



Problem Identification

The first step to successful problem resolution

Problem Identification

A problem occurs when there is a difference between what "should be" and what "is"; between the ideal and the actual situation.

A problem:

- expresses the difference between the hoped for and the actual situation;
- is directly or indirectly related to a desired outcome or standard of behavior.

Identifying a very clearly defined and specific problem is the first critical step to successfully implementing the problem-solving process.

Identify the Problem before the Solution

When an individual faces a problem, the natural tendency is to propose possible solutions. Consequently, the thought and discussion focuses on the merits and problems of the proposed solution(s), rather than an in-depth discussion of the possible causes of the problem itself.

An inexperienced manager will soon find out, that a great solution isn't worth much, if the problem it resolves was misidentified.

For example,

At a local retail store, customers have complained about cash register operators, claiming that the cashiers were "not very helpful," and "they weren't paying attention to what I asked for." Several complaints noted that cashiers were "more interested in chatting amongst themselves than answering my questions."

After being directed to "do something about this," by her manager, Mary, the supervisor developed a rule that stated, "cashiers on-duty may not talk to one another when customers are present." She informed her boss of the new policy, circulated it to her cashiers, and felt that the issue had been adequately resolved. The following week, Mary was called into her boss's office to explain why customer complaints about unhelpful cashiers were still "rolling in."

This unfortunate situation existed because Mary had misidentified the problem (cashiers talking amongst themselves in front of the customers) and then applied an ineffective solution (no-talking policy.)

If the supervisor had done some additional exploration regarding the problem and asked the question, “why are the cashiers perceived as unhelpful and chatting amongst themselves rather than helping the customer?” her research would have determined that the cashiers had not been adequately trained in customer service standards and expectations. They weren’t aware of how they should greet the customers or how they should deal with customer requests.

If the supervisor had correctly identified the problem – a lack of customer service training for the cashiers was resulting in poor customer service at the point of check-out, she would have implemented a different (and more appropriate) solution.

Identify the Problem, not a Symptom

If you want to resolve the root problem, treat the cause, not the symptom. For example, if you take an aspirin for a fever, you’re treating the symptom (an elevated temperature) and not treating the cause. You might experience temporary relief, but if the cause is left untreated, it’s likely that the fever will return.

The same is true for resolving work-related problems. For example...

Mary was told to deal with the problem of her cashiers receiving customer complaints (the symptom) so she instituted a new policy that said, “if an employee receives three or more customer complaints over a single pay period, (s)he will be fired.”

This no-talk policy may certainly produce short-term benefits, but if the supervisor never identifies the lack of effective training as the real problem, then the customer complaints are sure to continue. Firing the offending cashiers (an outcome of the new policy that treats a symptom) will not resolve the issue if the replacement hires don’t receive adequate training (a necessary treatment for the root problem).

Sometimes numerous negative symptoms are all outcomes of a single root problem – so solving the root problem will resolve many related problems.

Ask “Why?, Why?, Why?, Why?”

Identifying a root problem may require the supervisor to ask several “whys?” For example..

Why are customers complaining about the cashiers?

Because the cashiers are not paying adequate attention to their needs during the check-out.

Why are cashiers not paying adequate attention to customer needs during the check-out?

Because they are unaware that their behavior is off-putting to the customer.

Why are the cashiers unaware that their behavior is not acceptable to customers?

- 1) Because they are not aware of what specific customer service behaviors are expected of them in this position.

- 2) Their lack of appropriate behavior was never identified and flagged as unacceptable by a supervisor.

Why are the cashiers unaware of the expected behaviors of their job?

- 1) Because they did not receive enough training about necessary behaviors, only about computer operation, bagging and money handling.
- 2) Because the supervisor didn't perform an adequate performance appraisal in the first two weeks of their job.

Notice in this example that *two* causes of the poor customer service surfaced. If the supervisor had not asked "why" then she would probably not have identified her role in creating this problem.

When you've done a good job of correctly identifying the root problem(s) then the task of identifying workable solutions is much easier.

State a Problem Concisely and Precisely

Sometimes the identification of a problem gets lost in translation. A well-stated problem is one that can be stated in a single sentence.

For example, in the case of the chatty cashiers, the problem could be stated as "a lack of effective customer service training for cashiers is resulting in too many incidents of dissatisfied customers."

Notice that this problem statement doesn't focus on a solution – it focuses on the root cause of the undesired outcome, customer dissatisfaction. **It also summarizes the problem into a single sentence that contains the cause (lack of effective customer service training) as well as the effect (too many instances of dissatisfied customers).**

A statement that is written as, "the problem is that the cashiers need training" is not correctly phrased as a problem, it is phrased as solution.

The Acid Test

One test for checking to see if the problem you've identified is the real problem, is to ask the question, "if the problem I've stated had been resolved from the very beginning, would this current situation be happening?"

Applying this test to the previous example...

If the supervisor had first asked, "if the cashiers didn't talk to one another, would the customers be complaining?" she could have quickly determined that her solution of implementing a don't-talk policy wouldn't resolve the larger issue of cashiers' lack of helpfulness. She should have been able to foresee the failure of a no-talk policy because it didn't resolve the unhelpfulness problem due to a lack of training.