



Ten Ideas to Master Diagnosing and Solving Problems

What is your job as a manager? If you were a firefighter, your job would be to put out fires. While many managers see extinguishing fires as a major component of their jobs, it might not be found in their job descriptions. Yet, essentially, what management job does not entail solving problems on a daily basis? Problems are part and parcel of every manager's day.

I don't know if it helps if we reframe a problem as a challenge or an issue; essentially, a problem means that a commitment is not going to be fulfilled or a goal is not achieved, and generally, someone is not happy about it. Your job is to fix it and hopefully prevent it from occurring again.

The problem with problems is that they can get us down, frustrate us and increase stress. We can blame someone else or stick our head in the sand, but as managers, the one thing that you can be certain of is that there will be problems. The following are 10 ideas that can help you with master diagnosing and solving your problems.

1 Take a deep breath. When we hear about a problem, an emotion is generally triggered, and we tend to contract, tighten our shoulders and jaws and, consequently, reduce the amount of oxygen going to our brain. Breathe! You need a clear head to start.

2 Declare that you have a problem. The worst problems are the ones that you don't know about. Make sure that your staff is not afraid to bring problems to you early. The good news is to get the bad news early so that you can do something about it.

3 Assess fact from fiction. When people are upset, problems can get blown out of proportion. Find out what happened, and get the facts. When did it occur? Who was involved? What time? Who, what, where and when questions will prompt answers that provide factual information. Avoid why questions for now. Notice your interpretation, opinions and judgments, and choose to stop reacting and move into action.

4 Identify what is happening. Is there a prior commitment that is not going to be fulfilled? Can you contact that person and make a new promise? What requests can you make? What resources can you tap into? Or perhaps the problem is that your

vision or a value is being compromised. What conversation do you need to have? What action can you take?

5 Determine the cost and implications of the problem; prioritize this in the big picture. What, if anything, needs to be done right now?

6 If you are stuck, who can you talk to about this? Who may have experienced a similar problem? Who can you ask for help?

7 When the urgency of the situation has diminished or the problem has been resolved, determine if this is a recurring problem. Is it likely to reoccur?

8 Should you create a system to prevent this from happening in the future? Is there a tool or technology that could eliminate or reduce its impact? Or is there a conversation that needs to happen to clarify a standard or a value?

9 Design, document and execute the systems that will prevent the problem from reoccurring. Get feedback on its effectiveness.

10 What was the lesson learned? Could this become a new best practice for your organization or industry?

Stephen Covey tells us that, "The way we see the problem is the problem." If we can use our problems to design stronger processes, technologies, companies and industries, we make a contribution. ■

.....
MARK TAYLOR is the Chairman of a New York City think tank composed of CEOs focused on "outperforming" their competition. He is with Vistage International, the world's leading chief executive organization. He applies his 30 years of experience as an accomplished CEO and corporate manager towards increasing the effectiveness and enhancing the lives of CEOs. Mark holds an MBA from the University of Phoenix and is a graduate of the Coaching and Organizational Learning Program through George Mason University. He can be reached at 212-867-5849 or mark.taylor@vistage.com. Visit his blog at www.ceocoachnyc.com.