

## Analyze and Act on Problems

When faced with problems what do you plan to do? Whether it is an academic assignment, a personal, or a work situation, problem management is an ongoing fact of our lives.

### ***Core Elements of Problem Management and Solving***

There are four main steps in this process.



#### **1. Define the Problem**

The identification of specific problems and conflict situations is the first step to the management of problems. Problems then need to be clearly defined so that effective strategies can be developed to resolve them. You start by obtaining enough information to describe the problem clearly. Next, ask questions: Is it a well-defined problem, do the affected people agree on the definition, and is there a will to pursue a solution to the problem at this time? You will gain agreement of those involved that a specific problem exists and needs to change.

In some situations, the problem is clear and the method and possible solutions are apparent. There are only so many hours in a day – if the problem is that you need more hours than exist then you know that you will have to prioritize your expenditure of that time and probably put some things aside.

In other situations, the problem is less clear. For instance, in the medical field patients arrive with previously unrecognized illnesses. One example is AIDS. At one time, the problem or diagnosis of this disease had yet to be identified and the appropriate solution was not known. Although great advances have been made in the treatment of AIDS, solutions are still being developed as we learn more about the problem. Other situations include SARS, Zika, Covid-19, and there will be more. When little is known about the problem, more information to define it must be gathered before options can be explored, developed, and implemented.

#### **2. Generate Options**

Once a problem has been clearly identified and defined as well as possible, you can determine options that might be applied to it. Complex thinking skills – critical, creative, and problem solving – are the personal tools necessary to find and implement appropriate and effective options to a wide range of problem situations. There are a variety of ways that you can go about this. Often our approach is influenced by childhood upbringing and/or by culture. When you know this, you have the ability to move beyond your previous experiences to generating other options. When confronted with a problem situation, you can use:

- structured routines involving well-defined procedures,
- techniques involving trial-and-error searching, or
- other approaches for possible solutions.

Each option needs to be analyzed for practicality of implementation, impacts, and consequences. This includes impacts on systems and people and consequences that might be unexpected or unwanted but foreseeable with critical analysis. Always dig deeper. This allows you to see other impacts that can be mitigated ahead of time.

Once you have a number of options, choices can be made on the direction you wish to take.

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### 3. Implement a Solution

The development of an action plan to implement our chosen options is also necessary in managing the problem situation.

Implementing effective solutions is a reward for the energy invested in early parts of the problem management process. Sometimes, the implemented solution provides us with clues to even better solutions, and we go back to adjust our approach! Problem management is a fluid process, and we often don't know the actual outcome before it occurs. We can, however, shape and adjust factors that contribute to a positive solution or the eventual outcome.

### 4. Track Changes and Adjust

Problems are often multifaceted. Most problems encountered are dynamic. They are "moving targets". There are no static solutions to dynamic problems. To hit a moving target requires a continuous solution that is regularly updated to reflect the current situation. Dynamic problems are not defined and then solved. Instead, the definition of this kind of problem evolves over time as more information becomes available and initial responses are tried. Dynamic problems need to be tracked, measured, monitored, and adjusted for as you attempt to make changes. Think about how you will document your progress.

### Try it Out!

Start with a personal situation that you want to resolve or change. Define it and look to discover underlying causes. Remember to differentiate facts from opinions. Then move through the steps of generating options, Implementation, and tracking the changes to arrive at an optimal solution and management.

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|---------------------------|--|
| <b>Define</b>             |  |
| <b>Options</b>            |  |
| <b>Implement</b>          |  |
| <b>Track &amp; Adjust</b> |  |