



Mastermind Learning Network

Vol.9 No.1

Published by Lifelong Learning Partners, Inc.
www.jackwolflerning.com

Summer 2006

What's the Problem?

First Things First

Studies show that over 75% of all business improvement initiatives produce an unsuccessful result. One of the main causes of improvement failure is that the problem the business tried to solve was the wrong problem, or not the root-cause problem. A very old and valid axiom is: "A problem well defined is a problem half-solved." The key to dealing with a problem is to define it, and define it clearly, before making any attempt at solution.

Problem Definition

Problems range from the complex to the simple; from the clearly evident to the completely unknown. Defining the problem is a matter of collecting all known information related to the situation and using it effectively. Uncovering certain information may cause you to change course and re-define the problem as you go along. Define the boundaries and limits related to the situation. If there are too many boundaries, perhaps they are part of the problem.



It is also important to identify and then gather information from other key players and decision makers. Be aware of any bias or prejudice that may affect the opinions of others. List any assumptions that you have made but be ready to discard them if necessary.

These guidelines are not rigid rules to follow but will give you a framework from which to begin the process. First, find the answers to some basic questions:

- Is it a new problem?
- Is it the root-cause problem or the symptom of a larger issue?
- Who are the key players involved in this problem?
- What do they know that I don't know?
- What limits and boundaries exist to solving this problem?
- What are the consequences of ignoring the problem?
- Does the problem need to be resolved immediately?
- What are the rewards for resolving it?
- Can I solve it alone or will I need help?
- If I need help, who can provide it?
- What conditions must be met to solve the problem (what is the desired end result)?
- Will these conditions or results create new problems?

When you are searching for ways to improve performance, it may not be evident what the problems or limits actually are.

When the "problem" is simply that you want to improve your (or someone else's) results, a *Situation, Problem, Cause and Implication* question format can uncover connected areas where improvements can be made. Ask, for example:

(Situation) What are your top three goals at this time?

(Problem) What are the three biggest challenges facing you right now?

(Cause) What do you attribute that to?

(Implication) What impact has this situation had on your productivity?

Solutions Finding

Brainstorm, be open to unknown possibilities and consider all your alternatives. Evaluate all the suggested solutions without prejudice. It may also happen that a solution may not work due to existing limits and boundaries, such as money, ingrained attitudes (people won't or can't accept the solution) or it will cause a new problem.

The *Situation, Problem, Cause and Implication* question format is concluded by asking for specific actions. Answers to these Action questions usually provide good starting points from which change can occur.

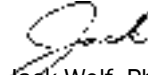
(Action) What 3 actions (by the company, by you, by others) would help correct this situation?

(Action) What can you do to make this happen?

(Action) What is the optimum scenario for you to achieve your three goals?

When working with a problem that affects you personally, remember that it's not the problem or challenge that is the greatest issue... it's how you address the situation, prepare a response or solution and then take action to reduce the impact of the problem. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "We are only as great as the smallest thing that upsets us."

To Your Success,


Jack Wolf, PhD, CPT

Learn

Create

Lead

