

## GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING

### 1. DEFINE THE PROBLEM

When problem solving, many groups observe a common practice. They “think in reverse.” Before identifying the problem or knowing the facts about the problem, they propose solutions. If luck is with them, a satisfactory solution might result, but these short cuts usually do not work. The problem reappears and continues to plague the group. A more sensible approach to problem solving is to begin by determining what the problem is. Usually a group undertakes problem solving because of a felt difficulty. The members perceive a perplexing situation and realize it has to be dealt with. What group members ordinarily perceive are the effects of the situation, the signs or symptoms of a possible problem, not the problem itself. They have to ferret out the problem before they can treat it satisfactorily. To identify a problem, answers to questions like the following are helpful:

- A. What is the situation in which the problem is occurring?
- B. What in general is the difficulty?
- C. How did the difficulty arise?
- D. What is its importance?
- E. What are the meanings of any terms that require clarification?

By obtaining the answers to these questions, a group can more ably determine what the problem really is. Once you have defined the problem you need to frame the problem as a question.

Questions should be:

1. open to alternative answers; not yes/no (closed) questions
2. clearly written; and avoid vague terms.
3. unbiased; it cannot imply that a certain decision has to be reached.
4. concise; not too wordy
5. a question of policy; it asks what action should be taken.
  - “**What should be** MCC’s policy towards high impact aerobics?”
  - “**How can we** promote low impact aerobics at MCC?”
  - “**What can be done** about the shortage of low impact aerobics classes at MCC?”

### 2. ANALYZE THE PROBLEM

After the group has agreed on what the problem is, then next step is to analyze it, particularly its causes and effects. In doing this the group must try to avoid letting opinions take priority over facts. The question “What are the facts?” must be foremost in the members’ minds. Answers to these questions are helpful in locating the facts:

- A. What effects indicate that a problem exists?
- B. How serious are the effects?
- C. What is causing the problem?
- D. Are the causes inherent in the problem situation?
- E. Have previous attempts been made to solve the problem?

Most problems have multiple causes that we should identify, so we can uncover a workable solution.

### 3. ESTABLISH CRITERIA FOR SOLUTIONS

After your group has analyzed the problem, you must now establish criteria to guide you in your quest for solutions. These solutions, preferably, will solve the problem, and will not cause other problems to develop and make conditions worse than they are already. For example in the case of a stomach ache, the doctor discovers that the patient has a kidney infection. One solution is to take out the kidney, but that solution might cause more serious problems than the patient has at present. A less drastic solution may be more appropriate, perhaps a program of medication.

To ensure that a group’s solution does not cause more serious problems than already exist, the proper procedure is to **FIRST** develop a set of criteria or conditions that an acceptable solution must meet. One criterion obviously is that the solution must correct the cause of the problem. Other general criteria worth considering are:

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| A. Is the proposed solution workable?                | F. Is the proposed solution just?        |
| B. Is it economical?                                 | G. Is it moral?                          |
| C. Is it the best possible way to solve the problem? | H. Will it get the job done efficiently? |
| D. Will it produce more benefits than disadvantages? | I. Is it clear?                          |
| E. Are the benefits significant?                     | J. Will it be harmful in any way?        |

## 4. GENERATING POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

Having determined the criteria, the group can now propose solutions to the problem.

Rather than accepting the first one proposed, the members should try to think of many ways to solve the problem. To create a list of possible solutions, the group might use brainstorming, a technique designed to bring forth many ideas. Three rules govern its use: (1) ideas are to be expressed freely; as an idea comes to mind, it is to be expressed without evaluation by anyone; (2) all ideas, wild or otherwise, are welcome; (3) as many ideas as possible are voiced; quantity is the goal. When the group runs out of ideas, it evaluates those resulting from the brainstorming.

### 5. SELECT THE BEST SOLUTION

In this step the group chooses the solution that seems to meet the criteria better than any other. As a means of accomplishing this end, these questions are helpful:

- A. What is the exact nature of each solution?
- B. How would it correct the problem?
- C. How well would it remedy the problem?
- D. How well does it satisfy the criteria?
- E. Would a combination of solutions be best?

Determining which of the proposed solutions is best is a decision-making process. A decision implies that agreement to do something prevails among the group members, and the something that is agreed to is a choice among different alternatives. Decisions can be made in many ways. Here six common methods:

1. Group consensus - all members come to an agreement.
2. Majority vote - decision of the majority is accepted.
3. Minority process - committee, board of directors makes decision for all.
4. Averaging individual opinions - members mail or phone in their opinions; majority wins.
5. Expert decision - authority on subject makes decision and group accepts it.
6. Decision by authority - after group discusses, leader decides.

### 6. IMPLEMENT THE SOLUTION!

The finale step involves deciding how to put the solution into effect. This step has much value. First, in deciding how to execute a solution, the group may uncover possible weaknesses. What often sounds like a good decision might prove to be inoperable. The members find this out when they try to institute a plan of action. If the solution is unworkable, it can be abandoned in favor of one that is more likely to work. You don’t have to solve any problems as a group or actually implement your solutions, however, you could and that would bring your group Extra Credit.

## EXTRA CREDIT

Your group may go beyond just talking about a solution. It can do something to carry out the solution. The adages “Talk is cheap,” “Actions speak louder than words,” and “put your money where your mouth is” apply here. **This is where the extra credit for our group work is available.** How exactly can you implement your plan?

If you take this project a step further and actually implement your plan you will receive extra credit, not to mention the deed you do for yourselves and others. An example may be a letter sent to the person or persons that can begin to implement your solution(s). Another example may be a petition to get the ball rolling towards your solution. The intent here is to see your project through. You have done, and will do some good work on this project, why let it die in a speech instructors files. Let your ideas live, and do some good for others that are affected by the issue(s)/problem(s), topic area your group has chosen. You be the judge as to how the information, you have gathered and the solution(s) you have come up with, can best be implemented. As always, you can ask me for my opinions, ideas, and help, as to what your group can do to see your solution(s) to fruition.