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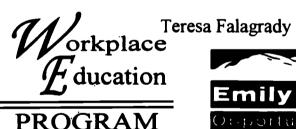   Methods; *Workplace Literacy

ABSTRACT
        This workbook suggests six problem-solving steps to help
employees in workplace literacy programs learn how to solve problems:
identify the problem; clarify goals; examine alternatives; choose; act; and
evaluate and react. Fifteen problem scenarios are provided for group efforts
in problem solving. A problem-solving questionnaire and questionnaire results
from people in various fields of teaching are also included. (KC)

Opportunities in Workclothes:

Problems & Problem-Solving

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$\mathscr{W}$orkplace
$\mathscr{E}$ducation
PROGRAM

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Opportunities in Workclothes:

Problems and Problem-Solving

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Introduction to the
Workplace Literacy Project

This module was developed by educators from Emily Griffith Opportunity School as part of a National Workplace Education grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. A cooperative effort between the business and education communities, the program was designed specifically to enhance employees' literacy skills.

Direct benefits to the workforce include improved morale and motivation, self-esteem, teamwork, and promotional opportunities.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of our partners. In addition, we recognize all of the students who participated in classes and who provided us the invaluable feedback for strengthening future classes.

We hope partnerships such as these will provide the catalyst for developing new or continued on-site educational opportunities.

Introduction

Problem-solving. We hear this word frequently, but we especially hear it in the workplace. Of course, problems are inevitable; yet, inevitably, most of us view them negatively. It seems, then, so reluctant are people to solve problems, that we've come to euphemistically view them as "challenges." Problems or challenges? Regardless the word we use, the message is still the same: how do we successfully solve them?

Now, more than ever before, employers are looking for employees who can "problem solve." But what is problem solving, actually? How does it affect our ability to be an effective employee? What factors are involved when we problem solve?

Most people tend to solve their problems the way they always have: by talking to people, trial and error, or by ignoring the problem altogether. What if, however, they learned a new way to problem-solve – by following a series of steps? Probably, most people have not heard of using an actual "format" (*Stages of Problem Solving* as suggested here in this workbook) for solving a problem. These stages identify the components for how to solve a problem. People may, in fact, balk at using such a prescriptive formula. Perhaps they may feel that they shouldn't have to memorize "steps," necessarily. However, they may, after following such a formula, in the end, feel more successful about the way they solved the problem. In addition, since problem-solving is a skill to be learned and honed, if people feel they aren't "good" at solving problems, it might be easier to follow a prescribed method. Time-consuming? Yes. Worthwhile? Yes, again.

Problem-solving is pervasive regardless the application. For example, at this author's workplace, The Workplace Education Program, trainers conduct problem-solving workshops for employees. Some of these topics include team-building skills, telephone communication, and customer service skills. In addition to these workshops, instructors teach GED and Basic Skills, English as a Second Language (ESL), Business Writing, and Medical Terminology. In each of these disciplines, problem-solving is incorporated.

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On pages 38-39, the reader will find a valuable bibliography – as suggested by the WPE staff – on books or periodicals about problem-solving. And in RESOURCES (page 40), a bibliography of workbooks is included. Written by WPE trainers, these materials focus either on problem-solving specifically, or they incorporate problem-solving into various disciplines.

The user of this workbook should show the problem-solving steps to her own employee-students and demonstrate the method. Then suggest they work together on solving the fifteen problem-scenarios included in this workbook. All of scenarios are based on actual events that occurred to this author, to colleagues, friends, or family. When discussing workplace problems with the aforementioned people, this author heard this complaint most often: workplace problems are most often not associated with the *job*, but with the *people*. Therefore, you will find that many of the scenarios are related to customer service/personnel issues. Scenarios were specifically chosen – with varied topics. Most of them will likely be familiar to the reader: at one time or another you have probably experienced the same situations or know of someone who has. Given the variety of the topics, employee-students will not only rely on their intellect for solving these scenarios; their sensitivity to health, religion, and cultural issues will be piqued as well.

There are a number of ways to use this workbook and the *Stages of Problem Solving*. The trainer/facilitator may want to show, explain, and discuss the steps prior to reading and solving the problem-scenarios; she may want to ask employee-students to solve the problems first – without any discussion of the *Stages*; she may ask participants to solve only a certain number (or kind) of problems; or trainers might want to compare solutions: those gotten by way of the *Stages* or another prescriptive method and those not. Results should prove engaging regardless the method taken.

Finally, the reader will find a questionnaire about problem-solving. Distributed to 10 of this author's colleagues, none of the trainers were given any specific instructions for completing it. The results are included as well (a black diamond denotes a change in writer). Unsurprisingly, many of the opinions were similar. However, it *was* surprising to discover that most trainers answered the questions based upon the discipline they're training in vs. a more generic approach. For example, those trainers presenting communication techniques answered the questions with specific answers related to customer service and dealing with people in the workplace; ESL trainers answered with specific ideas from training non-native English speakers.

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It seems, then, that all of us tend to solve our problems based on our own cultures, values, and norms – from what **we** know to be true. However, equally clear: we need to listen to and look at other suggestions for solving whatever problem may lie ahead. The reader may be interested in learning the opinions of his/her own colleagues and/or participants.

Some of us are better at problem-solving than others. Problem-solving is an acquired trait: we *can* learn to be better problemsolvers. This doesn't mean that one must follow a prescribed method. Solving problems this way does not automatically guarantee a successful outcome. However, for those of us who could use more practice, perhaps this is a good start.

The purpose of this workbook, then, is not necessarily to start to view problems as something positive; rather, to help ourselves view them as "*opportunities* in workclothes."

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Contents

Stages of Problem Solving*

Important: Note that all of these questions are open-ended. That is, people are forced to think of solutions; they cannot merely answer "yes" or "no."

1. Identify the Problem(s)

What are the facts and your thoughts and feelings?

Be concrete. When several issues in question exist, which are open to change?

Which do you want to focus on first?

2. Clarify Goals

What are your goals in this area?

How would you like it to turn out?

Is that possible or realistic?

If not, what is a more achievable goal?

3. Examine Alternatives

What have you thought of doing about it?

What are alternatives you've tried before in similar situations?

What else could you try, including alternatives you've rejected?

What are the costs and benefits of each?

What's stopping you from implementing one? How?

What will help you succeed? How?

4. **Choose**

Which alternative do you think and feel you can and will try?

If you can't decide, what's stopping you?
(That often becomes a new focus of problem solving.)

5. **Act**

What, specifically, will you do? How? When?
(Be concrete; that makes success more likely.)

What supports do you have available?

What more do you need?

6. **Evaluate and re-act**

How will you know that you've succeeded?

If _____ happens, what will you do?

What's next?

*from "Constructive Change" Organizational Consulting and Customized Skill
  Training, Jerry Feist, Ph.D
  http://www.publiccom.com/web/change/

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Problem-Scenarios

The Cost of a Bow

You are a manager of a stationery store. A customer arrives with his wife and infant. As the customer pays for his purchase, he gives one of the stores bows, located next to the check-out desk, to his son, who puts it in his mouth. After the customer pays for his purchase, he leaves the store with his family. His baby still clutches the bow. You notice that the man has not paid for the bow, so you ask him whether he wanted to buy it. The man replies, "No." You tell him that now it's impossible to resell the bow. The man angrily asks you whether you have children. You tell him "no," but that you wouldn't let your child play with unpaid-for merchandise, if you did. The customer disdainfully reaches into his pocket, pulls out a ten dollar bill, slaps it on the counter and says: "Here. You look like you could use it."

Problem-Scenario #2

This Is Room Service?

You are staying at a resort hotel. Wanting to eat dinner in your room, you call one of the two numbers listed on the telephone for Room Service. After many rings, no one answers. You call the second number listed – still no answer. Finally, you call the front desk, only to be given a third number. After calling this number and letting it ring 20 times, you are connected to a recorded message. The message instructs the caller to leave the order on the recording. You leave your order and request that someone call you back to verify. After waiting one hour for either a call or your food, you decide to go out of the hotel to eat. Just as you're getting ready to leave, you receive a call from the front desk calling to verify your order. You cancel, disgusted.

Problem-Scenario #3

Those Friendly Skies

On a trip away from home, your child becomes sick, requiring you to return home immediately. You call the airlines, asking for the next flight back home. The representative says that there's no flight that day. You inquire about the following day and the day after that. To both answers, the representative replies that there's not a flight. After verifying that there truly is not a flight out that day, the day after, or the day after that, you ask for the manager's name. The representative replies "I don't play the name game," and hangs up. You call back immediately, getting a new representative – and getting a flight out the next day.

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Checking on the Check

At the end of March you call your local library to reserve one of its meeting rooms for mid-May. The coordinator informs you of the required $25 deposit which will be refunded to you providing the room is returned to its original state.

After your meeting, you leave the room orderly. By May 30, you still haven't received your refund, so you call the library. The original person you spoke to is no longer there, so you relate your story to her replacement. The new coordinator politely tells you that the original information you were sent was "outdated" – that everyone pays a "non-refundable" $25 fee. However, the coordinator allows that because it was an "internal problem," she'll refund your money.

By mid-October you still have not received your refund, so you write a letter to the coordinator, laying out the problem from start to finish. Shortly thereafter, you receive a message from yet another library employee who tells you that your check will be "reissued" and that you "should receive it in a couple of weeks." Three weeks later you still haven't received your check.

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Problem-Scenario #5

Do You Want My Fingerprints, Too?

Your name is Marsha Vinnola, and you live on Josephine Street. You call a local cable tv company to get cable installed in your home. The representative asks you for your name, address, phone number, etc. When you receive your first bill, you see that it's addressed to "Josephine Vinnola" on Josephine Street. You call to speak to the same representative you spoke to when you signed up. She tells you that you can't change it "without authorization." You ask to speak to her manager, who confirms that proper identification is necessary to change your address. The manager asks you to bring your birth certificate to the cable company so she can verify your correct name and address.

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Problem-Scenario #6

Money's the Game

You are a high school basketball coach. One of your student's family has donated a large sum of money to the school to build a new gym. This student loves the game but is a mediocre player. He's a senior. Although in years past, you alternated playing him, this year, since he's a senior, both he and his family are expecting him to play. If his family weren't so prominent and hadn't given so much money to the school, he would have been cut from the team.

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Problem-Scenario # 7

Religious Beliefs

You are a nurse in training in the bone marrow transplant unit. One of your patients is an Orthodox Jewish woman scheduled to receive a transplant. The woman's son visits his mother every day and stays a long time.

As you come to work one day, you notice that the son is in the hallway, lying prostrate on the floor, and praying audibly. Another nurse tells you that the previous week, the son had brought onto the ward, a Jewish instrument similar to a horn. He then blew the horn outside his mother's room. Staff members and patients are upset. The son is determined to practice his religious beliefs.

Problem-Scenario #8

I'll be right with you?

You are a bank clerk. Usually, you get one hour for lunch, but today your supervisor asks you if you can return from lunch 15 minutes early to cover for someone who called in sick.

Despite having to return to work 15 minutes early, on your lunch hour you visit the local shopping center near the bank. You want to buy an anniversary gift for your husband for that evening's celebration. After selecting an expensive watch, you approach the sales counter to pay for your purchase and notice that the sales associate is on the phone. Although she sees you, she continues to talk. There are no other sales associates in sight. You wait a few more minutes and inadvertently hear that the clerk's call is personal. You wait a minute more, but the clerk makes no move to finish her call.

Problem-Scenario #9

Catalog Shopping

You purchase your young daughter a lamp that you had seen in a catalog. Attached to the lamp is a tape recording machine. After several months, the tape machine won't play. You send the lamp, with an explanation but without a receipt, to the company where you purchased it. After several weeks have gone by and you've heard nothing from the company, you call to follow up. Unable to speak to someone personally, you leave a message, briefly explaining your problem. Two days later, you receive a message from the company stating that they're unable to fix or refund your purchase because they can't verify that the lamp is theirs. You call them back and explain to them that you have their catalog and that they indeed, do carry the item. They insist on your having a receipt before they can proceed further.

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Fencing with the Customer

In early fall, you decide to have a six foot privacy fence built around your considerable property. You have to get the fence built before the first snow. You call the company that's well-known in the area for outstanding work and one that's been recommended to you. The representative tells you that it will be at least "three weeks" before the work can be started. Since both you and your husband work, you ask the representative to be more specific about the time they'll be out to start the work. You request, then, that the company at least call you the morning the builders will be out to start the fence. The representative replies that fall is a busy time of year for their company, and "If we have to take the time to call you, your order goes to the bottom of the pile."

Problem-Scenario #11

A Teachable Moment

You are an English-as-a-Second-Language teacher. Most of your students are in their mid-twenties, and many of them come from Western Europe. To give students an opportunity to practice speaking, you pair off people, intentionally partnering students whom you think would complement each other. When you ask a Student A to work with Student B, Student A says, "I don't think so."

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Problem-Scenario #12

Baby's Dinner Dilemma

You, your husband, and your three-month-old son go to a popular family restaurant for an early dinner (4:00). Since you are breastfeeding your child, you take a container of breast milk with you. When you're ready to order, the waitress sees your bottle on the table and tells you that you'll have to get rid of the container (company policy stipulates that no outside containers can be brought in to the restaurant). You ask to talk to the manager, who confirms the policy. You explain to the manager that you need to feed your child breast milk, not regular milk from the restaurant. The manager stands firm. You and your family leave.

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Problem-Scenario #13

One Bad Apple?

You are a manager at XYZ company. The company's busiest season is from January to April. When employees are hired, they are informed that part of the job consists of overtime and that they're expected to work the extra hours during the busy season. During the current busy season, one employee in particular leaves early or comes back from break late. You are forced to ask other employees to cover for him. Subsequently, the co-workers become resentful and unhappy with their own jobs.

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Problem-Scenario #14

Deadline

You are a secretary for a pharmaceutical firm. Toward the end of the workday, you are busy typing the final changes to the annual report. You have a 4:30 p.m. deadline to give those changes to the printer before you leave work that day in order for the reports to be completed by the following day's board meeting. In the middle of your 40-page document, your PC stops without warning. You try to troubleshoot, but your computer knowledge is limited.

Problem-Scenario #15

Reverse Discrimination?

You are a woman working for a medium-sized accounting firm. With nine other women, you create your own in-house "investment club." The group decides it would feel more comfortable working and learning with other women; therefore, you decide not to allow men join. Several months after starting the club, a couple of male employees complain that the female-only investment club is discriminatory. You, as a group, don't want to disband; neither do you want to include men.

Questionnaire

1. What is problem solving?

2. Why do you think *problem-solving* has become such a buzzword in the last five years or so?

3. What are the ingredients for successful problem-solving?

4. What makes a person a good problem solver? Or, what traits must one have in order to be a good problem solver?

5. Do you think problem solving is an inherent or learned trait?

6. In your opinion, what are the three greatest problems people have in communicating with others?

7. What "type" of employee-student, in your estimation, has the most – or more than most people – difficulty solving a problem? Why do *you* think that is?

8. Do you think your employee-students think of problem solving as something that requires strengthening (as math or English skills often do?) Why/why not?

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9. Is there a preferred method for solving problems, according to the majority of your employee-students?

10. How do you have the employee- student practice problem solving so you know he/she understands it?

11. Do you think problem solving takes practice? Why/why not?

12. What are some books/periodicals you can recommend on solving problems?

13. Any other thoughts on problem solving?

Questionnaire Results

1. WHAT IS PROBLEM SOLVING?

◆ Solving problems in a methodical, yet creative manner.
◆ Problem solving is truly identifying the problem and coming up with an acceptable solution.
◆ If you have a problem, then you look for the solution(s).
◆ A situation/circumstance in which two or more parties differ about how something is or should be done. This can involve behaviors of one or all parties or a difficulty with a process (delivery of a product or service.)
◆ Turning an unsatisfactory situation into a satisfactory or tolerable situation. A problem may encompass an infinite number of situations. The solution most often requires a change from the status quo.
◆ This is one of those terms that has various meanings depending on who is using it. I would have to define it within a context, not in general terms.
◆ Problem solving is the ability to think through more than one step, to think critically and form ideas on your own.
◆ A method for understanding and/or overcoming an obstacle.

2. WHY, DO YOU THINK 'PROBLEM SOLVING' HAS BECOME SUCH A BUZZWORD IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS OR SO?

◆ With the perpetual changes in the workplace created by technology, there are no longer formulaic answers to problems. People need to think!
◆ Either business or educational providers, I don't know which, started using the term in their dialogues with each other, and it caught on. Both groups have realized that we have raised a generation of Americans who seem to find it increasingly difficult to "think." I think this revelation has brought 'problem solving' to the forefront when we try to analyze "where we went wrong."
◆ It's a word whose time has come.
◆ Because conflicts are prevalent in the workplace and elsewhere and greatly affect how business is done – productivity, profit, etc. People (managers) want employees to "handle conflicts on their own rather than coming to supervisor or manager to take care of Part of the "improvement" movement. (Another buzzword.)
◆ Because of vast changes in life style, in economics, in the renaissance effected by the information age (aided by computer technology), and the adjustment all this requires from long-held traditional values and operating modes.

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♦ Because people often end up in conflict when they are unable to see different ways of doing things. These conflicts in the workplace can interfere with morale and job performance.

♦ Because the schools have failed to teach critical thinking skills, and the workplace is now suffering. But I think it's a double-edged sword because employees are often punished for showing initiative. So people just follow the rules and are hesitant to go ahead and solve problems that arise on their own. Is this a lack of education or fear of consequences?

♦ In my opinion, because it seems employers are seeing fewer competent workers entering the workforce, caused, undoubtedly, by adults' inability to effectively solve problems – a skill that should have been taught in their formative years.

3. WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL PROBLEM SOLVING?

♦ 1.ability to identify the major components 2. ability to generate possible solutions 3. ability to implement and evaluate solutions.

♦ Successful problem solving requires several ingredients. First, the person or people involved must either be inherently good at it, or know and use the procedures they have learned. (I think at times we all *choose* to use less than the 'prescribed procedures' and can still come up with good solutions, depending on the circumstances, the long-term effects, and luck!) *Identifying the real problem* is one of the most critical, and least well-done steps. I believe in our culture we tend to want the solution so fast that we aren't willing to invest the time it takes to identify the problem. (I feel *lots* of time should be allocated to this topic in a curriculum or course.) This, or course, requires discussions on perception, which is also critical. One person probably perceives the 'real' problem differently than another person, and one person may not perceive a problem at all, while the other person sees it as a big problem! *Generating several possible solutions* is the second step in the procedure, and again, is time-consuming. Group brainstorming, when properly carried out, can reap amazing solutions. *Weighing the options.* I feel that weighing the options is harder when done for individual problem solving or with, say, a spouse. I guess this is because those decisions you make for yourself or your family are usually more critical than those made in a group. *Choosing a solution.* By the time you get to this stop, it's usually pretty easy if you've done all the groundwork. You've already gone through all the "What's in it for me?" and "What's the most I can lose?" machinations by this time, so you should be past most of the anxiety. *Last but not least,* trust your instincts!! I think this is especially true when doing personal or family-type problem solving. A solution may look good or sound good on

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paper, but don't ignore your gut! Our guts and our hearts truly rule us beyond our minds, as they should! Feelings provide our long-term anchors. I read an editorial in *The Post* a few weeks ago by a long-time architect who was commenting on an article written about Zeckendorf Plaza and all its lost opportunities. This guy said that in the end, it doesn't matter how intellectually stimulating or provocative a work of art is; that in order for something to touch us, we have to love it with our hearts. If only all of our personal decisions could contain this integrity, just think about how much happier we could be!

◆ 1. Recognizing you have a problem. 2. Brainstorm possible solutions 3. Pick a solution and try it 4. Check results 5. Adjust solution if necessary

◆ An understanding that a problem (conflict) exists and the willingness to discuss it with someone and the belief that there <u>is a solution</u> both or all parties can agree upon.

◆ Open mindedness; flexibility; identifying; accepting; defining reality; research; willingness to try new things; to fail; and to persist in reaching a solution.

◆ Listening; brainstorming for a surplus of ideas; being open to others' ideas; being willing to see things from more than one perspective.

◆ Confidence; patience; the ability to think through more than one step; to understand sequencing of events.

◆ 1. Willingness to listen 2. Willingness to see another's point of view -- give and take – flexibility in thinking.

4. *WHAT MAKES A PERSON A GOOD PROBLEM SOLVER? OR, WHAT TRAITS DOES ONE NEED TO BE A GOOD PROBLEM SOLVER?*

◆ Openness to other points of view or other solutions. 2. Ability to see the big picture and its components.

◆ Good listener. Balanced (between left and right brain). Risk taker. Optimistic. Open to new ideas.

◆ The ability to try something while knowing it might fail. Listening to others' solutions.

◆ See question #3. <u>Collaboration</u> is the key. In addition, the ability to look at the larger picture and perhaps how this particular situation will impact or be impacted by others.

◆ See #3.

◆ Those listed in #3.

◆ Confidence, no fear of making mistakes. Someone who has been asked for their opinion and has had opportunity to practice formulating their own ideas.

♦ Willingness to listen. Consider all points of view (in a particular discussion with a particular problem). Evaluate data. Sometimes background knowledge in the problem area helps. Sometimes mental acuity.

5. *DO YOU THINK PROBLEM SOLVING IS AN INHERENT OR LEARNED TRAIT?*

♦ For the most part, I think it is a learned trait. However, I think it's easier for some people, depending on their learning styles.
♦ Both. Those who come by it instinctively have a much easier time with it, but the techniques can be learned.
♦ Learned.
♦ Some people are inherent problem solvers but may not necessarily know how to discuss this with another person or follow a particular process. That part must be learned.
♦ Inherent to the extent that basic physical needs must be satisfied for survival; but also learned, beginning at a very young age.
♦ It's a learned trait and I think many of us learn indirectly these techniques from parents, teachers, etc.
♦ Learned.
♦ Learned.

6. *IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT ARE THE **THREE** GREATEST PROBLEMS PEOPLE HAVE IN COMMUNICATING WITH OTHERS?*

♦ 1. Don't <u>listen</u> to each other. 2. Believe they are communicating when they aren't 3. Don't care.

♦ **Listening, listening, and listening.** This is definitely the biggest problem, and one that is not easily overcome. We spend more time listening than we do engaged in any other communication activity, and very few of us have any formal coaching or training in it. I think that paraphrasing and clarifying are aspects of listening that people have particular trouble with, as well as tuning out internal external distractions. All of these skills, when learned and teamed with tuning into perceptual differences, translate into **RESPECT**. This is a concept many people have difficulty with because they can't identify all the ingredients necessary. Beyond listening, people have difficulty articulating exactly what it is

they want to say (for a number of reasons), and people let their egos get in the way in so many different instances, that it builds up barriers to communication.

◆ 1. People don't listen. 2. Lack of time to prepare/think before you communicate.

◆ Not listening, making assumptions and perceptions. (Failure to realize that we all don't "see" things the same way.)

◆ 1.Understanding various points of view 2. Hearing their verbal and non-verbal needs and keeping the essential needs in sharp focus 3. Using a vocabulary of honesty and accurate definition

◆ Listening; seeing things from different perspectives; hearing accurately what the other person thinks he/she is saying.

◆ Listening, listening, and listening. For English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) learners in particular, please refer to the periodical RUN THAT BY ME AGAIN, by Pam Ingram and Teresa Falagrady

◆ 1. Inability or no desire to listen 2. Parochial thinking 3. Inability to effectively articulate one's needs/thoughts.

7. *WHAT 'TYPE' OF EMPLOYEE-STUDENT, IN YOUR ESTIMATION, HAS THE MOST – OR MORE THAN MOST PEOPLE – DIFFICULTY SOLVING A PROBLEM? WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?*

◆ Narrow-minded people (by definition!) seem to have the most trouble problem solving because they are not able (for a variety of reasons) to entertain divergent ways of looking at things.

◆ Three types: 1) The arrogant know-it-all. This person has difficulty solving problems because he isn't open to learning, to new ideas and options. 2) The person who cannot think abstractly, often because of language "limitations." Language is power – the more thoughts and ideas we are able to articulate in our minds and to others, the better we can communicate our feelings and needs. Also, the better we can **listen** (we have more "hooks" to hang things on – "associations" and **form new ideas and options.** 3) This is the category I see most higher-functioning people who have trouble problem solving falling into: Those people who are either heavily left-brained or heavily right-brained. A **balance** seems to be required to allow both common sense and creativity to contribute to problem solving. Think of the highly intelligent, creative people you know who have very few left-brained skills. These people aren't effective problem-solvers because they haven't mastered simple organizational skills or tools, such as typing, data entry, filing, etc. – these "insurmountable" details.

This applies to people at all educational levels. Conversely, those who are highly skilled at all types of organizational systems and details, but lack access to their creative right brain, often do not "see" or appreciate many possible solutions.

♦ (N/A)
♦ Entry-level – less education. They are not aware of what problem solving is <u>as a process</u>. They are in more of a "one day at a time" mode – not looking at the long-term or the big picture. They may also be intimidated by others because of their lack of education and position.
♦ (N/A)
♦ One who is unwilling to try new approaches – who continues to deal with problems in the same old way.
♦ Employees with little or no confidence.
♦ One who's made up his/her mind already about the answer; therefore, not usually willing to entertain others' opinions/input.
♦ problems getting started.
♦ All kinds. Generally, the lower-skilled groups identify learning, motivation, relationships, day-today associations, skills and decision-making as problems. In higher-skilled groups, they identify relationships (both personal and professional), communication, day-to-day associations, and sometimes decision-making as problems.
♦ At the company where I'm working, the employees can't read the procedure manuals.
♦ Problems with co-workers' behavior, or how they perceive it (including supervisors) and a great deal of difficulty dealing with/adjusting to mandated changes. (Feeling of total loss of control).
♦ Problems with excessive responsibilities at work and at home; difficulties living on low income; understanding housing and medical problems, and using services to solve these; difficulty mixing with and understanding co-workers of other cultures.
♦ Problems with co-workers, with supervisors, with customers.
♦ Communicating with supervisors!!! (and sometimes other employees or staff)
♦ Depends on if you're talking about social-related problems or subject-related problems. Employees usually say it's <u>other</u> people (usually supervisors) that are causing their problems. Or sometimes their problems are more related to what they're learning, i.e., the concept of changing a decimal to a percent.

8. DO YOU THINK YOUR EMPLOYEE-STUDENTS THINK OF PROBLEM SOLVING AS SOMETHING THAT REQUIRES STRENGTHENING (AS MATH OR ENGLISH SKILLS OFTEN DO)? WHY/WHY NOT?

♦ I think my students think that problem solving becomes <u>easier</u> (able to arrive at solutions quickly) with practice.

♦ Only those who have enough education to <u>identify</u> what problem solving is. The others don't know the meaning of the term.

♦ They think it requires strengthening because they are being tested, audited, and certified constantly at the company where I'm working.

♦ Yes. They often remark how difficult it is to confront someone – plus we're teaching the workshop because they've requested it and realize their skills need strengthening.

♦ (N/A)

♦ Yes. We talk in class about the benefits of practicing techniques to become more comfortable with them.

♦ No. I don't think they understand the concept. It's kind of like goal setting. It is often a new way of looking at things that I never have adequate time to incorporate into my ESL classes. I suppose everything we teach relates to problem solving, in-so-much-as the better the talk…

♦ No, because they haven't grown up (in schools) with the actual word, 'problem solving' like they have with 'mathematics,' 'history,' etc. I don't think they view it as a discrete area that needs strengthening.

9. IS THERE A PREFERRED METHOD FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS, ACCORDING TO THE MAJORITY OF YOUR EMPLOYEE-STUDENTS?

♦ It seems most employees use brainstorming or some form of [author could not read this word].

♦ I've never asked, but most seem to use trial-and-error solutions, regardless of their skill levels, judging by their comments through workshops and classes. I mean by this that they leave out identifying the real problem and generating possible solutions. Some have used or use the 'nominal group process' (brainstorming), but most who say they use the process don't use it correctly.

♦ Interactive (?)

♦ No. In most cases, employees are fearful of confronting someone at work about a problem, so they just "put up with it." (Fear of hurting feelings or being hurt, reprisals, losing job, etc.)

- I have not taught problem solving per se, so questions 8 through 16 are not within my experience.
- Many chose not to deal with the problem – ignore it and maybe it will go away.
- It's hard to get into this with most of my classes because of the [low] level. But most of my students will do just about anything but confront a problem directly.
- It seems to me students solve their problems according to the problem – they don't really use a prescribed method.

10. HOW DO YOU HAVE THE EMPLOYEE-STUDENT PRACTICE PROBLEM SOLVING SO YOU KNOW HE/SHE UNDERSTANDS IT?

- We practice problem solving by individually and collectively brainstorming rough drafts of different types of documents in class.
- See curriculum or ask me.
- The students had vocabulary tests. They were also given questions and problems to solve, and we discussed or graded.
- As in the Conflict Resolution curriculum, we take a problem from the workplace and ask participants to work through the process – determine <u>needs</u>, brainstorm solutions, choose one, and implement it. Often the first step – identifying needs is a <u>new</u> approach – as is brainstorming. We observe the small group process.
- (N/A)
- We do brainstorming and webbing in class with a specific problem in mind. I often use a very specific technique for brainstorming.
- (N/A)
- I give them a problem and then have them solve it to the best of their ability – according to the steps they learned.

11. DO YOU THINK PROBLEM SOLVING TAKES PRACTICE? WHY/WHY NOT?

- Yes, because it's a skill.
- Yes!! Practice makes perfect.
- Yes. Just like any learned trait, practice makes perfect.
- <u>Absolutely</u>. Approaching another person about a problem is not comfortable for most of us; so it takes practice to "risk it" the first time and build on that experience to become more comfortable and more successful.
- Yes, to be efficient, to be at ease, to have self-esteem, to learn to be objective, to have confidence that most problems are not insurmountable, though it may be

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necessary to agree to disagree or to be satisfied with a solution that means "skirting the problem," or learning to accept the problem and live with it.

◆ Yes. The more one works at solving problems, the more comfortable he/she is when dealing with problems. We learn that there are other ways to deal with difficult situations rather than either having conflict and/or severing a relationship.

◆ Yes. I've been practicing for 32 years, and I still need to work on it. Everybody does.

◆ Absolutely – as with any subject, some people are more adept at it than others.

12. WHAT ARE SOME BOOKS/PERIODICALS YOU CAN RECOMMEND ON PROBLEM SOLVING?

◆ N/A – all pretty much the same stuff.

◆ *Lateral Thinking*, Edward deBono
  100 Training Games, Gary Kroehnert
  Whole Language Instruction for Adults, Judy Cheatham, et.al, Literacy Volunteers of America.
  Whole Brain Thinking, Jacqueline Wonder and Priscilla Donovan (I read this one long ago in school, and I still like its treatment of the subject.)

◆ (N/A)

◆ (*The Employee Handbook for*) *Organizational Change, Before It's Too Late: Employee Involvement... An Idea Whose Time Has Come, People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts, (The Employee Handbook of) New Work Habits for a Radically Changing World]* and *Constructive Conflict Management*, John Crawley.

◆ (N/A)

◆ *Please Understand Me.*
  Resolving Conflict.

◆ *ESL for Action*, Auerbach, Wallerstein
  Language and Culture in Conflict, Wallerstein
  React Interact, Byrd, Clemente, Cabetas

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◆ *Training and Development* magazine has problem-solving-related articles.
   How to Think Straight
   Mental Aerobics
   A Passion for Success: Practical, Inspirational, and Spiritual Insight from Japan's Leading Entrepreneur (these last two I haven't read yet, but they look intriguing)

13. ANY OTHER THOUGHTS ON PROBLEM SOLVING?

◆ (N/A)
◆ (N/A)
◆ (N/A)
◆ Wish more people would practice this!
◆ Just that I wish I knew more.
◆ (N/A)
◆ (N/A)
◆ Sometimes problem solving gives me a headache.

Additional Resources

From The Workplace Education Program at Emily Griffith Opportunity School:

Communication and Problem-Solving in the Workplace, Colleen Consol,
Teresa Falagrady, 1993

Conflict Resolution – A Collaborative Approach, Connie Tripp, Karen Fletcher,
1995

Customer Service/Telephone Communications, Karen Fletcher, 1994

Focus on Communication, Karen Fletcher, Connie Tripp, 1994

Team Talk, Karen Fletcher, Mary Liles Gravely, 1995

Total Quality Management (TQM) Awareness Training for Healthcare,
John Cleary, Dee Sweeney, 1994

Teresa Falagrady, M.A., teaches language-related classes for businesses in the
Denver metro area.

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