaring causes that we had overlooked time and time again. The underlying root cause that we found was that our entire marketing effort was geared toward individuals. Our marketing pieces said things like "helps YOU overcome the fear of public speaking." Our registration form only had room for one person's name. We had no group discounts. These were all root causes.

## Step #3: What are the Possible Solutions

Once the root causes are uncovered, solutions should start popping like popcorn. In our case, we redesigned our registration form and marketing pieces and began offering a group discount. In the next six months, our percentage of group registrations versus individual registrations tripled. In the next six months, the percentage of group registrations tripled again.

In our case, we had a number of solutions to choose from and each was helpful in helping solve our problem, but in some cases, you may have to weed out possible solutions to discover a best possible solution.

## Step #4: What's the Best Possible Solution

In this step, you'll want to weigh the pros and cons of each solution to determine what is the best plan of action based on what we know today. You may find that half way through implementation that one of the other solutions might work better. It's okay to regroup and begin to implement another solution if the first "Best Possible Solution" turns out to be a poor choice after all. Don't be afraid to take risks, though. Be willing to go out on a limb to create a breakthrough.

## Step #5: Create an Implementation Plan

Most problem-solving meetings end when the solution is determined. Don't fall into this trap though. Once the solution is decided upon, create a detailed plan of action that hold specific people accountable for implementation. By doing this, you ensure that the solution that you worked so hard for actually pays off for you and your company.

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