

Problem solving is a critical skill for success in business—in fact it’s often what you are hired and paid to do. This handout accompanies a training that explains the five steps to problem solving.

Defining Problem Solving

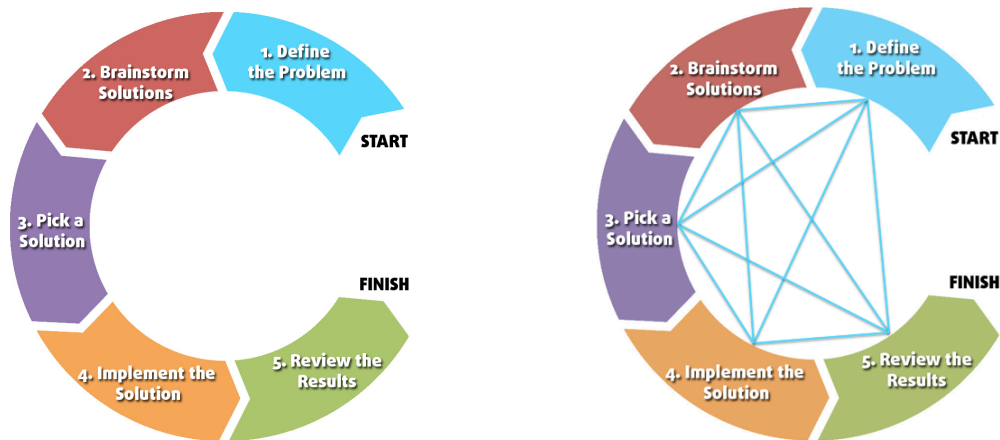
Problem – a state of desire for reaching a definite goal from a present condition
-Problem solving on Wikipedia

Solution – the management of a problem in a way that successfully meets the goals established for treating it.

-Introduction to Problem Solving by Robert Harris

Problem Solving Tips

Solving a problem isn’t about fixing something that is wrong; it’s an opportunity to move from the current state to a more ideal one. There are five steps to the process:



These steps aren’t strictly linear. It’s very possible (and for difficult problems, very likely) that steps will be repeated and you’ll move back and forth between them (the figure on the right).

While following these steps, it’s important to remember:

- How you define the problem is incredibly important and often goes a long way in finding a solution. The problem definition should be specific enough to meet your goal, but broad enough that it doesn’t limit possible solutions.
- Solutions can fix either the cause or the effect. Fixing the cause is about preventing, stopping or reducing the problem. Fixing the effect is treating, adjusting for or accepting the problem as-is.
- When defining the goal, think about it from the perspective of everyone affected by the problem and the solution.

5 Steps to Problem Solving

Below are the inputs, outputs and purposes each step of problem solving. For explanations of the improvisation exercises included, visit htww.co/psimprov.

Five Steps to Problem Solving:

- 1. Define the Problem** aka What are you trying to solve?
In addition to getting clear on what the problem is, defining the problem also establishes a goal for what you want to achieve.
Input: something is wrong or something could be improved.
Output: clear definition of what is wrong and a goal for fixing it.
Exercises: Newspaper Headline; Future Party; 40-20-10-5; Explain Like I'm Five
- 2. Brainstorm Solutions** aka What are some ways to solve the problem?
The goal is to create a list of possibilities to choose from. The harder the problem, the more possible solutions you may need.
Input: a goal; research of the problem and possible solutions; imagination.
Output: pick-list of possible solutions that would achieve the stated goal.
Exercises: Ad Game; Dumbest Idea First; What Would X Do; 10x10x10 Matrix
- 3. Pick a Solution** aka What are you going to do?
The ideal solution is effective (it will meet the goal), efficient (is affordable), and has the fewest side effects (limited consequences from implementation).
Input: pick-list of possible solutions; decision-making criteria.
Output: decision of what solution you will implement.
Exercises: Future Wheel; Thiagi's 35; Idea Trial; Coin-Flip
- 4. Implement the Solution** aka What are you doing?
The implementation of a solution requires planning and execution. It's often iterative (focus on short implementation cycles with testing / feedback).
Input: decision; planning; hard work.
Output: resolution to the problem.
Exercises: End in Mind; Idea Mock-ups; Gamification; Character Execution;
- 5. Review the Results** aka What did you do?
To know you successfully solved the problem, it's important to review what worked, what didn't and what impact the solution had. It also helps you improve long-term problem solving skills and keeps you from re-inventing the wheel.
Input: resolutions; results of the implementation.
Output: insights; case-studies; bullets on your resume.
Exercises: Apply McLuhan; Word on the Street; Stop-Start-Continue; Find the Funny

For more, check out *501 Ways to Use Humor in the Workplace* on Amazon. Visit htww.co/501ways.