

SOLVING PROBLEMS (19-1)

EO 1. THE TWO TYPES OF PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY SUPERVISORS:

1. Operational problems--arise from the specific functions performed by the person, the unit, or the department.

Operational problems include

- a. jobs, workflows, and work processes that need revision;
- b. ineffective controls;
- c. inappropriate automation;
- d. missing or obsolete job aids such as manuals and bulletins; *and*
- e. ineffective interdepartmental communications.

2. People problems--arise from the human element in the work situation.

A people problem exists when an employee with proper training and resources doesn't successfully perform a task.

People problems include

- a. employee rejection of department or unit objectives,
- b. employee failure to meet performance standards,
- c. excessive absenteeism and/or tardiness,
- d. failure to use appropriate job procedures, *and*
- e. overly long lunch and break periods.

EO 2. THE SUPERVISOR MUST BE A SKILLED PROBLEM SOLVER because problem solving

is the key supervisory skill that supports and is fundamental to the other supervisory functions.

Failure in the planning or control functions can lead to desperate attempts at problem solving.

Organizing requires choices in dividing the unit's workload or in realigning jobs in response to new procedures.

Failure to direct employees on an ongoing basis can lead to both operational and people problems.

Management expects each supervisor to solve ongoing operational and people problems in his unit.

Employees want a competent leader who can solve departmental problems and help them identify and solve their own problems.

EO 3. THE NINE STEPS IN PROBLEM SOLVING:

1. **Describe the problem**--Identify the problem. Distinguish between facts and opinions.

2. **Gather the evidence**--Compile both facts and others' interpretations of those facts.

Use a combination of these six techniques:

- a. **Analysis**--Study the method of measuring work or the work output.
- b. **Interviews**--Talk to employees.
- c. **Observation**--Recognize and note facts or behaviors.
- d. **Feedback**--Get input from customers or internal users of the work.
- e. **Surveys**--Ask written questions and correlate their answers.
- f. **Brainstorming**--Engage in group problem-solving in which all participants make spontaneous contributions to the discussion.

3. **Identify the root cause--Determine the root cause (the ultimate source of the unwanted result, ie, the ultimate cause of the problem) through two techniques [Know.]:**

- a. **Analysis**--divides a large problem into its smaller parts and evaluates each part. Analysis facilitates control and reduces future problems by letting the supervisor focus on those areas that need attention.

Example: A supervisor can determine the total response time for a premium quote by evaluating the entire quoting process, step by step, in detail, to see if there is a better way to do any step.

- b. **Synthesis**--combines the individual elements into a whole and evaluates the entire process.
Example: A supervisor can determine the total response time for a premium quote by evaluating the quoting process as a whole to see if there's an entirely new way to quote.

The supervisor can combine analysis and synthesis.

Example: The supervisor can reduce the total response time for premium quotes through synthesis of the existing workflow, analysis of the individual tasks in the workflow, reassignment of tasks, *and* synthesis of the new workflow.

4. **Identify alternative solutions**--Develop several alternative solutions.
Avoid uncritically accepting the first solution that presents itself.
Develop several before doing any evaluation of them.
5. **Evaluate alternative solutions**--Analyze the 'pros' and 'cons' of each potential solution.
Define rating criteria and rate each alternative in terms of each criterion.
6. **Choose the best alternative**--Select the alternative that best meets your chosen criteria.
7. **Implement the chosen alternative**--Establish a plan for executing the chosen solution.
8. **Evaluate the results**--Analyze the plan's effects.
Take any intermittent corrective action to reinforce the chosen solution.
Do you have the same or a new problem?
Should you start again with Step 1?
If not, go to Step 9.
9. **Document the results**--Identify the specifics of the situation and the steps taken to solve the problem.

EO 4. **THREE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURED PROBLEM SOLVING:**

1. **Focus on the root cause**--When a supervisor responds to the problem rather than to its root cause, he wastes time and money treating symptoms without knowing the problem's root cause.
2. **Avoid shortcuts**--If a supervisor fails to identify alternative solutions, he probably will overlook the best solution.
3. **Document the results**--Effective documentation prevents later duplication of efforts if the problem reappears. Documentation highlights the unique characteristics of the situation and helps supervisors avoid the natural tendency to apply old solutions to new problems.

EO 5. **THE INTUITIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING** applies insight and hunches to problem solving. An intuitively oriented supervisor might quickly determine the root cause of a problem *or* he might approach the problem haphazardly and fail to explore alternative solutions.

THE LOGICAL APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING uses a systematic approach to problem solving and requires careful analysis before eliminating any alternative solution.

This approach is thorough, but may be inefficient for problems that require quick exploration and evaluation of alternatives.

In practice, most supervisors use a combination of both approaches.

EO 6. **INDIVIDUAL PROBLEM SOLVING:**

1. **Advantages--Individual problem solving**
 - a. is fast,
 - b. stays focused,
 - c. maintains consistency with previous decisions and with organizational practices, *and*
 - d. results in decisions that are practical to implement.
2. **Disadvantages--Individual problem solving**
 - a. is limited to the information and perspective of only one person *and*
 - b. lacks feedback for early detection of errors.

GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING:

1. **Advantages--Group problem solving**
 - a. gains the information, experience, and perspectives of many people;
 - b. results in **consensus** (a sense that all views have been heard and that enough time has been spent on the problem) that increases group acceptance of the decision; **and**
 - c. encourages creativity.
2. **Disadvantages--Group problem solving**
 - a. takes more time;
 - b. can result in a weak compromise solution;
 - c. can be dominated by strong individuals;
 - d. might result in a solution that is unacceptable to management;
 - e. might cause friction between opposing employee groups; **and**
 - f. causes resentment if employees misunderstand the authority delegated to the group.

[Know this Educational Objective 6.]

EO 7. **CHOOSING BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING** is based on the advantages and disadvantages discussed in EO 6 and on the following **FIVE GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING CRITERIA:**

1. **The need for acceptance of the solution**--Group problem solving is appropriate when the need to 'sell' the decision to the group outweighs the need to find the best possible decision.
2. **The possibility of undesirable outcomes from group problem solving**--Group problem solving is not appropriate if the issue is divisive or if the group might produce an unacceptable solution.
3. **The time limitation**--Group problem solving is inappropriate if time is of the essence.
4. **The quality benefits of group participation**--Group participation is often inappropriate if the group is unlikely to produce a better solution than would an individual.
5. **The discussion leader's skills**--An inexperienced discussion leader shouldn't use group problem solving for any controversial problem.

[Know this Educational Objective 7.]

EO 8. **TWO GENERAL TYPES OF PITFALLS IN PROBLEM SOLVING:**

1. **Failure to use knowledge about problem solving--such as**
 - a. making unwarranted assumptions about the root cause or the specifics of the problem **or**
 - b. jumping to a conclusion without proper analysis.
2. **Failure to accept responsibility for the problem and for its solution--such as**
 - a. waiting for others to notice and to solve the problem,
 - b. assuming that the implementation is adequate, **or**
 - c. 'passing the buck' by refusing to work on problems caused by others.

[Note: Given a choice between using classically proper grammar and adhering to the current trendiness of political correctness, I have chosen classically correct English.

As you no doubt have already noticed, almost nothing affects one's success in life as much as his use of classically correct English. Hence, by using classically correct English, I am teaching you one of the prime elements of success.

It would be just too painful for me to say "I want everyone to pass their exam."

It is a shame our language lacks a pronoun that distinguishes between 'he' meaning a specified male and 'he' meaning a specified person.

*It is **not** my intent to offend men by including women when I use 'he' nor is it my intent to offend women by using 'he' to include them.]*