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Learning Solutions

KnowledgeCity® PROBLEM SOLVING FOR LEADERS



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Strengthen your leadership skills with advanced problem-solving methods

Introduction:

Problems can come up at any time, especially for those who are in positions of leadership. What does it take to become a leader who's strong and ready to tackle problems? This eBook will provide you with a wealth of strategies for advanced problem-solving, communicating your decisions effectively and encouraging your team to do the same. You will also be able to identify the characteristics of problems and use critical thinking to effectively discover positive solutions.

Defining a Problem

To understand or spot a problem, you need to first define what a problem is. In the business sense, a problem is the perceived gap between the existing state and the desired state of a situation or process. It can also be a deviation from the norm, standard, or status quo. To solve a problem, you must invest some time and effort to improve your understanding of it, so it's important to understand the characteristics of a problem.

Characteristics of a Problem

Identifying the characteristics of a problem helps you form a baseline. This baseline should give you information on the current processes and performance. When you have this information, you can determine root causes of the problem, set goals, select the best strategy to take, and measure your results against the baseline. This enables you to further evaluate and improve the processes and results.

To determine the characteristics, we simply ask questions that answer: Why? This is a Six Sigma technique. By asking "why" questions, it will help you lead your team in finding the origin of the issue.

Let's use a scenario as an example. A shipment was late, and the customer is angry. Using "why" questions to identify the characteristics of this problem would look like this:

The shipment did not arrive as promised— **Why?**

The truck broke down— **Why?**

The wheel fell off— **Why?**

The bearings failed— **Why?**

They over heated— **Why?**

They were not lubricated correctly— **Why?**

The truck was improperly maintained.

As you ask these questions, you should note the issues which include not only the origin of the problem—the poorly maintained truck—but also the processes that contributed to the whole scenario. As you can see, the current processes are part of the issue, not just the truck that broke down. You now have a baseline and have identified what the origin of the problem is.

Origin of the Problem

Identifying the origin of a problem is the product of gathering information by asking questions. By asking “why” questions, you can identify the cause of the problem. Identifying the origins of the problem will also help you decide how to approach the problem.

For example, to put out a fire, you need to know what started it. You can't put out an electrical fire with an extinguisher meant for paper or wood. Overall, it is imperative to identify the origin of the problem and invest some time and effort to improve your understanding of it before you can solve it. When investigating a problem, remember there may be several people, processes, and departments involved.

Perceptions of the Problem:

People see things differently. The perceptions of the problem are the assumptions people make on how it is being handled. To avoid misconceptions associated with a problem, try this framing technique:



- 1 Draw a frame.
- 2 Put all items related to the issue in the frame, one at a time.
- 3 Discuss each item added with your team.
- 4 Determine the different perspectives and views for each item.
- 5 Take notes on the perceptions and views discussed.
- 6 Eliminate unrelated items.

Once you have eliminated unrelated items and gathered feedback from all associated people, you can move forward with brainstorming solutions.

Problem Severity

The impact of a problem affects severity, or how much damage it might cause if not mitigated. Detailed analysis may be necessary to determine the severity or potential severity. A good way to evaluate the severity of a problem is to establish a rating system using the Severity Matrix Technique:

Level One

These are problems that are critical and require immediate attention due to the severe impact they would have on business operations.

Level Two

These are problems that are significant and require attention due to the significant impact they would have on business operations.

Level Three

These are problems that are not critical, but do require attention due to the minor impact they would have on business operations.

Level Four

These are problems that have minimal impact on business operations but do require reasonable circumvention to avoid escalation.

When Conflict is the Problem

Conflict in the workplace is inevitable and usually perceived as something negative. This is not always the case. Sometimes, conflict initiates the problem-solving process. To turn conflict into solutions, do the following:

1. Be optimistic and open-minded from the very beginning.
2. Be unbiased and look at both sides of the situation.
3. Never accuse or place blame upon one party, and refrain from making assumptions prior to getting the facts.
4. Be assertive, not aggressive.

Defining the Problem: Steps You Can Use Now

Here are some steps you can start using right now to define the problem:

1 Observe the Current Situation

What is the result of your problem? How is it affecting the rest of the team? Look at the issue from different angles and how the situation hinders multiple departments.

2 Simplify the Problem

When informing your team, you want to be as clear and to-the-point as possible. How can this problem be summed up in one sentence?

3 Ask Yourself Why

Why is this a problem? If the answer takes you to another more prominent problem, you can switch your focus to the root cause, creating a solution-based domino effect in all situations connected to the source.

4 Rate Your Problem

How much energy should be spent on this issue? Is it critical? Do you need to change your business operations as soon as possible? Or is this an issue you can table for later? Analyze your problem to avoid expending more time and energy than necessary.

5 Utilize Conflict in Your Favor

Conflict should be an opportunity to seek compromise and show your team that you are fair, open-minded, and unbiased.

Communication

If you have never considered the many ways in which we communicate, pay attention now. Communication comes in many forms. The main forms of communication are verbal, non-verbal, and written. Verbal communication consists of any type of vocal communication, such as speaking at a conference or over the phone. However, you should consider more than what you say. How you say it, as well as the tone and inflections you use in your speech will give the person you are speaking with a lot more to listen to than your words alone.



Here are three tips for better verbal communication that you can start using right now:

1

Think before you speak.

Get your thoughts organized. This will help you deliver your message in a more concise manner.

2

Speak with confidence.

Now, confidence does not mean arrogance. Confidence in yourself builds trust, so pay attention to the words you choose, as well as your tone and inflection.

3

Be clear and concise.

Avoid complex, convoluted sentences. Be direct and to the point.

Non-verbal communication includes hand gestures, head nodding, facial expressions, and other forms of body language. You want to be aware of what messages you are sending with your body language. You don't want to be saying one thing with your words and something else with your facial expressions.

The written word is also an essential component of communication. Here are four tips that you can use right now to improve your writing:



Write with a clear purpose in mind.

State your purpose at the beginning of your communication. Avoid complex sentences as well. They won't help you get your point across. Keep it simple.



Check your tone.

Reread your message, but from the receiver's point of view. Does your tone come off as demanding? Angry? To avoid any misinterpretations, read it.



Proofread your message.

Good communication is often hampered by easy-to-fix writing errors. Always proofread.



Listen.

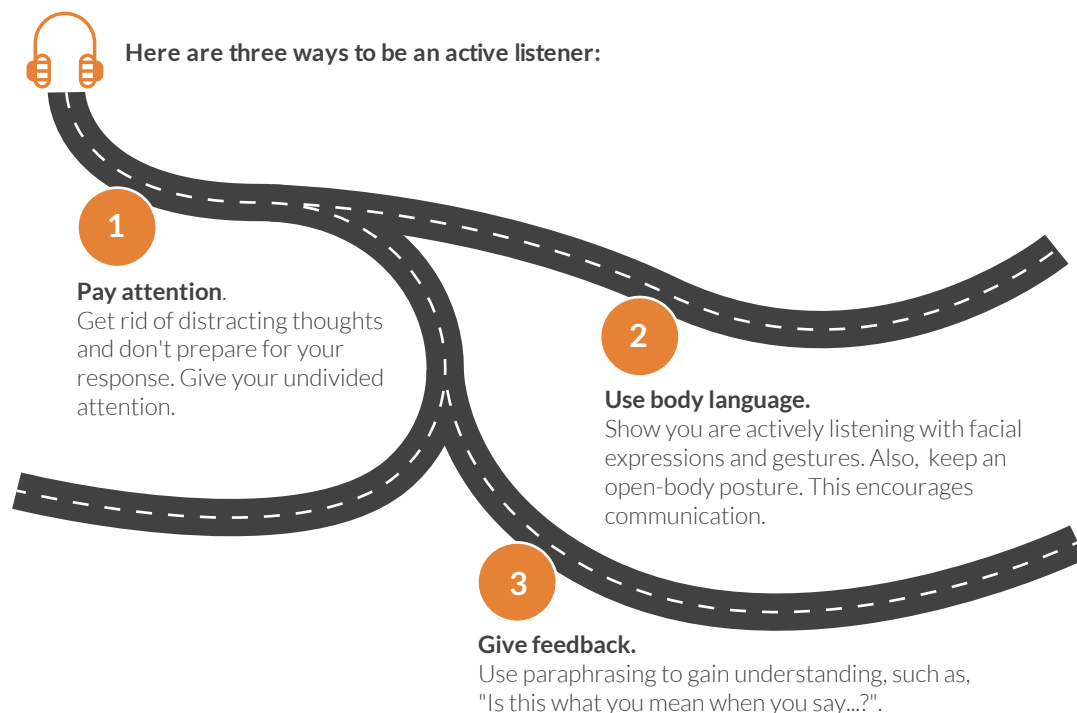
Once you communicate your message, sit back and listen to what others have to say.

Communication



Active Listening

Why do we listen during communication? We listen to obtain information, to gain understanding, to learn something, or for pure enjoyment. So, what happens when we can't recall the details of a conversation we just had five minutes ago? We have all been there. Someone starts to speak, and somewhere during the conversation, your mind wanders. It is easy to get distracted during communication, which is why we need to discuss active listening.



Persuasive Writing and Speaking

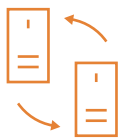
Even after you've defined a problem, found the root cause, brainstormed a solution, and are ready to implement that solution, you still need to convince all the stakeholders that this is the best solution and encourage their buy-in for the new process to take place. When being persuasive, you must demonstrate some benefit to the audience and ensure they understand why agreeing with you is beneficial to them. Persuasion, when used effectively and with integrity, can improve your chances of removing obstacles to problem resolution.

Communication

Understanding Your Audience

The more you know about your audience's background, concerns, and needs, the better prepared you will be to make decisions that concern them. In problem-solving, we need to make tough decisions and not everyone will be happy with the changes, so you need to make sure you know how to approach them.

Understanding your audience helps you make better business decisions, develop competitive strategies, and improve your overall value as a leader. You need to know what people want, what they are looking for, and what matters to them. Are you able to provide these things? Finding common ground in problem-solving is possible when you prepare and adapt your message for the audience. To do this, you need to find out the audience's most urgent concern and address it.



Communication: Steps You Can Use Now

Effective communication is the cornerstone of problem solving. As a leader, your communication needs to calm, persuade, encourage, and motivate. Here are three tips you can use right now for better communication:

1

Know the ins and outs.

Before giving your opinion, have the courtesy of taking time to understand the situation. It's easy to critique when looking at numbers, but do you know what it's like to be the one doing the work? Have this knowledge before critiquing someone's work.

2

Empathize.

Get into the habit of disagreeing while empathizing. This means being aware of word choice and tone of voice. If you're known to argue, you may appear to be a rigid boss who does not encourage new ideas. Instead, be sure to validate others' reasoning and then state reasons why you disagree in a respectful tone.

3

Lead by example.

The best thing you can do to motivate a winning team is to demonstrate good work ethic.



Analyzing a Problem

One method for analyzing a problem is called peeling the onion. Problem analysis is all about peeling back the layers of the problem, so think about the problem as an onion. The questions you want to ask during this process are like peeling back each layer. Who? What? Where? When? Why? And how? For example, who is involved? What happened to create this problem? Where did it come from? When did this happen? Why did it happen? How did we find out about it?

These questions will help you lead your team to working out a solution. In some rare cases, some of the questions may not have answers at first, but you will uncover them as you continue to peel away layers of the problem.

Here are several brainstorming tools you can use to peel the onion:

1 Mind-mapping

This is a visual thinking tool that can help your team structure information, as well as better analyze, comprehend, synthesize, recall, and generate new ideas. Here is a video on mind-mapping from the creator of the process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5Y4plsXTV0>.

2 Whiteboard

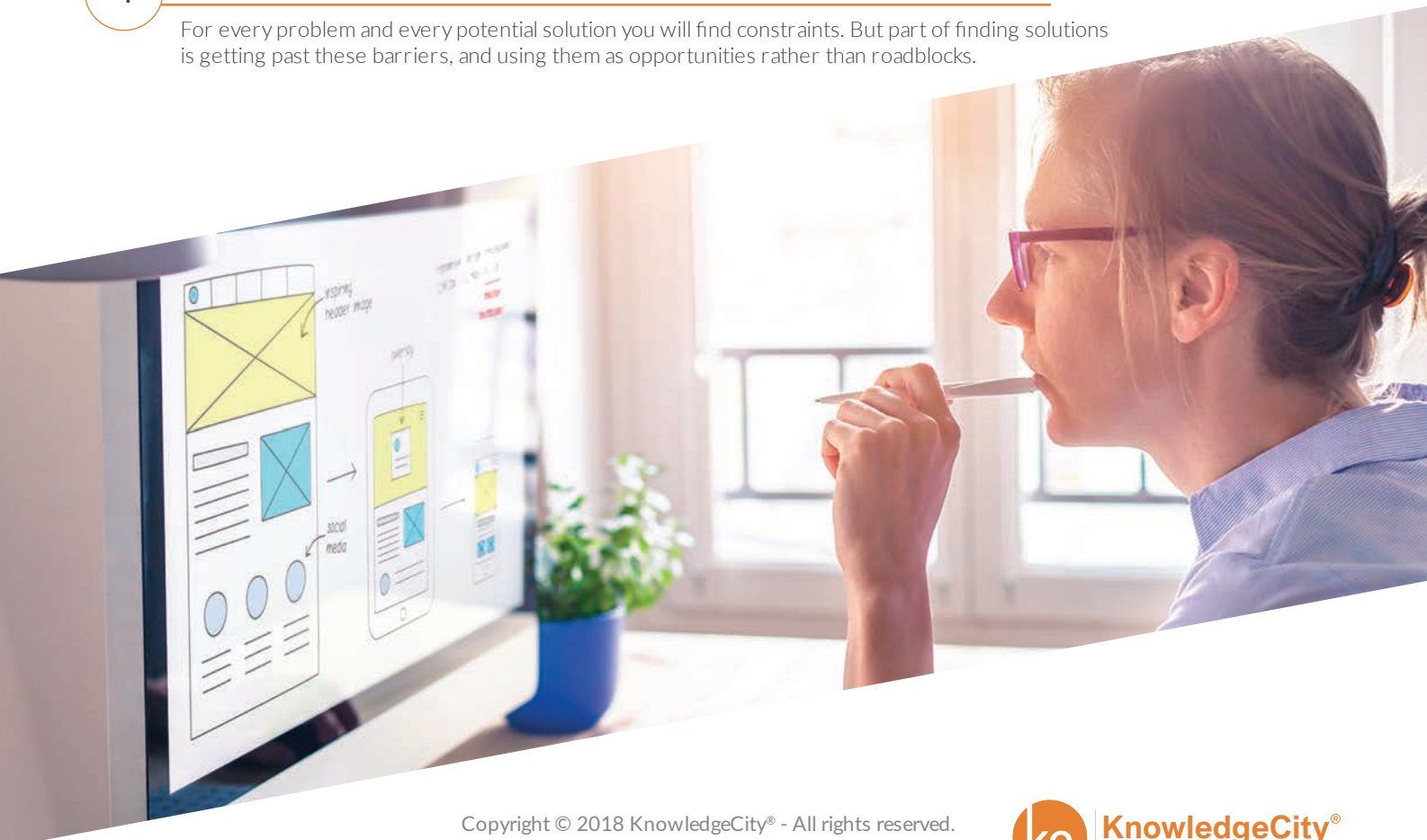
Draw out the segments of the issue, draw lines, arrows, or highlight sections that have greater value or impact than other variables to help facilitate critical, nonlinear thinking.

3 Synergy

Assemble your problem-solving team with both diverse and complementary talents in mind.

4 Recognize constraints

For every problem and every potential solution you will find constraints. But part of finding solutions is getting past these barriers, and using them as opportunities rather than roadblocks.



Analyzing a Problem

Barriers to Problem Resolution

Each problem has its own set of barriers. Barriers are what stand in the way of solving problems and moving forward. These can be either tangible or intangible. An example of a tangible barrier would be when the truck broke down in the previous example. You know that the maintenance was the issue, and you can change something in the process to remove the barrier.

An intangible barrier would be silo mentality. This is when team members, departments, or management have a mindset that is not conducive to working together to solve a problem. They may believe there is no problem or that the problem is not theirs to fix. Barriers are inevitable. The important thing is how you handle them.

Illogical Reasoning

When an idea or solution is presented in a way that doesn't make sense or is way off base to the situation, it is considered illogical reasoning. Illogical reasoning encompasses several thought processes, including irrelevant reasoning, the slippery slope, hasty generalizations, and fallacies. A fallacy is when there is a disagreement or argument that is based off something that is incorrect or illogical in nature.

In some cases, when working through problems and possible solutions, people make hasty generalizations. This can be construed as illogical reasoning, since the decision or thought was not thoroughly considered and is often based on some bias or prejudice. To ensure that you're not making inaccurate or hasty decisions when deciding on solutions, it is important to understand and mitigate any illogical arguments.

Analyzing the Problem: Steps You Can Use Now

Here are some steps you can implement right now to get you closer to solving any problems that you may have:

1. Avoid assuming your solution is right.

If you talk to your employees assuming your solution is the best, you go into the discussion with a biased perspective. Always compare your ideas with those of others.

2. Look at the big picture with a magnifying glass.

Don't make the mistake of forgetting to break down your problems. Breaking them into smaller pieces makes solving them a lot more doable.

3. Look for what caused the issue to begin with.

Without knowing this, you are further from understanding the root cause.

Don't risk making ill-informed decisions. Utilize these brainstorming tools to analyze a problem thoroughly, and you will be closer to a solution.



Critical Thinking for Leaders

Outcome-based thinking is essential for leaders to incorporate into their planning and implementation methods. It's as simple as it sounds. Your thinking is focused on the outcome, or end result, rather than performance-based measurements. Maintaining a focus on outcome-based thinking allows for measurements that help identify risk and may allow for mitigation strategies prior to implementation.

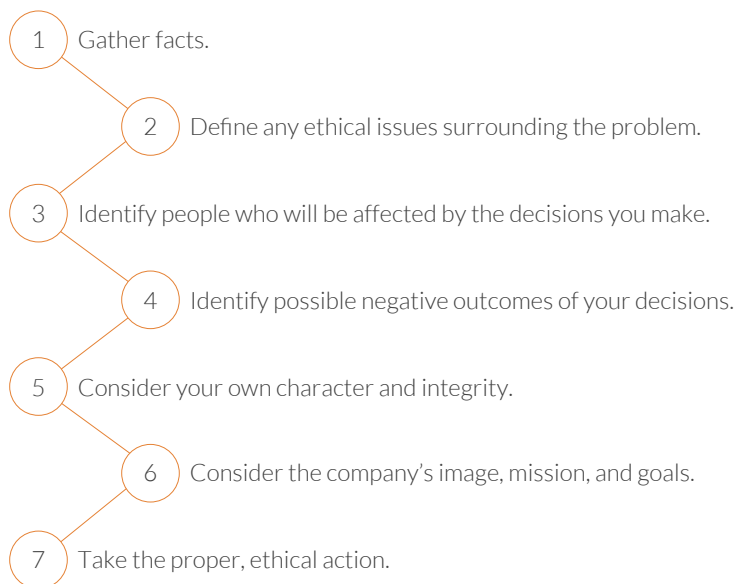
Detecting Bias and Identifying Setbacks

Getting rid of bias is essential to critical thinking. Bias in the workplace is usually driven by previous experiences, erroneous knowledge, perceptions, or intolerance. Avoid bias towards or against your team, vendors, products, or stakeholders. If you show any bias as a leader, it can easily rub off on the members. Unchecked bias may not allow for the resolution of problems and may create more issues. So, what about setbacks? Setbacks are inevitable. All leaders encounter setbacks at some point. As a leader, act rationally and analyze the situation prior to making any final decisions or selecting the method to best handle the setback. It is a good idea to get in the habit of holding weekly meetings for the team to provide updates and discuss possible areas of concern or conflict so that those can be addressed sooner rather than later. This is when you need to listen to the feedback you are receiving from your team.

Ethical Decision Making

Leaders constantly face ethical decisions in business, and that naturally will become part of any problem-solving situation. Being ethical is an important characteristic. It's not just about acting on behalf of what is right and what is wrong. It's about knowing and doing the moral thing under all circumstances.

The best way to determine if you are making ethical decisions is to follow this basic process:



Critical Thinking: Steps You Can Use Now

1. Refer to your company code of conduct and ethics or your workplace policy. This can bring clarity to which actions are more in line with the company's mission statement.

2. Notify and seek advice from a superior. Chances are, throughout years in the business, they've encountered the issue before and can guide you toward the best decision.

3. Take matters into your own hands. By doing your homework to find out how other companies have dealt with similar problems, you'll have insight on what to do and what not to do.

Finding a Sustainable Solution

The United Nations Brundtland Commission defines sustainability as, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Be aware of decision biases. These can come into play during the problem-solving process and affect whether or not we make sustainable decisions. Some common biases are: loss avoidance — you don't like to give up things that seem to be working; shortcuts — we tend to try to stick with what is familiar even if it is outdated; intuition — sometimes sustainable options are a struggle to process, so avoiding the situation and relying on gut feelings in a new problem situation can be a distraction; and finally, wants versus should — wants tend to cloud a problem situation with immediate gratification; we should be looking for the long term.

Get buy-in for the decision from your team. When you get buy-in, team members feel like valued members and contributors to the success of the company. It also empowers them to make better day-to-day decisions. When team members are part of the solution, the success rate and sustainability increase.

Quality Control and Process Improvement

Quality metrics are used to conduct quality control measures and quality assurance. Some common tools and techniques used to determine quality include cost-benefit analysis, benchmarking, flow charts, statistical sampling, and cause-and-effect diagramming. Quality control happens once you have identified your quality metrics. You use these metrics to ensure quality standards continue to be met and managed.

There are specific tools that can be implemented for this process as well. These include tree diagrams, affinity diagrams, and matrix diagrams. These tools help you prioritize issues and possible alternative solutions, enabling you to make decisions that work best for your situation.

Obtain Feedback

Feedback can be obtained in various ways, such as from meetings, surveys, and blogs. Monitoring is also part of this process, as it allows you to obtain feedback further down the road and ensures all stakeholders are satisfied with the solution to the problem. The key is to remember to document all the feedback you receive, whether it is positive or negative. Even the smallest comment or complaint may be useful in solving future problems.



Finding a Sustainable Solution

Disaster and Crisis Recovery

Sometimes, the problems a leader needs to deal with are larger than a missed shipment and a broken-down truck. Sometimes, the problem is elevated to a crisis. Disaster recovery is exactly what it sounds like: the development of a detailed plan that is put into place in case of a disaster. A disaster can be anything from an internal building fire to an earthquake or to an insider theft incident. These can be detrimental to your organization's health and presence. The key to being able to handle a crisis-level problem is preparation.

Contingency Planning

Contingency planning is when you identify possible risks or problems and develop a plan of action on how to deal with them if they arise. In other words, contingency planning is problem-specific.

There are three types of risks: a major disaster that immediately prevents normal business (this may be a national disaster such as war, a regional disaster such as a hurricane, or a local disaster such as a power outage) a gradually worsening situation that makes it difficult to operate normally (this was demonstrated with the truck example when the poor maintenance eventually led to a failure breakdown and missed shipment) or a series of smaller events happening simultaneously.

When you prepare a contingency plan, it should address the following issues: the things that will happen immediately after a problem is discovered, how your business will continue, how operations will resume, and who will be responsible for what.

Consider having a spokesperson experienced with public relations in case the problem is newsworthy and must be addressed publicly. The contingency plan ensures the team or organization will be able to mitigate damage and properly react to the given problem or situation.



Conclusion

Utilizing the tips found throughout this eBook will help you in finding solutions to even the toughest of problems. Whenever you go through the process of defining a problem, analyzing a problem, critical thinking, and finding sustainable solutions, you engage in problem-solving. The most effective problem-solving, though, also involves clear communication. Every time a problem occurs in life or in business, it is crucial that potential solutions are arrived at promptly and hindrances are recognized. The most effective leaders are those who can, not only contribute to finding solutions, but invite others to do the same through open dialogue and collaboration.



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