

Want to Solve Problems on the Job? Then Take This Problem-Solving P.L.A.N.E. to Work

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Abstract

Being able to successfully identify and solve problems is one of the most important functions required of managers in both for profit and non-profit organizations. A five-step model of problem-solving is presented to help businesspersons make the best possible decisions in the workplace.

Keywords: Problem-solving; Decision-making; Problem diagnosis

Problem-Solving P.L.A.N.E

A business executive once said "...you can't solve a problem if you don't have one." He would have been more accurate had he noted: "You can't solve a problem if you don't recognize that you have one." This addition is necessary because, unfortunately, some businesspersons think that their work environment is problem-free when, in fact, they have simply failed to spot developing difficulties that exist and need to be addressed.

Behavioral scientists have long recognized that individuals vary in their ability to spot developing problems [1-3]. It is almost as if some individuals possess a "problem-solving radar" that allows them to detect problems more quickly than others. Of course, the earlier a problem can be detected, the better the chance that it can be contained/solved before it "gets out of hand".

Fortunately, there are ways that individuals can improve their ability to identify problems and do so when the problems are in their earliest stages of development when they are easiest to solve. Learning to identify problems is a skill—like learning to drive a car. With proper training, knowledge, motivation and practice, businesspersons will discover there are certain things they can do and look for to help identify problems more effectively. To help learn those skills, the authors will present a five-step process for maximizing problem-solving effectiveness.

Step 1: Problem identification

This step involves efforts undertaken to search for, identify, define and determine the cause of problems.

Keep your problem detection radar system on at all times: When it comes to solving problems, you can't make effective decisions if you don't know the problem exists. The best way to spot developing problems is by diligently monitoring your environment: always keeping an "eye out" for potential difficulties. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut method for accomplishing this important monitoring function [4]. It takes effort: vigilant, sustained effort. Problem detection—particularly early detection—requires a person who is motivated to seek out and process information about his or her circumstances in a never-ending quest to spot developing difficulties. Good problem-solvers stay in an active information search and monitor mode. It's hard work, but it pays good dividends in the form of reducing or eliminating the impact of potential problems in the workplace.

Business leaders should think of themselves as a problem detection radar system. What does radar do as part of a missile defense system?

It gives early warning of an incoming problem. So, too, with the businessperson. His or her problem detection radar works the same way. By spotting problems as early as possible it gives the decision-maker additional precious time to deal with problems more successfully. Of course, to work, the radar must be "on." If a person's radar isn't "on"—if he or she is not actively monitoring the environment (think of a person texting while driving)—the problem missiles can remain undetected leading to an ever-growing threat of catastrophe.

Know which radar signatures indicate possible problems: Part of effective environmental monitoring involves deciding which "radar signals" are significant and need your attention and which are "clutter" that can be disregarded. With experience on the job and appropriate training you will become increasingly proficient at determining what inputs are "noise" and which ones are telltale signs of developing problems. Some of these signs include: (1) any noted departure from standard operating procedures or deviations from accepted standards of your business (e.g., drop in productivity, change in the behavior of an individual employee); (2) confusion or uncertainty over what is taking place or lack of clarity concerning instructions or expectations. If something happens at work that "doesn't make sense" or there is a lack of understanding as to what you are expected to do...this represents a fertile breeding ground for problem-development. (3) Unresolved discrepancies between individuals in the workplace. When differences of opinion exist between workplace personnel concerning how a job should be performed, this should not be ignored. Rather, the differences should suggest the possibility of a problem that needs to be addressed and resolved. (4) When an employee suggests the presence of a problem [5]. Even if this person is a person lower on the organizational hierarchy, it should not be ignored but, rather, investigated for possible action. Different individuals at different levels of an organization have unique vantage points for viewing the workplace; sometimes this allows them the chance to see developing problems that a person working at a different organizational level might miss. (5) When a configuration of circumstances exist that have led to problems in the

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past. This is where experience plays a large part in effective problem-detection and decision-making. Businesspersons should be alert to situations that have created problems in the past, and act quickly to make sure the organization doesn't "go down that road" again. (6) The final telltale sign of developing problems is a person's own gut feeling that something is wrong. One can experience this feeling, for example, when he or she senses a gap or difference between the present situation as it is...and the way he or she feels it should be. Pay attention to these feelings when it comes to detecting potential problems. Oftentimes these "gut feelings" are based on past experiences that have created problems, but which can't be conceptualized on the cognitive level. Of course, not all "gut" concerns will turn out to be accurate. Yet, if even one or two such concerns lead to the discovery of a problem...they will be worthy of the businessperson's consideration.

Define/diagnose each problem carefully: Recall the old saying: "A problem well-defined is a problem half-solved." One critical thing that must be done whenever a problem is detected is to accurately determine the cause of that problem (why it "exists"). The reason this is so important is because the way a person treats a problem will be determined by his or her belief as to what caused the problem. In this sense, businesspersons defining a problem should approach the task like a doctor who is attempting to diagnose what is wrong with a patient. That patient might present numerous symptoms, and by gathering information (speaking with the patient, running lab tests, etc.) the doctor makes an informed decision as to what is causing the patient's problem. Of course, if the doctor is wrong—if he diagnosis the patient with a migraine headache when in fact it is a stroke—then serious repercussions follow. The same is true in business. Spotting the problem is only half the battle; correctly identifying the cause of the problem so it can be treated correctly is the other half. Sometimes the cause of a problem will be obvious (the building is on fire), but other times, finding the actual cause of a problem will be both challenging and time-consuming [6].

Step 2: List alternative solutions

This step involves efforts undertaken to search for information relevant to the problem and to generate alternative solutions to the problem.

Having successfully identified and carefully defined a problem, the businessperson is now ready to try and solve it. This involves an active search for information that can be utilized in generating the best possible solution to the problem. In carrying out Step 2 here are some useful guidelines:

Be ready and willing to take early actions in dealing with developing problems: If the businessperson's monitoring activity has paid dividends and a problem has been detected early-on through vigilance and hard work...don't let the effort go to waste! Deal with that problem in a timely manner. Problems are like cancers; the earlier you detect and treat them, the better your chances for survival. Don't let problems get so big they can't be solved, or unnecessarily drain the resources of an organization. Be proactive rather than reactive in handling problems [7]. Remember this: Noah would have been in an awful fix if he had waited for the rain to fall before beginning construction of his Ark!

Be time sensitive in your decision-making: always consider the time-frame in which your problem must be solved, or your decision rendered: The problem-solver must always be aware of time constraints in dealing with problems...as sometimes the need for a quick decision will not allow for a thorough consideration of possible solutions to

the problem. However, some individuals use "time constraint" as a justification for not doing due diligence and gathering enough available information to make the best possible solution to a given problem. It is hoped that businesspersons will reject the temptation to use limited time as an excuse to cut short consideration of alternative solutions, particularly when there is ample time to make a reasoned decision [8].

Step 3: Adopt the best solution

This step involves efforts undertaken to evaluate the various alternatives and choose the best one(s).

Assuming the businessperson has "done his or her homework" and generated several different potential solutions to a problem, it is now time to take a hard, critical look at those alternatives and choose the course of action deemed most likely to solve the problem in the most efficient, cost-effective manner. To accomplish this will involve assessing the probable benefits and costs of adopting any specific alternative and also comparing the overall worth of each alternative against the other alternatives. With practice, the process of running down a list of alternatives (either in one's mind or on paper) will become easier and quicker...almost "automatic."

Step 4: Undertake Necessary actions to implement your decision

This step involves efforts undertaken to carry out the chosen solution.

Once a course of action has been determined, it is time to implement that decision in the most effective manner possible. There are three things that can be done (when appropriate) to implement your decision with maximal impact, timeliness and success:

- (α) Monitor the implementation of your decision to make sure things are going "according to plan."
- (β) Obtain the support of those colleagues who will be involved in carrying out your decision.
- (γ) Provide the necessary resources and/or guidance required to successfully implement the decision that has been reached to solve the problem.

Step 5: Evaluate the results of the action(s) you have taken

This step involves efforts undertaken to review the correctness/incorrectness of the decision and to take any follow-up action(s) that may be necessary [9].

Businesspersons—and people in general—are not perfect. They make mistakes. That is the reason Step 5 is necessary. By evaluating the results of actions taken, one can determine the overall wisdom of the decision(s) made and—if necessary—change them. Effective evaluation of a decision involves:

- (α) A timely review of the results, so that a decision can be changed or altered quickly if things aren't going well.
- (β) Monitoring the results for enough time to insure the decision is sound (some "fixes" work for a while but then the problem returns).
- (γ) Getting sufficient feedback to accurately assess the true worth of the solution being utilized.
- (δ) A willingness to rethink the decision and come up with an alternate course of action should the current solution prove unworkable. (Some decision-makers get so ego-involved in

their decision that they resist changing it, even when presented with evidence it isn't working. Avoid this human frailty whenever possible.

What happens if, in evaluating the effectiveness of a decision, it is found to be not working? If the problem lies with the solution itself (and not an implementation error), then it is often advisable to return to Steps 1 and 2 of the decision-making process [10]. Once there, the businessperson can check to see if the problem and its cause has been identified correctly and/or consider other possible solutions (ones not thought of the first time around). It might also be necessary to expand one's information search, using knowledge gained from the initial failure to pinpoint possible places where additional information acquisition might prove beneficial.

Conclusion

Aviators use checklists when they fly their aircraft. They do so to maximize problem-solving effectiveness and reduce the chances for mistakes that could be costly and even fatal. This article has provided the reader with a checklist for maximizing problem-solving performance. If you're willing to take a P.L.A.N.E to your place of employment, we are confident your management skills will attain a higher cruising altitude.

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