

the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

Every job requires a certain amount of problem solving. Figuring out what a customer or colleague needs and coming up with a solution that keeps the transaction or project moving forward is the primary objective of many positions.

For managers, understanding common approaches to problem solving may provide insights into the best ways to address mistakes or accomplish team goals. When faced with a problem, most people tend to favor one of these three approaches:

- ▶ **Avoidance:** Ignoring that the problem exists or hoping that it will resolve itself
- ▶ **Solve when necessary:** Dealing with issues as they become urgent (the “putting out fires” approach)
- ▶ **Proactive:** Anticipating potential problems and addressing them before they occur

Sometimes, a person’s problem-solving approach can be adjusted through coaching and feedback. For instance, a person who prefers to avoid problems may, with experience, become adept at anticipating

Falling Forward: Problem-Solving Techniques



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them. Someone whose instinct is to anticipate problems may become skilled at “putting out fires” if shifting priorities necessitate that approach. Providing clear expectations will help team members adapt to organizational needs.

In addition, there are two common styles for thinking through problems, both of which have value in the workplace. These are:

- ▶ **Systematic:** Systematic thinkers take a logical, rational approach. They may prefer to break a problem into smaller chunks and work through each one methodically.
- ▶ **Intuitive:** Intuitive thinkers approach problems from a holistic perspective. Their thought processes are sometimes non-linear and may be confusing to

those who prefer a more concrete approach. An intuitive thinker may need to “sleep on it” before providing recommendations.

Recognizing how individual team members react to problems can help you leverage their skills and talents when a workplace challenge arises. In addition, the following steps may be helpful:

- 1. Maintain objectivity.** Focus on fixing the problem, not assigning blame. If an employee has made a mistake, schedule a private meeting to review procedures and address performance issues.
- 2. Take action.** If a short-term fix is available, provide guidance and support to those with the know-how to implement it. In some instances, a temporary workaround may be required until larger issues can be addressed.

3. Identify causes. Some problems, especially recurring ones, may be due to systemic issues. Others may reveal a previously unanticipated concern that should be factored into future planning. Evaluate if the issue is external to your team (such as needing a new piece of equipment) or if it is the result of internal dynamics, such as poor communication.

4. Generate ideas. Once the immediate crisis has passed, gather your full team or a small group of stakeholders to discuss a long-term solution (include both systematic and intuitive thinkers in this mix). Keep the focus on “falling forward” and making improvements that benefit your team’s efficiency and workflow.

5. Deploy resources. Once you have determined what steps will best address the problem, determine who will be responsible for implementing any changes. It may be helpful to create a small task force that includes people from different disciplines.

6. Follow up. Schedule regular status report meetings or more informal check-ins to monitor progress. Remember to celebrate successes, such as reaching specific milestones.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help you sort through workplace problems and assist with addressing any performance issues that may be a factor. Call 24/7/365.

How Do I Say That? Sparking Creative Ideas



Sometimes a workplace problem requires a fresh approach. If you are looking for a way to spark new ideas, these problem-solving or goal-setting techniques may help:

► **Mind mapping.** Mind mapping is great for sorting out multi-stage projects. To use mind mapping in a team meeting or brainstorming session:

1. Write your core goal or task on a white board or large pad of paper. (If your team works remotely, a mind-mapping website may be helpful.)

2. Ask your team to list key words or phrases related to the primary goal. Write each word or phrase so that it radiates outward from the center like spokes from a wheel. (Color-coded sticky notes are another option.)
3. Add more lines as needed, including branches for sub-categories or related ideas. Stay focused on the primary goal or problem. If an issue arises that is not relevant to the specific concern you are trying to address, consider

if it needs a separate mind map.

4. When completed, your mind map will resemble a city grid, with your core idea (or “city hall”) at the center.

Mind mapping may assist your team with making connections that could be harder to identify when a more linear approach is employed. In addition, it may be helpful to see the whole project laid out on one page.

► **Storyboard.** The storyboard technique may help generate multiple ideas in a short period of time. It could also assist with breaking a large, complex problem into more manageable chunks. To create a storyboard:

1. Start with three headings:
 - Topic
 - Purpose
 - Miscellaneous
2. Establish two rules:
 - Positive ideas only
 - No sarcasm
3. Ask for any idea that comes to mind, no matter how off-the-wall or outrageous. Even





silly ideas are helpful, as they may break tension and provide needed levity.

4. Write each idea in the appropriate category. Add new categories as needed.
5. For complex problems, create separate storyboards that are focused on these general areas:
 - Planning
 - Ideas
 - Organization
 - Communication

While both of these techniques are useful for solving problems, they are by no means the only options. Whichever method you choose, keep the following in mind:

- ▶ Stay positive. Avoid negativity or sarcasm.
- ▶ Remain focused on solutions. Avoid assigning blame.
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions that encourage discussion.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can help you prepare for a problem-solving or goal-setting session. Call 24/7/365.

Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- ▶ Confronting an employee about performance issues
- ▶ An employee's personal problem
- ▶ Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- ▶ Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- ▶ Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- ▶ Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- ▶ Your own personal concerns
- ▶ Any other work-related issue

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