WHY HAVE A SYSTEM FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS?

Often, people bring you problems with the expectation that you, the manager, will come up with solutions. While it may be flattering to think of yourself as a problem-solver, generating a quick solution is counterproductive for two reasons. First of all, most solutions generate new problems. Unless the person comes up with a solution, he or she will have difficulty following through. When new problems arise, that person may turn them over to you. Secondly, when you tell people how to fix something, they are unlikely to show independence in using their skills or exercising their judgment. They know they are implementing your solution, not their own solution. If it doesn’t work, they just blame you!

Problem solving should be developmental. It requires meaningful participation on the part of your people. Through participation, people achieve a sense of involvement and a feeling of influence. When people know they can influence outcomes, their commitment is significantly increased. Something magical happens when participation leads to commitment: the person develops ownership in the solution. That means the problem will not be dumped back in your lap. It belongs to the problem-solver, not you!

THE FIVE STEPS TOWARD PROBLEM SOLVING

A five-step process engenders a sense of commitment from your people:

1. Define the goal and the barrier. In other words, what are we trying to accomplish – and what barrier is standing in the way? The Goal should be defined in terms of “outcomes.” Frequently problems are made more complicated because the various parties involved are seeking similar but different outcomes. Spend whatever times is necessary to understand the Goal and then generate a list of Barriers that seem to be in the way. The Barrier(s) are the problem(s) to address.

2. Do a Situation Analysis. Discuss what has seemed to have a positive impact on the Barrier and what didn’t. Review actions to date and make up a T-chart: In addition add any events or happenings that seem related but don’t fit neatly into something that worked or didn’t work.

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What worked (+)       What didn’t (-)
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Assist the person in looking at the pluses and minuses of past experience before formulating a new action plan.
Generate options. This is done in two phases: (1) Brainstorming, to come up with a quantity of ideas; (2) Rating, to prioritize those ideas in terms of their quality and the resources involved in implementing them. Brainstorming should be a non-critical activity that gets ideas out on the table. Rating assigns them an order and value.

Choose an Option.

Set up an action plan consisting of what, who, when, where, why and how much. What are you going to do?
- What resources will be required?
- Who is going to do it?
- When is it going to be done?
- Where is it going to be done?
- Why? i.e. What is your intent?
- How are you going to measure success?

Review contingencies. Consider: If this solution doesn’t work, is there a fallback plan? For example, if they can’t get an appointment with the key decision maker, who else could be helpful?

Monitor and Follow-up

Plans require energy and attention. With the many responsibilities everyone has it’s easy for a plan to get lost in other urgent activities. Once our action plan to address a problem is set, the plan must be monitored and adjusted as necessary.

TEACH YOUR PEOPLE THE FIVE STEPS

A key benefit of using the five-step model (or a similar one) is that, through repetition, your people learn the five steps. This increases their ability to solve problems on their own. You multiply your effectiveness by imprinting the pattern of problem solving on the people who work for you.
HOW DO YOU MEASURE URGENCY?
For the manager who faces urgent situations every day, it is important to make a distinction between crises and emergencies.

IF A BUILDING DOESN’T MEET FIRE-CODE REGULATIONS,
YOU HAVE A CRISIS ON YOUR HANDS.
IF A BUILDING IS ON FIRE, YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY.

A crisis requires analysis before action. When people bring you a crisis, shut off the motor, do some quick analysis, and use the five-step problem-solving discipline. Examine the crisis situation calmly. Working with your people, develop a strategic approach so the problem does not become more acute. An emergency, on the other hand, requires an immediate response. Emergencies compel command decision making. When someone brings you an emergency, you take over. If you handle all crises as if they were emergencies – if you always take over – then your people will develop a dependency relationship. You reinforce them in bringing their problems to you. And that’s non-developmental. And it wastes a lot of your productive time. No one wins in that situation. Distinguish crises from emergencies. Develop your own abilities to manage problems by managing your people. That way, you generate learning. Through the five-step action plan, you generate commitment.

REMEMBER: IF YOU TELL PEOPLE HOW TO FIX THINGS, YOU’RE NOT GETTING COMMITMENT – AT BEST YOU’RE GETTING AGREEMENT.

Agreement does not go far enough. Your people have to be willing to go the next step and implement follow-through. Only their commitment can make solutions work.