

Problem Solving in Business

A few weeks ago I was having a discussion with a senior manager in a manufacturing company. We were discussing the growing pains of an expanding business with numerous new employees. I was not surprised to learn that a critical element in the business improvement process was teaching managers and supervisors problem solving. While such a process may be common to many leadership programs, it is less common at the manager and supervisor level. Nearly every business needs to review the need for this skill in their development plans.

There are any number of problem solving models out there, and most are very similar and easy to follow. People just need to be aware of them. So, a prime start for the introduction of teaching problem solving is to pick or modify a process to fit the organization's needs. That is the easy part.

A harder part, and not one incorporated in most problem solving models is the understanding of emotions involved in the problem solving process. Modern behavioral scientists today will tell you that, by nature, we want to make decisions based on emotions first and reason second. Think about the last time you bought a car ... much of your decision was based on emotion. More importantly, think of a time when you made a decision or developed a problem solution when you were mad or otherwise emotionally upset. Probably not the best decision you have ever made.

Problem solving models, therefore, need to recognize up front that we need to recognize our emotional state or the emotional state of your team when solving a problem or making a decision. We have to learn to control our emotional environment or at least learn to count to ten once in a while.

Leaders need to realize that managers and supervisors (and even some leaders) need development assistance in making decisions and solving problems. Most importantly, leaders need to know and remember that emotions have a strong impact on the problem solving process, whatever the process may be. As a start, try this model outline:

Eliminate emotions: We tend to make emotional choices first and rational ones second. Give yourself the freedom to recognize when emotions are high and bring them under control.

State The problem: Describe as accurately and realistically as possible.

Generate Alternatives: develop as many solutions and approaches as possible. Use the minds of others and brain storming.

Evaluate the Alternatives: Put the options on paper. Consider the outcomes of each as pros and cons. Prioritize from best to least.

Choose the best option: Have confidence in your process. Be prepared to assume risk in making the choice.

Implement the solution: Don't get bogged down on what ifs and maybe should haves. Give the solution a chance to work.

Assess the outcome: If it worked, great. If not, start the process again.

Assess Mike is a partner and coach at Wolf Leadership Development, LLC. He works with executives and pre-executives who desire to increase performance and take their leadership skills to the next level. His specialty is improving performance at work by improving relationship behaviors required of successful leaders. Mike can be contacted at mfarlow@wolfleadership.com.