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CREATING A PROBLEM-SOLVING CULTURE
Exploring Problem Resolution
in the Workplace

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Today, problem solving is no longer an exclusive responsibility of those occupying the executive suite.

As new and complex business challenges become more widespread, everyone in the organization is undertaking the duty and responsibility of solving workplace problems.

A recent survey conducted by AchieveGlobal supports this point of view. Seventy-five percent of respondents answered that everyone in the organization is responsible for solving problems (Figure 1). Today's business environment dictates that all individuals in an organization need to be prepared and equipped to meet the problem-solving challenge.

FIGURE 1

In your organization, who do you believe is responsible for solving workplace problems?

75% Everyone	4% Frontline Supervisors
12% Managers	4% Senior Managers
6% Frontline Staff	0% Executives

SOURCE: Survey of **LEADING**edge™ Subscribers (AchieveGlobal's Online Newsletter)

In turn, organizations are making substantial investments in developing the problem-solving skills of their associates. Take into account the fact that 75 percent of employers surveyed for *Training* magazine's annual industry report stated that they offer some type of "problem-solving/decision-making" training to their employees.[1]

Since contemporary business is more complex, the resulting problems, too, are more complicated. Many organizations are facing stronger competition, increased customer expectations, and more aggressive delivery deadlines—all against a backdrop that tolerates significantly less room for error. Each of these developments requires individuals to tackle problems and develop solutions more proficiently and more rapidly (Figure 2).

Formal, structured, highly efficient approaches ensure that individuals from all parts of the organization are equipped with the ability to identify solutions and implement them in an optimal way.

COMMITMENT TO EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Last year the U.S. Department of Labor granted Delphi Corporation, a Troy, Michigan-based automotive parts supplier, a $3 million grant to train more than 1,500 engineers on problem-solving methodologies. Delphi's vice chairman in announcing the receipt of the grant said, "We are committed to becoming a problem-solving culture."

Against today's business environment lie three central challenges to solving workplace problems:

1. While it is obvious that the effective implementation of solutions is critical, for many organizations being able to execute solutions in a *timely and cost effective* manner presents the greatest challenge.

2. Those who solve problems in the absence of a systematic framework may squander precious time and assets through experimenting, using outdated methods, and/or overlooking crucial variables.

3. People themselves are an essential part of the equation. Without working relationships among stakeholders, even the best process is less likely to realize results.

The key to efficient and successful problem resolution is approaching the process with a systematic and logical methodology and accomplishing this through positive interpersonal interaction. AchieveGlobal has proposed a results-oriented approach to problem solving—a straightforward and impactful model shown in Figure 3. This approach is based on our extensive industry knowledge, primary and secondary research, and experience with customers.

FIGURE 3

The Results-Based Problem-Solving Method

PROBLEM SOLVING IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE

For today's organization, much like the past, successful problem solving translates into enhanced productivity and increased profit. The more efficiently, effectively, and quickly problems get resolved the greater the propensity for improved employee morale, enhanced production capabilities, and realization of fewer dollars lost or wasted.

Achieving successful problem resolution has remained an important endeavor in business for decades. For over 50 years, a variety of structured approaches have been introduced. From Shewhart's control charts for statistical problem description, to Deming's model for distinguishing phases of problem solving, to Juran's focus on the diagnostic and remedial phase of problem solving, our workplaces have experimented with a host of approaches and methodologies.

In the 1980s and 1990s, business efforts shifted gears and pursued quality systems, such as total quality management (TQM), which moved the focus from problem solving towards problem prevention. And, into the early 21st century, the workplace has been testing Six Sigma's define-measure-analyze-improve-control model.

Today's workplace, according to AchieveGlobal's most recent research[2], appears to be utilizing an assortment of approaches and methods; some formal, such as Six Sigma, and some not so formal, such as following intuition or hunches. Sluggish and tentative economic conditions have considerably transformed the faces of our workplaces through massive layoffs and job losses, resulting in a workforce shaped by mixed talents, skills, and experiences—hence varying problem-solving practices.

Successful problem solvers recognize the value of structurally controlled problem-solving methods to promote discipline and increase the chance for success. Problems must first be defined before an investigation of the causes can begin. Designing

and implementing solutions are the next phases of the process. Naturally, describing the problem accurately and communicating the problem clearly to stakeholders in the organization is critical for successful problem solving.

Our research tells us that utilizing some form of problem-solving technique in the organization is critical to addressing major business issues. An AchieveGlobal survey of 373 business leaders revealed the top five business issues most important to the success of their organizations: surviving in a changing economy/marketplace, operating at more profitable levels, daily delivery of customer service, meeting the demands of owners and stakeholders, and maintaining quality control (Table 1).

<div align="center">TABLE 1</div>

TOP FIVE BUSINESS ISSUES
Surviving in a changing economy and marketplace
Operating at more profitable levels
Daily delivery of customer service
Meeting the demands of owners and stakeholders
Maintaining quality control

In addition, the findings state that **problem-solving skills** are among the top skill sets believed to be vital to achieving or meeting the challenges of the major business issues (Table 2).

<div align="center">TABLE 2</div>

TOP FIVE SKILL SETS
Communication skills
Strategic skills
PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS
Technical skills
Decision-making skills

The senior business leaders believed that a model problem solver can sift through information overload or a number of issues and emotions to identify the root cause and then develop solutions for potential implementation. This skill, they suggested, requires taking the base problem down to smaller parts for more effective resolution and management.

For the most part, it was held that problem solving is more of a team-oriented exercise that tends to involve multiple individuals to identify root cause, develop solution alternatives, and finally, carry out implementation.

It came with little surprise that the senior business leaders selected these competencies as being critical to organizational success. In a time with rapidly changing markets, constantly moving targets, and unforeseen obstacles appearing daily, individuals—now more than ever—need to have the skills necessary to map their way through a maze of issues and dilemmas, and that includes effective problem-solving skills.

THE NATURE OF PROBLEMS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

We've all experienced problems in our workplace—from quality assurance process breakdowns to a customer receiving an inaccurate order or invoice. Workplace problems surface daily and may be routinely classified into one of three primary sources: technical, human, and policy/process.

Problems may arise as the result of technical errors, such as a network server being down, preventing associates from retrieving important information. Some problems may be the result of human errors, such as ineffective communication between departments and teams. And yet another set of problems may be policy-, procedure-, or process-related, such as having too much downtime or, conversely, being completely overworked. Then again, some problems may emerge from a combination of all three sources.

Today's business environment dictates that all individuals of an organization need to be prepared and equipped to solve problems (Figure 4).

PROBLEM-SOLVING METHODOLOGIES

Like the diverse nature of problems themselves, there are likewise several different problem-solving techniques. Some problem solvers may resort to simple "troubleshooting" or "shooting from the hip" when in a tough situation. Some problem-solving methods are more creative in nature and may include brainstorming and obtaining different points of view. Some approaches assume a more investigative slant and may include using personal insights and intuition, check sheets, or formal surveys. Some problem-solving techniques are more analytical and structured and may include flowcharts or graphic representations of quantifiable data which call attention to specific concerns by visually displaying complex information.

There are also some approaches which are considered to be more or less aligned with convergent thinking such as rating solutions, ranking solutions, and developing risk analysis matrices, which is a tool that identifies and evaluates risks of each solution option. And there are other tools associated with analytical thinking including Gantt charts or force field analysis—a technique that identifies the facilitators and inhibitors of solution options.

To better understand the types of problem resolution methods that are being utilized in today's workplace, AchieveGlobal conducted a series of focus groups.

The focus group participants were instructed to think about the most recent problem they encountered in their workplace. After identifying the problems, the participants were asked to share the approach they used to resolve the issue that was presented to them or to disclose the method they have been most likely to utilize as it relates to resolving workplace problems.

Consider some of the approaches they have used:

- **Root Cause Analysis:** "First I conducted a root cause analysis to identify what the exact problem was. Then I developed steps to ameliorate the situation and hopefully stop it from happening again."

- **Empowerment:** "I talked to the person involved to see if they had the solution to the problem. I can always tell them the problem and suggest potential solutions; however, I want to get *their* opinion to involve *them* in the solution."

- **Flowcharting:** "We flowchart our problems and are just starting this process to draw out the problem and identify a process to fix the problem."

- **Asking Others:** "We share the problem with others outside of the issue to get their opinion and seek other points of view."

- **Investigative:** "I use an investigative approach every day. Once you ask, 'Why, how, when, etc?' and begin peeling back the onion to get to the root of a problem, you're investigating all the way through and solving problems along the way."

- **Learning From History:** "We look for precedence of both the problems and the problem solutions we have employed in the past."

Most participants reported that past history and reflections on similar situations in the past served as their greatest resource when tackling problems and designing solutions. For those subscribing to the viewpoint that previous behavior often dictates future behavior, this finding may be validating.

In many instances, participants mentioned the importance of having as many data points and facts as possible before communicating with involved parties and attempting to solve the presented issue. Determining when one has enough information is no simple task unto itself. The key, overall, as they consistently suggested, is solving the problem *quickly*.

The majority of the focus group participants offered that their organization has not adopted a formal problem-solving approach. And while that presents some obvious obstacles, for those that have embraced a formal methodology, there may be challenges as well.

Equal to the pressures of rapidly resolving problems is the concern that an organization may by strategic intent, default, or sheer comfort align itself with one rigid approach to solving problems. A successful organization, as suggested by Subject Matter Experts and the focus group participants, will tailor its problem-solving methods to the problems themselves, and this may include customizing available tools and techniques to the individual problem. It is also important to note that several focus group participants expressed concerns over the use of ineffective and cumbersome structured approaches to solving problems. Frequently the participants disclosed that, "Yes, it is important to have formal approaches to solving problems, but at the same time they're sometimes difficult to follow and consume too much time that we don't have." AchieveGlobal believes all problems are different, but using a structured and impactful process yields success.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL PROBLEM SOLVING

Creating Success Through Implementation

As previously noted, today's business climate often dictates that we do everything faster, more cost effectively, and with higher quality. This is no easy task in an age of stress and information overload.

In the process to deliver, groups commonly get bogged down in a sea of data or fail to tap into existing information that might further their efforts. At the same time, people often develop solutions and action plans that never get fully implemented. Results from these efforts are frequently mediocre and add more complexity and frustration to an already challenging situation.

Good solutions will not carry themselves to actual implementation. When adoption and follow-through are given short consideration, problem-solving efforts fall short of expectations.

So what are the major obstacles to solution implementation?

The focus group participants were asked to share the barriers they've experienced or observed in their own places of work. Take into account some of the workplace obstacles they have witnessed, which include lack of participatory efforts, lack of communication, resistance to change, no management support, and time pressures, among others:

- "'*We've always done it this way!*' is an attitude that is a major barrier to implementation."
- "Sometimes employees responsible for implementing the solution haven't been asked to participate in solution development activities, so there will be some resistance and lack of buy-in as they won't see the value or benefits to implementation."

- "Human failure—Individuals not taking ownership or responsibility for getting the solution implemented."

- "Poor communication—Communication breakdowns about who is responsible for what, when, where, etc."

- "Lack of management commitment— Lack of senior management commitment to getting the changes to take place."

- "Sometimes individuals don't know how to implement the solutions. That can be due to a lack of communication or a lack of education about how to implement an action plan."

- "It is called 'NIH,' 'Not Invented Here.' It (the solution) won't work here because we didn't invent it here. ... I don't care what the last leader did; it won't work here because *we* did not develop it *here*."

- "Time is a barrier. That is the time it takes to implement solutions or the time urgency that doesn't allow for good implementation practices."

Other barriers the focus group participants shared included: employee turnover, lack of team motivation, poor morale, complacent managers and employees, and new hires too fresh to the enterprise to understand what needs to be done.

These barriers can significantly contribute to failed implementation efforts. Overcoming them requires effective leaders who are able to develop well-defined action plans which include clearly defined responsibilities and accountabilities.

AchieveGlobal believes there are six steps to implementation success:

1. Get the details right.
2. Enlist ongoing support.
3. Provide for contingencies.
4. Energize effort.
5. Monitor and evaluate.
6. Celebrate and share success.

After lobbying and negotiating for the needed solution resources, effective leaders monitor progress, keep individuals focused, continuously communicate, identify obstacles, proactively tackle the barriers, and lead their teams to successful adoption of the resolution.
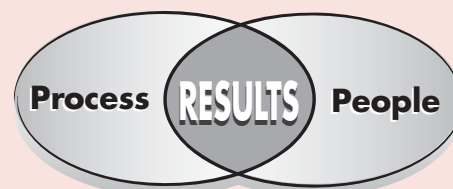
THE RESULTS APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

Clearly the ability to problem solve efficiently, create innovative solutions, and leverage opportunities is more important than ever before. AchieveGlobal believes the key to achieving these outcomes lies in understanding two elements.

By drawing on a common **process** and attending to the needs of **people** participating in the process, problem solving can efficiently and effectively generate results (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

The Results-Based Problem-Solving Method

The Importance of Process

Utilizing a problem-solving process in the organization is critical to addressing major business issues. The Results Process is a rigorous yet flexible approach to problem solving. This five-step process, shown below, provides the organized and orderly approach required for efficient and timely problem resolution.

The Results Process incorporates tools to expand and focus the thinking of problem solvers. Recognizing and using four types of thinking—Open, Exploratory, Analytical, Convergent—helps stakeholders approach the problem from multiple perspectives.

Problem solving is meaningless if solutions are not implemented. Herein lies the greatest hurdle for workplace problem solving today: overcoming the barriers to successful resolution.

The Results Process advocates a collaborative approach to problem-solving, focusing on consensus as the preferred approach to deciding on a solution and ensuring implementation success.

> *"It's important to acknowledge the problem up-front and communicate to everyone exactly what the problem is. In the communication you need to state who is going to be following up, who will be looking for a solution, and who will be responsible for getting the solution in place. All of this is just letting stakeholders know that something is going on."*
>
> *–Focus Group Participant*

THE RESULTS PROCESS

The challenge of working with others to solve problems comes from trying to get quick results while involving others in a meaningful way. The five-step Results Process efficiently guides a group from pinpointing the problem to implementing a practical or innovative solution. The five steps are as follows:

STEP 1: Quantify the Gap.
Solutions appear more quickly when you define the gap between the current and desired state of affairs. By defining that gap in measurable terms, you focus thought and effort where it counts most.

STEP 2: Uncover the Cause.
You can identify an effective solution only when you have accurate information about the cause or causes of the problem. Without relevant data, your efforts may address the symptoms but not the source of the problem.

STEP 3: Create Options.
Generating a range of possible solutions makes it easier to find one that not only closes the gap, but also satisfies all your stakeholders.

STEP 4: Decide the Solution.
The solution you choose affects people beyond your team. In this step, you involve the right people in the right way to increase their commitment to the success of the solution they choose.

STEP 5: Realize Results.
Good ideas don't implement themselves. They require a comprehensive plan specifying what to do, who will do it, and when they'll do it. Once efforts are underway, it's critical to evaluate how people are doing, make needed adjustments, and celebrate accomplishments.

The Importance of People

Without attention to the needs of people, problem-solving efforts can fall short. With collaboration as an essential ingredient for effective problem solving, creating a supportive environment for problem solving becomes a critical element for success. Consider the high percentage of focus group respondents who report that they depend on other people to problem solve (Figure 6).

AchieveGlobal has found that how well people work together to solve problems depends largely on the presence of specific organizational conditions. These conditions are called "The Hallmarks of a Problem-Solving Culture."

In summary, AchieveGlobal believes that a problem-solving culture:

- **Builds trust**

    Lack of trust compounds any problem through hidden agendas, poor communication, and widespread suspicion. Where trust prevails, people find it easier to work together and approach problems objectively. As a result, people are more willing to make the collective effort necessary to solve shared problems.

- **Leverages what people do well**

    It's rare to encounter a problem that no one on your team has seen before. Every team has untapped strengths—skills, talents, experience, contacts, and access to resources. Leveraging those strengths and building on past success can reveal shortcuts to solutions, as well as prepare a team to take on more and bigger problems.

- **Encourages innovation and measured risk**

    Real breakthroughs rarely occur in an organization that punishes sincere but failed attempts at innovation. When people are encouraged to try new things and when earnest mistakes are treated as opportunities to learn, then creative problem solving becomes the rule and not the exception.

By attending to stakeholders' needs and developing effective relationships, the organization can develop a culture that builds trust, leverages what people do well, and encourages innovation and measured risk.

FIGURE 6

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE

A number of resources may be sought out when solving problems in the workplace. To what extent do you rely on the following resources when solving problems?

	Percent of Respondents Who Replied "Always" or "Often"
Past history/experiences of a like or similar nature	84%
Co-workers (this may include peers, superiors, and subordinates)	**78%**
Organization's values and standards	72%
Any available data, including secondary sources	71%
Your own intuition/gut feeling	71%
Organization's policies and procedures	59%

SOURCE: AchieveGlobal Research

CONCLUSION

All told, organizations should strive to develop a comprehensive problem-solving and implementation strategy that increases the speed and likelihood of resolution and allows everyone within the organization to assume successful problem-solving responsibilities.

This problem-solving strategy should be balanced and flexible and include multiple structured method options so as to increase effectiveness and speed to resolution. Effective problem solvers appreciate the importance of having organized approaches for problem solving. Orderly methods contribute positively to efficient and timely problem resolution and increase the odds of a successful implementation.

Equally important as having a set **process**, empowered and inspired **people** are critical to problem-solving success. Without positive interpersonal interaction, problem-solving is usually fruitless. Together, high-performing people and an effective process combine to create a problem-solving environment that produces **results**.

NOTES

[1] *Training* Magazine's 2003 Industry Report, October 2003, p. 32.

[2] Focus groups conducted by AchieveGlobal, October 2003.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In addition to an extensive secondary literature review, which included publications such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Quality Progress*, and *Training*, amongst others, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted proprietary primary research projects to compliment its efforts which are detailed below.

Throughout October 2003 the AchieveGlobal research team conducted focus groups in Jacksonville, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; and London, England. The audience for each session was service line staff and service line supervisors and managers. In total, 59 individuals participated in the groups.

During December 2002 and January 2003, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted an online survey with a random sample of business leaders in the United States. A total of 373 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 125 were executive managers (e.g., vice president, C-level) while the balance represented other management ranks. The margin of error is ±5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

Throughout November and December 2002, the AchieveGlobal research team conducted focus groups in Omaha, Nebraska; Tampa, Florida; and London, England. The audience for each session was director level and above. In total, 57 individuals participated in the groups.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark Marone, Ph.D., is AchieveGlobal's senior research manager. He has more than 13 years of academic and private sector experience in research and consulting on issues such as economic development, corporate strategy, and business policy. His career includes being a senior analyst with Nielsen Media Research, where he was responsible for analyzing market data for key national media accounts. He also served as director of research at the Global Business Information Network, a research firm that provides international consulting to businesses in the Midwest. In addition, he spent several years as a management consultant with KPMG, LLC, and as a client services manager with Sterling Research Group, Inc.

Mark has written extensively on topics such as high technology industries, economic development, and corporate strategy in the telecommunications industry. He has been a featured speaker and presented research findings at numerous international academic conferences.

He earned a Ph.D. from Indiana University, where he has held several academic posts. He is currently an adjunct professor of management at the University of South Florida.

In 2003 Mark co-authored a book on sales performance, *Secrets of Top-Performing Salespeople*.

He is also a member of the American Marketing Association and Marketing Research Association.

Chris Blauth is senior product manager for leadership with AchieveGlobal. Since joining the AchieveGlobal product management team, Chris has been responsible for maximizing revenue for numerous products through the creation and execution of product management strategy. He also guides the organization to develop and maintain products that meet the training industry's current and future needs. Chris' recent accomplishments include the launch of *Genuine Leadership*™, AchieveGlobal's newest leadership product system. Chris also launched classroom sales training seminars and an asynchronous Web-based tool designed to reinforce skills taught in AchieveGlobal's flagship sales program *Professional Selling Skills*™. Chris has also facilitated AchieveGlobal's popular sales performance and leadership courses. Prior to joining AchieveGlobal, Chris spent seven years with Leica Microsystems, Inc., holding financial analyst and product manager positions. Chris earned a B.S. (accounting and finance) from the University at Buffalo and an M.B.A. in marketing from Canisius College. Chris is a member of Beta Gamma Sigma Honor Society and the American Management Association.

ABOUT ACHIEVEGLOBAL

AchieveGlobal is the world leader in helping organizations translate business strategies into business results by developing the skills and performance of their people. We are a single resource for aligning employee performance with organizational strategy through training and consulting solutions in customer service, leadership and teamwork, and sales performance.

With offices throughout North America and a presence on every continent, we serve more than 70 countries and offer programs and services in more than 40 languages and dialects. We continually adapt and translate our programs and services to meet the needs of global cultures.

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*Strategy to Results
Through People*