



From Fear To The Finish Line: Problem Solving

I used to work for a man who had trouble making decisions. His real problem was that he was fearful. Too fearful, in fact to move from identifying an issue to solving a problem. As a subordinate, it was difficult to handle. I would bring something to his attention and literally have to wait a week or two for permission to move on the problem. Many times the situation would be resolved or pointless by the time he would be ready for action. During the wait for an answer I would go to him with potential solutions, and like a confused parent he would give me incomprehensible answers like, "We'll see." It was maddening.

If you are a manager, you are constantly problem-solving and making decisions. Chances are, you are not paralyzed like the man I used to work for, but you probably have an occasional problem that you avoid, or a situation that truly stumps you. What do you do when this happens? Don't avoid the problem. Break it down.

I know that there are some very sophisticated decision-making tools out there, but I also know that managers are usually pressed for time. When I get stuck, I break a problem down into digestible pieces until I have a simple solution. It's quick, and unless I am working on something really complicated (like world peace) it works.

Define Your Problem:

Good managers are usually painfully aware of the larger issues their department and their people are facing. The challenge for a lot of managers can be to identify the core of each issue and hone in on the specific causes for each challenge. **If possible, keep this simple.** Try to define the bottom line of the problem. So rather than making a blanket statement like, 'People keep leaving as soon as they are trained.' - get specific. Replace generalities with targeted conclusions. For example: 'Attrition has increased 20% in department A over 9 months'.

Why:

In your estimation why did this problem happen? If we refer to the attrition example we might ask the following: What are the limitations? Are you low on money or staff? Did your industry suffer a blow due to the recession? Did one of your best supervisors leave? Are your employees stressed out by extra work brought on by recession? Define what factors contributed to the problem.

How:

How can you remedy the problem? Come up with several options...I mean SEVERAL. Brainstorm until your brain is empty. Even if something sounds totally ridiculous, type it or write it down. This will keep your mind open as you are working.

When you are done brainstorming, choose your solution from the remedies you have come up with. I find that after ten or fifteen minutes of brainstorming, I usually have at least three workable ideas. (By workable, I mean ideas that can be adjusted as I get to work.)

Make It Happen:

Plan, implement, and delegate your solutions. Don't wait. Get up and do what you have to do to get things moving. Establish a goal or a date to measure results. If something isn't working...adjust. Just move on the problem.

Evaluate:

When enough time has passed, evaluate your results. Look at the issue from every angle and evaluate how your plan succeeded or failed.

Once you have pressed several problems through this process, you begin to build skill. You will be able to analyze situations at the front of the process and predict potential outcomes from that vantage point.

Every role in the workforce that I can think of requires problem-solving skills and swift decision-making capabilities. If you are a receptionist, you decide whether a call is critical or not. If you are a toll-worker, you decide whether you will give a person quarters for change or dimes and nickels. If you are a manager, you have to decide how each problem will be resolved in light of departmental and company vision. Increasingly, companies are looking for people who can do more than simply follow instructions. They are looking for people who create sound solutions and bring tangible results.

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