Practicing Problem Solving & Decision Making

Rich Drinon, M.A., is a leadership speaker, trainer and coach. Over the past 25 years he has presented thousands of sessions for hundreds of organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada, including KSCPA. He has also conducted individual communication coaching for hundreds of leadership and management executives.

Rich has worked in leadership positions for local, statewide, national and international for-profit and non-profit organizations. He's a University of New Mexico Journalism graduate, and has a Master's Degree in Communication & Leadership Studies from Gonzaga University. His magazine articles have appeared in Kansas Business News, New Mexico Business Journal, The New Rock Times Music Magazine and Sports Illustrated. His book, "Stepping Up to Leadership" is the text for a Washburn University sponsored program he instructs on Directions in Organizational Leadership.

Whether you're involved in annual strategic planning, making important business choices or resolving daily issues, you can benefit from problem solving and decision making skills. Problem solving and decision making can be a subjective, objective or intuitive pursuit. You may choose to apply these approaches individually, or with a group.

SUBJECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

When coming up with subjective solutions to problems, you are operating on your own, or the groups, thoughts and feelings about a particular subject. Experience will come into play, and known information is the primary lens through which the problem is viewed.

Dale Carnegie's How to Stop Worrying and Start Living (1944, 1984) shares the story of Leon Shimkin, a busy publisher who devised a four question approach to solving problems. Shimkin found that using four questions each time he faced a problem, and asking his employees to do the same with their issues, reduced the amount of daily time and anxiety he had to invest in problem solving while also producing

better quality solutions:

1. What is the problem?
2. What are the causes of the problem?
3. What are the possible solutions?
4. What is the best possible solution?

Accurately Identify and Clearly State the Problem

When conducting a subjective problem solving meeting, it's helpful to have a third party facilitator who can be impartial to the group's thoughts and feelings. Whether you have an outside facilitator, or you are serving in that role, the leader must ask participants to answer the question: "WHAT exactly is the problem?"

As you will discover, participants will have different views on the problem. One challenge with group problem solving is that not everyone will be looking through the same lens. For example, when trying to determine what is causing a company to experience high rates of employee turnover, one manager might say it's from low wages or benefits, another might identify the problem as work that most people don't really want to do, another may say it's from lack of qualified help in the job market and yet another may site a campaign by competitors to hire away good people.

The group must work through issues and come to an agreement on the most accurate problem description.

Make a Comprehensive List of Contributing Factors

Once the problem has been identified, the causes need to be determined. You may, in fact, already have a list put together by the time the group has worked on identifying the precise problem. From the example given, you would have already listed multiple causes of the employee turnover problem. Now the group must decide which causes carry the most weight in contributing to the problem.

Prioritize from Most Likely Contributors to Least

The facilitator should promote dialog in the group and get participants to prioritize the causes. A good dialog, with everyone participating, will bring more issues to light and add clarity to the problem. For our current example, the group may rate the lack of qualified help in the job market at the top of their list, with the competitor's campaign second, low wages or benefits third and the unpleasant work to be done fourth. In order to get the best possible solution, contributing factors must be clearly identified and prioritized.

Finding Possible Solutions by Addressing Each Cause

The facilitator should next lead the group through the list of causes, asking participants to state and discuss possible solutions. Some solutions will be simple or singular, other causes may bring a number of possible solutions that also have to be weighed.

Encouraging Brainstorming & Creative Thinking

To create the right climate for brainstorming, you must trust in the intelligence of the group. Let participants express their ideas without judgment from the group. Have an anything-goes attitude during the brainstorming session. Aim for a quantity of ideas. This will eventually lead to quality. Look for ways to improve on ideas through creative thinking.

Group process can be slow, tedious and frustrating. Often, additional rounds of brainstorming, focused on the same problem, will yield better solutions. There's nothing like letting a group of intelligent, experienced people walk away from the problem solving table for a few days to find out, upon their return, what intuitive ideas have come to them during the hiatus.

Determine the Best Possible Solution to the Problem

At some point, the facilitator will ask the group to vote on and prioritize the best possible solutions. As hard as this may be, the meeting must be brought to closure. Not everyone will be happy with the outcome, but that's often how it works with groups of people who see the situation from different vantage points.

Reach a Solution, Make a Plan, Assign Tasks and Take Action

The final stage of the problem solving meeting is turning the solution list into an action plan, with each participant taking on an assignment to complete by a

particular date. Nothing will happen unless someone forms a plan and participants are held accountable for completion by a particular date.

OBJECTIVE DECISION MAKING

Objective decision making requires more careful research, analysis, preparation, organization and facilitation than does a subjective problem solving session. Once a problem has been identified, or framed, these are the necessary elements for an effective decision making meeting.

Assign an Impartial facilitator

If a group leader has leanings towards any one individual, sub-group or point of view, the meeting will most likely be swayed in that direction. To really benefit from an objective decision making meeting, you must start with an impartial, third party facilitator.

Carefully Select Your Group Members

Make sure you involve individuals who can contribute the needed research, experience, information and know-how to the decision process. Determine who can move this decision into a solution or action phase and make sure they are included.

Do Your Research

Decide what information is needed to make a good decision, and who will bring that information to the table. Determine what facts, figures, statistics, reports, customer or employee feedback, board requests and other vital information must be considered in light of this decision. Other areas to be researched could include: cost factors and strategic plans that interplay with this decision, or identifying those who will be impacted by the decision.

Apply a Group Process.

An effective group process, led by a facilitator, should include these phases: Preparation, Meeting and Follow Through. In order to prevent debate or group think, having a facilitator who applies an effective group process will keep things moving in the right direction.

1. Preparation Phase

In the preparation phase, introductory information is sent to individuals who are participating in the decision making process. The information will give the individuals dates, time and location of the meeting(s) and will include the purpose of the meeting, perhaps with an attached agenda and timeline. Research and data that is currently available regarding the decision may be sent to participants in order for them to study up on the "known" information related to the meeting.

Individuals may also be asked to collect information on the "unknown" elements pertaining to the decision and to be prepared to distribute, present or discuss that information at the meeting.

2. Meeting Phase

In the meeting phase participants join the facilitator at the appointed date, time and location. Having clearly framed the problem, question or issue, participants must come with completed assignments and prepared to participate. The facilitator will then lead the group through four key stages of group process.

Opening: The facilitator allows for the presentation of information by various participants, as applied to the framed problem. When information has been sufficiently shared and examined, the group moves into the next stage of Dialog.

Dialog: Items are talked about in an open, non-critical, anything-goes manner. It's important that participants let the flow of information occur during this phase without shutting each other down with statements like, "That will never work," We tried that before," or "You must be kidding." While all of those statements may be true, the dialog phase is for hearing, discovering and watching for emerging patterns, themes, ideas, answers and solutions.

Discussion or Debate: Now that participants have shared and heard all of the well researched information, experienced insight and stupid questions, the group begins to work towards elimination of unfitting ideas and selection of the best ideas.

Closure: The facilitator must move the group towards wrap up with a decision made, action steps outlined and assignments given to individuals with follow up dates scheduled. The facilitator must be careful he does not just let those who talk the most or loudest have total say in the final decision. The decision must be a group decision.

3. Follow Through Phase

Nothing is more common than solutions, decisions and plans that fall by the wayside. Participants must be accountable for following through by completing assignments that contribute to the fulfillment of the decision, outcome or solution. While the leader may be accountable for the overall performance of the group, the leader must also hold followers and participants responsible for successfully completing the task.

Beware of Problem Solving & Decision Making Pitfalls

Pitfalls, or decision traps groups face when working to resolve problems and make decisions are many (Russo, J. & Schoemaker, 1989):

• Failure to utilize a third party facilitator and failure to use a definite process are two of the biggest mistakes an organization can make.

• Jumping in to resolve an issue without giving careful thought to how the problem can best be approached is common and often leads to poor problem identification.

• Being overconfident in what you know, or relying on information that is easily obtained (instead of doing solid research on an issue) is counter-productive.

• Trying to apply yesterday's thinking to today's world can also get you in trouble.

• Some groups and individuals simply choose to wing it when it comes to solving problems and making decisions. As a result, their decisions and solutions often don't take flight.

INTUITIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

There may be times when we choose to combine both intelligent and intuitive approaches to solving problems. As Brian Tracy (1984) suggests, when seeking an intuitive answer to a question, you're putting your onboard computer to task. The simple equation is "specific question asked + contemplation time = answer."

Any of the steps to group problem solving or decision making can be applied to finding answers to your present life questions. When both halves of your brain work in concert, during a state of relaxed concentration, you are more likely to have a flash of intuition.

To prepare yourself for that eventuality, you want to state your problem or questions clearly, gather factual information about the problem and ask questions of those with relevant information or experience. Next, you must allow your brain to work on the details while you draft possible solutions to the problem; practice quietness or contemplation and maintain an attitude of openness towards receiving the best solution. The final step is to seize the intuitive solution when it presents itself

RESOURCES
• Carnegie, D. (1944,1984). Problem solving and decision making. How to stop worrying and start living (pp. 15-16-26). New York, NY: Pocket Books.
• Russo, J., & Schoemaker, P. (1989). Decision traps (First Edition ed.). New York, NY: Doubleday.
• Tracy, B. (1984). The psychology of achievement. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Productions.