Introduction

Organizational challenges are many times disruptive to productivity. Group problem solving is the process of bringing together stakeholders who through their analytical decision making abilities can influence the outcome of the problem. The use of groups in problem solving is encouraged as groups tend to evaluate diverse solutions and action plans. The core objectives of the group are identifying the problem and developing solutions. This five-step systematic group problem solving process provides a defined strategy for a teamwork approach to generating creative and workable resolutions.

Process Description

Have you ever tried to get a group of people to agree on one answer to a problem? It’s nearly impossible. However, there are positive approaches to this issue that anyone can employ with some minimal training and review. This project outlines a one-hour group problem solving technique that you can use with your organization. It helps clarify issues and provides an outline of actionable solutions.

Group Problem Solving Process Outline

1. Define the Problem
   Provide history relevant to the problem. Make a comparison: how are things now versus the way you would like them to be? How long has the problem existed? How frequently does it occur? Who is affected by the problem?

2. Determine Causes
   Look for the cause of the gap between the present (what’s now) and the desired (future) state or resolution.

3. Develop Alternative Approaches
   Brainstorm. (Write exactly what is said. Capturing specific words can be powerful.) Make a list of as many possible solutions as you can. Do NOT judge correctness or feasibility here. Just list everything.

4. Assess the Consequences
   Ask what possible results may come from each alternative. Who is affected? Who pays? Are there uncontrollable challenges?

5. Develop Action Plans
   Identify what you want success to look like. Use the Action Planning Worksheet to choose feasible alternatives that are acceptable to the group. Note: This is where most of the work is done!

Questioning Approach

Below are some additional, specific questions that you may use to help guide the process. As you move through each section, allow your group to take sufficient time to think critically before moving on.

1. Define the Problem
   Begin this portion of the exercise by asking people to write individually on an index card what they think the problem is. This may seem redundant or simplistic for some seemingly obvious problems (e.g., budget shortfall). However, individual responses may point to confounding issues, related problems, or causative items.
   After writing individually, ask everyone to share. (If it’s a very sensitive issue, collect the cards, shuffle the cards, and then ask one person to read them.)
   • How are things now versus the way you would like them to be?
   • How long has the problem existed?
   • How frequently does it occur?
   • Who is affected by the problem?

2. Determine Causes
   • Why does this problem exist?
   • How long has the problem existed?
   • How frequently does it occur?
   • Who is affected by the problem?

2. Develop Causes
   • Why does this problem exist?
   • What needs to be changed in both the immediate future and for the long term?
3. Develop Alternative Approaches: What is feasible?
   - Based on the outlined causes, what first step could we take to address the issue?
   - What else could we do?
   - Can the problem be handled by internal resources? Do we need outside/expert assistance?
   - Are personnel and funds available?
   - Does sufficient data exist to make a plan?
   - Can the needed data be gathered within the time available?
   - Does the issue involve large costs or major consequences for the organization?

4. Assess the Consequences
   - Who or what will be affected by this solution?
   - What are the possible side effects . . . immediate and long-run?
   - What would be the likely consequences of this solution?
   - What would be the reaction of [citizens in the community/employees/patrons/customers]? Who would complain? Who would be glad? Why?

5. Develop Action Plans
   - Use the Action Planning Worksheet to choose feasible alternatives that are acceptable to the group.
   - What would be accepted as evidence of its success?

Conclusions and Recommendations
The step-by-step process outlined in this fact sheet can help lead you to a successful outcome for even the most complicated group problems. Results are especially effective when using a neutral, skilled facilitator. A facilitator can come from within the group but runs the risk of inserting influence and suggestion. The best-case scenario is a facilitator who understands the group, understands the problem, and has no direct stake in the solution. The role of the facilitator is to assist the group in performing more effectively (Keltner, 1989).

Drawing out group members to generate potential solutions is central to problem solving, just as long as it’s managed and facilitated well. There should be no criticism of ideas, and novel or seemingly unusual ideas should be encouraged. Involving all group members in the process is critical if everyone is to buy into the final solution. The best approach to making this work smoothly is to establish formal rules for positive participation.

When a large group is involved in the decision making, the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) may be used in conjunction with this outlined process. The NGT is a weighted ranking method that allows a group to generate and prioritize issues. The procedure encourages balanced participation and creates a quantitative output.

With any problem solving process, defining the problem may be the most important, but likely the most difficult step. This forces the group to collectively recognize the scope of the problem and need to devise a solution. And yet, if the group is facilitated through the process of solving a problem and is successful in developing an action plan, but does not implement the plan, all efforts are for naught.

References

Additional Resources: Seven Steps to Problem Solving, http://www.pitt.edu/~groups/probsolv.html
## Action Planning Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Theme/Goal:</th>
<th>Project:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Project:</td>
<td>Time Frame for Completion:</td>
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<td>Members of Task Force:</td>
<td>Date:</td>
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<tr>
<th>Critical Steps: (in order of importance)</th>
<th>Who will be involved and make decisions? (names)</th>
<th>What resources are needed? (financial, human, social, environmental)</th>
<th>Information and assistance needed to complete task:</th>
<th>Time to do task: (How many meetings, hours, days? Set times)</th>
<th>How we'll know we've successfully accomplished task:</th>
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What difficulties do we anticipate and how will we deal with them (or put them on the agenda)?

How will we deal with unanticipated difficulties?

Who do we need to contact and/or partner with that may also be working on this issue?

SOURCE: Ohio State University Extension and University of Missouri Extension. Revised by Brian Raison, OSU Extension Community Development, 2013.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility—who will carry out task?</th>
<th>Strategy—how will task be carried out?</th>
<th>When must decisions be made?</th>
<th>How will decisions be made?</th>
<th>Notes:</th>
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