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Leadership & Managing People

How to Solve Problems

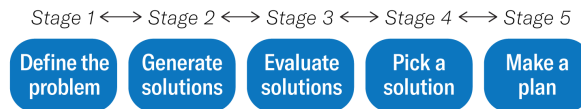**by Laura Amico**

How to Solve Problems

by Laura Amico

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Teams today aren't just asked to execute tasks: They're called upon to solve problems. You'd think that many brains working together would mean better solutions, but the reality is that too often problem-solving teams fall victim to inefficiency, conflict, and cautious conclusions. The two charts below will help your team think about how to collaborate better and come up with the best solutions for the thorniest challenges.

First, think of the last time you had to solve a problem. Maybe it was a big one: A major trade route is blocked and your product is time sensitive and must make it to market on time. Maybe it was a small one: A traffic jam on your way to work means you're going to be late for your first meeting of the day. Whatever the size of the impact, in solving your problem you moved through five stages, according to "Why Groups Struggle to Solve Problems Together," by Al Pittampalli.

The 5 Stages of Problem-Solving

We subconsciously move back and forth between these stages before landing on a solution and making a plan.

Stage 1 ⟷ *Stage 2* ⟷ *Stage 3* ⟷ *Stage 4* ⟷ *Stage 5*

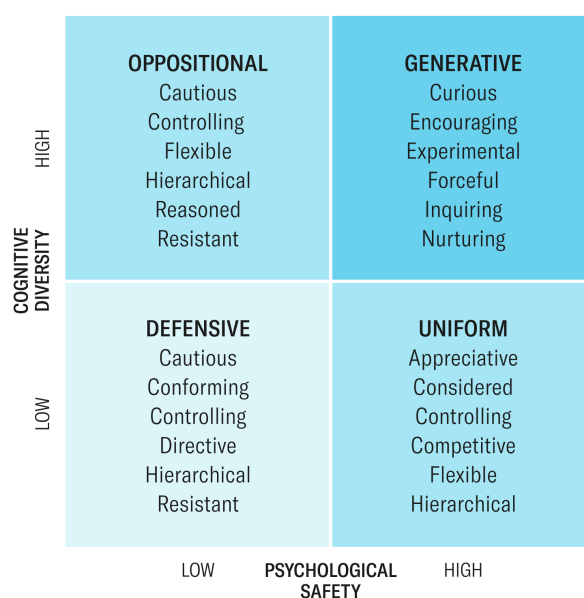| Define the problem	Generate solutions	Evaluate solutions	Pick a solution	Make a plan

Source: Al Pittampalli

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Pittampalli finds that most of us, when working individually, move through these stages intuitively. It's different when you're working in a team, however. You need to stop and identify these different stages to make sure the group is aligned. For example, while one colleague might join a problem-solving discussion ready to evaluate assumptions (Stage 3), another might still be defining the problem (Stage 1). By defining each stage of your problem-solving explicitly, you increase the odds of your team coming to better solutions more smoothly.

This problem-solving technique gains extra power when applied to Alison Reynold's and David Lewis' research on problem-solving teams. In their article, "The Two Traits of the Best Problem-Solving Teams," they find that highly effective teams typically have a pair of common features: They are cognitively diverse and they are psychologically safe. They also exhibit an array of characteristics associated with learning and confidence; these teammates tend to be curious, experimental, and nurturing, for example.

The Most Successful Teams Are Cognitively Diverse and Psychologically Safe

They also share positive behaviors and emotions.

	OPPOSITIONAL Cautious Controlling Flexible Hierarchical Reasoned Resistant	**GENERATIVE** Curious Encouraging Experimental Forceful Inquiring Nurturing
	DEFENSIVE Cautious Conforming Controlling Directive Hierarchical Resistant	**UNIFORM** Appreciative Considered Controlling Competitive Flexible Hierarchical

COGNITIVE DIVERSITY — HIGH / LOW (vertical axis)

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY — LOW / HIGH (horizontal axis)

Source: Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, using the Qi Index

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As you and your colleagues consider these ideas, think about the last problem you had to solve as a team. First, map out what you remember from each step of your problem-solving. Were all of you on the same page at each stage? What aspects of the problem did you consider — or might you have missed — as a result? What can you do differently the next time you have a problem to solve? Second, ask where your team sees themselves on the chart. What kinds of behaviors could your team adopt to help you move into that top-right quadrant?

Laura Amico is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review.