CHAPTER TEN

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem Solving
How to Use the PAR Formula to Solve Problems

INTRODUCTION

Are you a problem solver? Do you know how to analyze a problem and solve it?

Problem-solving is a required and important skill every professional needs to get hired, promoted and achieve organizational goals.

What is a problem? The Definition

A problem is something that is not planned and deviation from the norm.

How quickly can you solve a problem?

Use a road map to define the problem, brainstorm alternatives, and implement an action plan to get desired results. Use the

PAR Formula strategies as a guide to problem solve.

THE PAR FORMULA (PROBLEM, ACTION AND RESULTS)

Three Strategies to Problem Solve

Strategy One: Problem – Identify and Clearly Define the Problem

1. **Problem.** What is the problem?
2. **Discovery.** Did you identify the problem or was it brought to your attention.
3. **Who.** Who does this problem affect?
4. **What.** What is the effect of the problem?
5. **When.** When did this problem occur?
6. **Where.** Where did this problem start?
7. **Why?** Why did this problem occur?
8. **How?** How often does this problem happen?

Strategy Two: Action – Develop an Action Plan

1. **Action Steps.** What action steps will you use to solve the problems?
2. **Options.** What are your options?
3. **Resources.** What do you need to solve the problem?
4. **Independent or Team.** Can you solve the problem alone or will you need assistance?
5. **Costs.** Are there costs associated with solving the problem?
6. **Barriers.** Is there time or other barriers associated with solving the problem?
7. **Approval.** Can you solve the problem without management approval? Are you a risk taker?
8. **Strategy.** If your plan requires management approval – how will you present and support your action plan?

9. **Target Date.** Can I implement my plan immediately or will I need to set a target date?
10. **Resolved.** Who will I need to inform the problem is solved?

Strategy Three: Results – How to Evaluate Results
1. **Action Plan.** What are the results of the action plan?
2. **Conclusion.** How well did you solve the problem?
3. **Options.** What would you do differently? Why?
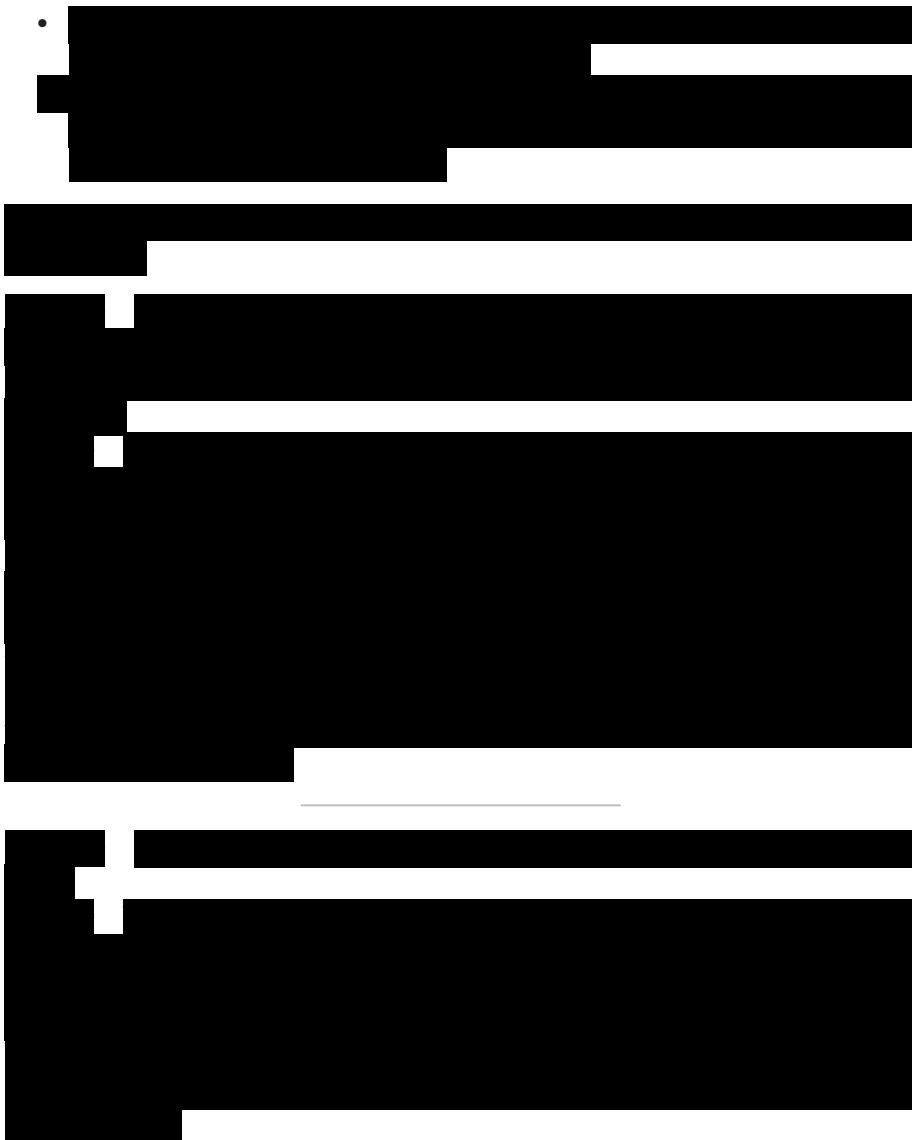4. **Root Causes.** What did you learn that is beneficial to solve future problem?

Problem solving skills will enable you to increase your career options, accountability, responsibility, visibility and value to an employer.

Summary

Problem Solving

Key Points:
- Problem-solving is a required and important skill for every professional.
- Problem-solving is something that is not planned and a deviation from the norm.
- The PAR Formula is used to strategically solve problems.
- There are three strategies to problem solve – **P**roblem, **A**ction and **R**esults.
- Problem-solving skills increase your career opportunities.

Problem Solving, Troubleshooting, and Speed-reading

Problem solving and troubleshooting are systematic and scientific processes of searching for the source of a problem and resolving it. Doing this proactively (not reactively) is a smart soft skill to possess. Since any problem quickly gets senior management attention, a key role played here to diffuse the situation using this skill gets recognized by the organization.

Problem Solving Method of 'Kepner and Tregoe'

In this problem solving technique, some typical questions, as given below, are asked with the intent of getting to the root cause of the problem:

- The actual point where the problem is causing trouble
- The points where there is no problem
- Exactly when the problem started to occur
- Exactly when it definitely was not there

As a starting point, the five W's are used:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?

In some cases, 'How' and 'How much' are also added to the five W's. Incidentally, this relates to a few well-known lines from Rudyard Kipling:

> I keep six honest serving-men
> Who taught me all I know
> Their names are—What and Why and When
> And How and Where and Who
> (Source: *The Elephant's Child*)

These types of questions greatly help in narrowing down a problem and make the diagnostic test easier, quicker and more accurate.

Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe (1981) explain the technique adopted by them in their book. Their technique is a gradual step-by-step process of arriving at the root cause of a problem by asking questions as given earlier. In fact, the book clearly elucidates the assured method of analyzing problems (though it does create occasional stalemates in organizations of different genres).

According to Kepner and Tregoe, another huge advantage of their method is that it greatly improves communication among team members. This is because in this method there is a common, accepted structure which is worked upon by team members working in different groups.

Another soft skill that is often used by people adept at fast problem solving is speed-reading. Here one reads volumes of data or pages of reports in a quick glance to get the gist of the issue. One doesn't go through every minute detail but has the ability to get to the key sections of interest.

Illustrative Examples Where Problem Solving, Troubleshooting, and Speed-reading are a Strength or a Weakness

Weakness   When confronted with a customer problem, I rely on trial and error to solve the issues.

Strength   I follow a systematic method to analyse potential causes by looking at such factors as what changed, when it changed, etc. My focus through this exercise is to isolate the problem.

Weakness   I try to do problem solving in isolation.

Strength   I work together with my customer who is facing the problem, and involve him in the problem resolution. The process often involves significant interaction between us.

Weakness   After I solve a problem, I move on to the next one.

Strength   I first document the lessons learnt after solving each problem, so that my team members or I can refer to it at a later time—and speed up problem resolution in case other customers face similar issues.