Dealing with problems

It's not the problem that's the problem, it's how you deal with it. Unfortunately, given the underlying issues of relationships and prior personal history that invariably accompany any difficult problem, it all too often results in tackling the problem inappropriately with problems never getting easier. It therefore seems to make sense to set out some basic ground rules on how to be an effective problem solver.

1 Bite-sized chunks: A few years ago, there was a best-selling book by Kristine and Richard Carlson called Don't sweat the small stuff... and it's all small stuff. All too often, individuals refer to a series of inter-related problems instead of tackling the specific problem at hand. If you can take what appears to be a large problem and break it down into several sub-components, and then deal with each component part individually, you are much more likely to find a solution than trying to sort out the problem in its entirety.

2 Control: Define and clarify the issue – does it warrant action? If so, now? Is the matter urgent, important, or both? Are you able, in a clear and rational manner, to identify the problem and the obstacles that the problem presents? Clearly state the problem and what obstacles the problem presents to you. Once you have done this, you need to understand what you have control over and what you don't. Your efforts to resolve the problem must focus on, and be within, the areas over which you have control.

3 Reality and perception: Which components of the problem are real, which are perceived? You may contribute to the problem by magnifying it out of proportion, thereby turning a small issue into a very large one. Check the realities! Take the example of a patient who promised to send a cheque, which has not yet been received. You might think the patient had simply forgotten, and send a gentle postal reminder, or you could become incensed that you had done so much for the patient who had gone unappreciated, pick up the phone, ask the patient how they expect you to run a business if people don't pay on time and demand immediate payment. Guess which is the reality and which is the perception. Guess which way will lose the patient to the practice.

4 Information: Do you have all the information you need? Solving problems is often like becoming involved in investigations. Have you thoroughly researched why the problem exists? Do you have all the information you need? If not, be persistent and seek out all information before tackling the problem. Gather all the facts and understand their causes.

5 Non-emotion: Are you able to see issues clearly, objectively and with emotional detachment? Are you able to discuss points of contention without becoming angry or emotional? We all have ‘buttons’ which, when pushed, cause us to react in a predictable but unfortunately irrational way. For example, when a partner says: ‘You are doing this every hour’, always change the subject. How are you going to respond with a retort that is as unreasonable as the very statement itself?

6 Negative energy: Working toward your goal without the interference of negative mental energy makes any job more manageable – you should not allow another person who is critical of you, rather than having your best interests at heart, to be part of the solution – they are more likely part of the problem.

7 Options: How many options for solutions do you have? Generate a list of different options for solving the problem. Are some better than others? Why? Which options seem reasonable? Some are practical, others rooted in fantasy. How do you weigh the pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages of your options? Are there any limitations to your options? Are they affordable? Avoid vagueness or ‘foot in both camps’ compromise. As Aneurin Bevan once said, ‘We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run down.’ Think about, or brainstorm with others, possible options and solutions. Select the best option. Explain your decision to those involved and affected, and follow up to ensure proper and effective implementation.

8 Is it you? Could it be that you are the problem? Your personal belief and value systems may be contributing to the problem, and may equally be getting in the way of a solution – ‘I’m not going to let a nurse tell me what to do!’ Don’t jump to conclusions. Once you have all of your information, analyse it carefully and look at it from various viewpoints. Be as objective as possible and don’t be quick to judge. Remain judgment-free as much as possible as this can be harmful for you to use your critical thinking skills.

9 Take a break: When you are beset by what appears to be an insoluble problem, take a break. Failure to take regular breaks not only wears you down, but also makes you less productive. While you may not feel it at the time, slowly but surely, your productivity will sneak up on you. You’ll become less patient and less attentive. Over time, you’ll burn out more quickly and your creativity and insights will slowly fade away. Breaks don’t have to be disruptive or last very long. Usually all we need is a few minutes every hour or so to clear our heads, stretch our arms and get some air. It’s like pressing the reset button and providing ourselves with a fresh start. Furthermore, a week or two away doesn’t harm either.

10 Buying a solution: Some decisions and challenges are difficult because you don’t have the necessary knowledge or experience. Could it be beneficial to buy a solution, for example, by calling in a coach, consultant or an accountant? How often does a pair of eyes that is not emotionally involved in a tricky situation see the reality of the situation with absolute clarity?

Problem-solving and decision-making are closely linked, and each requires creativity in identifying and developing options, for which the brainstorming technique is particularly useful. Good decision-making requires a mixture of skills: identification and creative development of options, clarity of judgment, firmness of decision, and effective implementation. Once your solution is in place, it is important to monitor and evaluate the outcome regularly.

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