



## The leader as the problem solver

*"No problem is too big to run away from."*  
- Charlie Brown (Charles M. Schultz)

No sooner is one problem solved than another surfaces as there is never just one cockroach in the kitchen! Life is a series of problems waiting to happen. Leaders, as point people in the management of people and ideas, encounter problems daily, even hourly. The successful ones learn to deal with them and develop techniques to manage and solve them. And the funny thing is that if you have enough money then you can arrive at all your problems in style!

Unfortunately, even well-intentioned leaders can be overwhelmed by circumstance and their own stubbornness. Solving problems however takes radical solutions. Only a few leaders can wait for the next in line to solve their problems. If they did, they would be out of a job. Leaders must devise solutions immediately or risk losing the loyalty of their followers. Good leaders operate with a mindset that says: *"Problems are really solutions in waiting."*

Most important, good leaders come to realize that their most able resource in any problem situation is the people around them. Just as problems do not occur in the vacuum, neither do solutions appear from thin air. It is a mistake for leaders to assume that they must solve every problem by themselves. Problem solving, like leadership in general, requires involvement of others. Leaders should make hard decisions and set direction for the organization, but they also need to seek input from those involved, particularly those who must implement the solution. Good leaders seek advice from all stakeholders (customers, employees, suppliers) and then make a decision. There are concrete steps that leaders can take to address problems.

**Step 1:** Assess the situation

**Step 2:** Envision the outcomes

**Step 3:** Delegate authority

**Step 4:** Adopt a solution

**Step 5:** Implement the solution

**Step 6:** Reflect



- **Assess the situation:** Stand back and take a deep breath. Even in the heat of battle, combat officers learn to divorce themselves momentarily from the danger of the moment so that they can assess the situation before making a decision. By stepping back - for a day, an hour, or even five minutes - gives the leader the benefit of perspective and time. Assessment in this situation is a form of reflection; it helps the leader to "get out of himself" and just think.
- **Envision the outcomes:** A leader must ask two questions when faced with a problem: What happens if we do nothing? What happens if we do everything possible? Some problems cannot be solved no matter what you do; that problem calls for containment, or operational mode. Other problems need to be extinguished like fires—quickly, safely, and with maximum resources. Considering the outcomes narrows the options and provides a choice.
  - a. A common phrase in management is "Think out of the box." The term refers to devising unconventional approaches to common problems.
  - b. There are some ways to train your mind to think unconventionally.
    - i. **Brainstorm:** Get everyone together and throw out ideas. (Be careful at this point and avoid being judgmental.)
    - ii. **Adopt the perspective of the customer:** What would a customer want done to solve the problem?
    - iii. **Dialogue:** Get a trusted partner, review the problem and consider the solutions.
    - iv. **Create a visual metaphor:** Create a pictogram of the problem, present it to others and discuss it.
    - v. **Think laterally:** Look outside the problem to gain perspective. This point involves awareness, alternatives, and provocation (i.e., stimulating creative thoughts)
    - vi. **Force Field Analysis:** Draw two columns. Label one "forces for change" and the other "forces against change." List forces for both columns. Discuss how to overcome the restraints so that positive change may occur. This is really where you decide about the outcomes of acting upon something and the outcomes of not acting upon it.
- **Delegate authority:** Give ownership of the problem to those who must implement the solution. Provide the team with guidance, but leave the details to the employees. Let them fill in the blanks. Good leaders learn to let go. They trust their people to do their jobs. At the same time, the leader needs to "be in the loop", that is be informed of progress and available for consultation.
- **Adopt a solution:** Sometimes individuals and teams find the adoption step to be the easiest. Selecting the right solution is often the logical outcome of the creative process; people know the possibilities and the outcomes, and can decide amongst themselves what is best for the organization. The ease of selection, however, does not mean the solution will be easy to implement, only that it was readily apparent as the right choice.
- **Implement the solution:** Once the solution is formulated, the leader must find the resources to implement it. In manufacturing, the solution may involve application of a new process and acquisition of a new piece of machinery. New training may be required. The leader should gather all resources necessary and make certain people have the authority and support to do what they need to do. At this step, it is also wise to be flexible. If something does not work out, try something different, as long as you stay on the path.
- **Reflect on what to do next time:** Evaluate the steps you took to solve the current problem. Ask yourself: could you have done it more efficiently, more quickly, more creatively? Prepare for the next eventuality. Like disaster contingency plans, formulate next steps to help the organization prepare for the next problem. And then, once again, take a step back

and just think about the entire problem and solution process. Many people find that ruminating over problems over time can produce new ideas.

All of these problem-solving measures are effective, but most leaders will state that the best solution is to anticipate the problem and head it off before it occurs. Leaders who "manage by walking around" are ones who have good instincts for rooting out situations before they fester into problems. These leaders are also adept at looking problems in one area of the company and sensing that they could spread to another area. A systems-thinking approach, as practiced in organizational learning, teaches us how to analyze the root-cause of one problem and then think how that root-cause, or its consequences, may affect another aspect of an organization.

Product development teams apply systems-thinking when designing various components for a product: be it an appliance, a computer, or a car. By looking at how all of the components work together, and then determining if problems with one may affect another, the engineers determine the functionality and efficiency of the total design. Likewise, astute human resource professionals look at their organizations with a similar mindset. If one group is experiencing trouble with a benefits plan, they immediately look to other departments to assess their experience with the plan. In this way, they prevent a problem from spreading by heading it off.

An even more effective means of ensuring work harmony is to assess the work styles of individuals working within teams. Remember however that no individual is 100% one style or another. Most people are a combination of all styles, but with a strong accent on one or two other styles. For example, some individuals like to use spontaneous approaches to problems and situations; they are focused on tangible, near-term outcomes. Other individuals may be idea generators, who tend to work without detail and seek satisfaction in creative solutions.

Knowing the working style of an individual can help a team leader choose individuals best suited for specific project as well as assign individuals of complementary styles to work together. And, by knowing individual work styles, leaders can allocate the right blend of people to solve problems when they do occur.

Anticipation and preparedness may be the best antidote in a leader's problem-solving medicine kit bag. But, short of heading off a problem before it occurs, the leader who maintains the mindset that problems are prolific, but so too are solutions, is one who will be prepared to respond quickly and effectively when problems do occur.

Problem solving by its nature lends itself to a step-by-step analysis process. But the solutions required to solve them are not always based in procedure. While the steps themselves are straightforward, implementing them, particularly in fast-breaking, tension-risen situations can be extremely difficult. Furthermore, moments of crisis do not always allow for creativity. What is needed is a leader who can stand back and assess the situation coolly and calmly, with the dispassion of a surgeon, but the creativity of an artist. This leader most likely does not exist outside the pages of fiction. But the leader who can exert command over a problem, call in the right people to solve it, and support them in their efforts, is the individual most organizations need most desperately—the leader as problem-solver.