

5 Minute Guide to

# PROBLEM SOLVING

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How to quickly cut through the mess and solve any problem!



BY ANDY BRIGHTSON

# The 5 Minute Guide to Problem Solving

by

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## Getting the best from this 5 Minute Guide

Welcome to the 5 Minute Guides to key management development topics.

Many management books are excellent and full of relevant information about key topics. However, many managers and operational staff told me that what they really needed in their busy schedules was to be able to quickly develop their skills and impact the situation around them. They may not have time to read 200 page books or be able to attend training courses – but they do want to get results with tasks, situations or challenges they face

The 5 Minute Guides are designed to enable individuals to quickly access essential information, concepts, approaches and insights on a topic and then to apply these to their personal situation and in the workplace.

Checklists, training exercises, key points, quotes and information are all designed to provide practical perspectives into key areas of performance.

So here are four easy ways to get the best from this 5 Minute Guide.

1. Dip in and out, pick a chapter or topic and take 5 minutes in your day to develop your learning.
2. Set aside 5 minutes and think how a particular topic relates to you in your current situation or your current role.
3. Actively search this 5 Minute Guide for ideas and new approaches specifically in relation to issues that you would like to know more about or are dealing with at the moment.
4. Use the material to encourage and help others. Take key points and use them for staff training and development sessions – or team meetings.

With the 5 Minute Guides there is no need to read from start to finish to get the key messages. These ebooks are designed to be used as a 'live resource' to be referred to time and time again - rather than theoretical textbooks. They are meant to be easy, practical and enjoyable learning resources – and for you to benefit in just 5 minutes. You can quickly access them on your phone, laptop or tablet.

I hope you enjoy this ebook and will explore the other titles in the series.

Keep building your career!!

Thanks!

Andy Brightson

## Chapter 1

# Group Problem Identification Exercise

In your team, brainstorm opportunities for problem solving and performance improvement in your work areas. Consider:

List all of the key areas of performance (or key performance indicators) in your workplace e.g.

- Process Management improvement
- Quality improvement
- Cost reduction
- Productivity increases
- Waiting lists
- Delivery times
- Health & Safety
- Cost of materials
- Sales
- Absenteeism
- Scrap reduction
- Resource utilisation
- Time savings
- Customer service enhancement

..... and so on.

Come up with at least 3 ideas below for Problem Solving Improvement Opportunities

## Chapter 2

# Why do people at work live with their problems – instead of fixing them?

In your team, think of all of the factors that prevent problems being tackled and resolved. Give reasons as to why each occurs.

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Reasons</u>
e.g. Lack of interest.	Come to work and do job. Don't feel any commitment to make things better.

## Chapter 3

# 20 reasons why people don't tackle problems / realise performance improvement opportunities

1. Don't see them as problems.
2. Habit.
3. Lack of interest.
4. Lack of motivation.
5. Lack of ownership.
6. Don't feel it's their responsibility.
7. Don't feel they have the authority.
8. Autocratic management style – just do what you're told to do.
9. Lack of urgency.
10. Absence of consequences.
11. No recognition / reward when you do.
12. Lack of knowledge / understanding.
13. Lack of skills.
14. Scared of making mistakes.
15. Absence of true customer care culture.
16. Negative attitude to the organisation.
17. Unclear expectations.
18. Find it difficult to think of improvements or solutions.
19. Find it difficult to get started.
20. Don't have time.

**As managers, how do we fix these? List three action points for each of the twenty points.**

Don't see them as problems.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Habit.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of interest.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of motivation.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of ownership.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Don't feel it's their responsibility.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Don't feel they have the authority.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Autocratic management style – just do what you're told to do.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of urgency.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Absence of consequences.

- 1
- 2
- 3

No recognition / reward when you do.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of knowledge / understanding.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Lack of skills.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Scared of making mistakes.

- 1
- 2
- 3



Absence of true customer care culture.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Negative attitude to the organisation.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Unclear expectations.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Find it difficult to think of improvements or solutions.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Find it difficult to get started.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Don't have time.

- 1
- 2
- 3

## **Task Time!**

### **Practical Problem Solving Exercise**

***Select one problem or opportunity for performance improvement from your list.***

Your task is to make maximum progress towards resolving this problem or realising this opportunity over the next 2 weeks. .

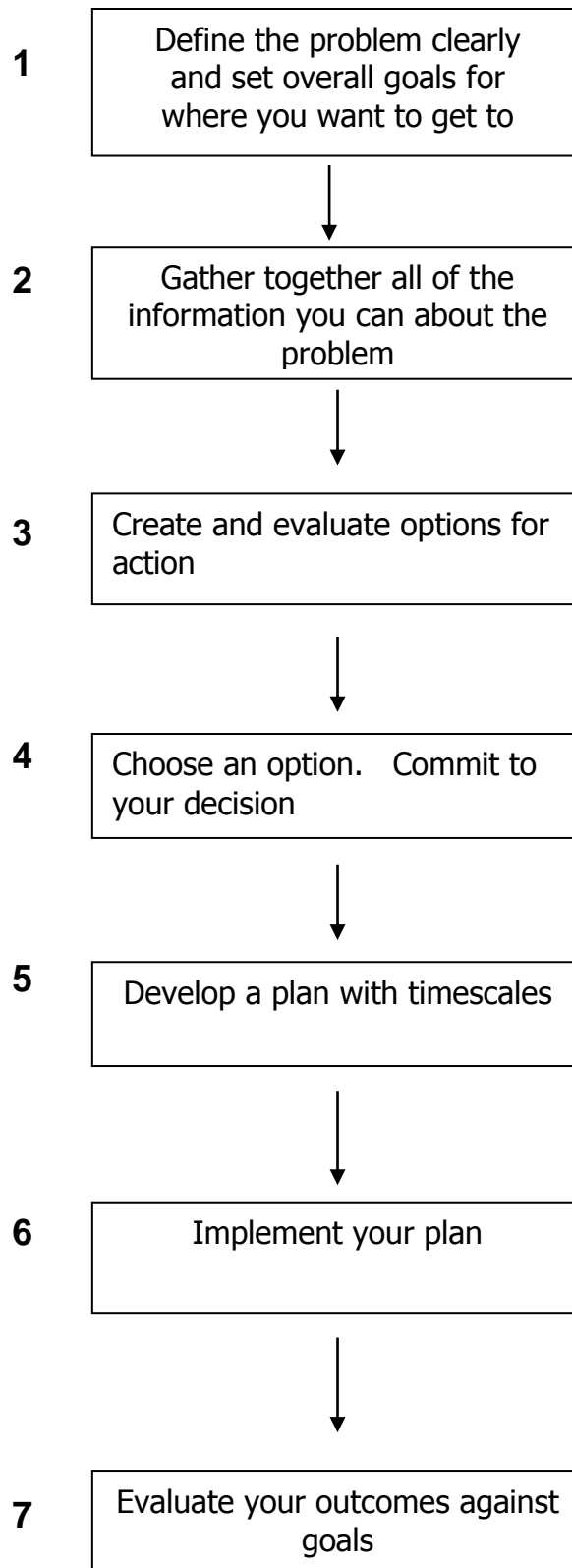
## Chapter 4

# 10 Essential Action Points for Problem Solvers

1. You must get agreement to the goals.
2. You must be willing to think creatively and to try new things.
3. You must develop a comprehensive, viable plan and keep on top of it.
4. You must sort out the resources you need to get things done.
5. You must have realistic targets and timescales.
6. You must remember to take people with you.
7. You must gain the formal support of your managers.
8. You must be willing to change and adapt.
9. You must keep people informed of what you're up to.
10. You must become a leader.

## Chapter 5

# 7 Steps For Fixing A Problem



## Step 1

### Define the problem clearly and set goals and objectives.

Fuzzy goals can be interpreted differently and people may never agree whether you've succeeded or failed.

Goals are simply the specification of what you hope to achieve. The goals will determine the measurable benefits. To be effective:

**1. Goals must be specific**

Others should be able to look at them and know exactly what you plan to achieve.

**2. Goals must be realistic**

Your goals must be possible.

**3. Goals must have a time component**

You must specify when the changes you are aiming for will be complete.

**4. Goals must be measurable**

You must be able to measure your success at meeting your goals. This must be objective not subjective.

**5. Goals must be agreed upon**

Goals must be agreed with anyone who needs to agree them before planning commences.

## Step 2

### Gather together all of the information you can about the problem.

Relevant questions might be:

- What is happening?
- Why is it happening?
- Has it always happened?
- When did it start?
- What happened previously?
- Who is involved?
- Has any other part of this/another organisation tackled a similar problem?
- Would another person/organisation/department/agency know something useful about this subject..... and so on.

However, Don't let the information bog you down! Sometime the simple and obvious is what you are looking for.

It is also worth considering why the problem has not been resolved previously. Who or what has prevented progress being made. This information may be relevant to the generation of options and plans.

### **Step 3**

#### **Create and evaluate options for action.**

In creating options you will need to identify any financial, capital, equipment, people and time implications of different approaches. You will need to get commitment to these as part of the decision-making process.

Try and think creatively. Ask yourself is there a better/different/smarter way of looking at this? Is the impossible really impossible? Begin by pulling together every possibility (however unlikely) and evaluate each by identifying the benefits, risks and resources/cost/people implications. Try to consider totally different approaches, as well as alternatives within the approach you know well. Use others as a source of ideas.

Risks and constraints are known roadblocks that should be identified at the outset so that they are fully considered in the decision-making process. They are not an excuse for inactivity!

### **Step 4**

#### **Choose an option. Commit to your decision.**

Look at how your options will contribute to the achievement of your goals. Take account of the resource implications and risks. Involve anyone you need to in the decision-making process and go for it! Don't procrastinate.

If you have all the information you need and have created viable alternatives that will achieve your goals, don't put off getting on with it.

### **Step 5**

#### **Develop a plan with timescales**

*Steps:*

- Break all the activity required into tasks. These should be very clearly stated.
- Organise tasks in a logical sequence to reflect the order they need to happen.
- Put timescales to tasks.

- Assign tasks to individuals.
- Identify the resources needed for each task.
- Communicate the work to be done in an unambiguous way.

Write down your plan.

## **Step 6 Implement your plan.**

- Getting started is the key to a successful outcome. Avoid floating start dates!
- Take charge! You are responsible for the completion of this action. Lead by example.
- Be positive and enthusiastic. Don't treat the exercise as a chore. Keep your eye on the prize.
- Monitor progress frequently.
- Resolve problems as they arise.
- If targets are missed, revise your action plan immediately to get back on track.
- Maintain urgency.

## **Step 7 Evaluate your outcomes against goals.**

The final step is to appraise your actions. What did you do well and what could you have done better? What lessons can be applied to future problem solving opportunities.

Review your goals and check that these have been achieved. In any further action required or can you build on your success.

Remember to acknowledge outcomes and results and recognise effort and contributions.

# Chapter 6

## **Goal Setting Exercise**

*Spell out goals for the following situations:*

1. In setting up a small business, what would be the first year's goals?
2. What are the goals of a school?
3. In tackling a big fire, what might be the goals of the fire chief?

## Chapter 7

# Essentials of Planning – Cutting through the mess

One of the reasons that problems don't get solved and opportunities for improving performance are not realised is that managers "don't get round to it," because they feel they don't have the time. This is particularly true in organisations where fire fighting is a way of life. Many people feel they do not have the time to plan!

When you are planning you are not actually producing but preparing to produce. It is tempting to say this is time-wasting and dive straight in, thinking that it is better to press on rather than to think and consider. Those who do this may 'look' busier but they are not always working as effectively as they might.

### What do we mean by planning?

Planning in this context means how you go about planning your job in order to achieve your objectives. We cannot always do much to reduce the amount of work we have to get through but we can master it by organising it, establishing priorities, delegating and tackling things systematically.

Planning should be applied to personal organisation and effectiveness at the day-to-day level and also in the sense of how your time is managed daily and on a longer term basis.

Planning means deciding in advance:

- *What to do.*
- *How to do it.*
- *Who is to do it.*

In this way, planning bridges the gap between where we are now and where we want to be in the future. Planning cannot predict the future but it provides the flexibility to cope with change and the unexpected event.

## PARETO PRINCIPLE

*(Vilfredo Pareto, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Economist)*

80% of our activities are responsible for  
20% of our achievement

20% of our activities are responsible  
for 80% of our achievements



## Chapter 8

### Critical Information

*Often the solution to a problem is obvious. The challenge is simply to get on with resolving it!*

Other problems may be more complex and in order to create the most productive options and solutions, it is important first to pull together all of the relevant information. Failure to do so can lead to the “wrong” solution. In other words, the action taken may not respond (or only partially respond) to the problem you intended to tackle.

In each of the following situations, list the information that you think you may need to know in order to create options for resolving the problem.

At the end of the exercise, you will be told what the problems were and can assess how helpful the information you looked for, would have been in helping you to find them!

## **Case Study 1**

### **Marketell Case Study**

*It is your first day as manager of Marketell. Marketell is the Birmingham based, European headquarters of an American company, selling pens, caps, golf products, shirts etc with the customer, company's name, logo or message imprinted.*

*The company uses direct mail as its main method of reaching customers plus it has a very successful telesales operation to call customers every 3 months to achieve further sales. In each of the European countries telesales is contracted to a local marketing company who have agreed targets. The telesales team for the UK are based in Birmingham headquarters and are all company employees.*

*Ten minutes after you sit behind your new desk, the MD bursts through the door and tells you that, for the second month in a row, sales in France are way below target. France is a big customer and has an annual telesales target of £800,000 a year. He asks you to "fix it fast".*

*It is your first day, you are starting from scratch. What information do you need?*

## **Case Study 2**

### **Banbrook General Hospital**

*Banbrook General is a town-based hospital with 400 medical, surgical, childrens and ENT (Ear, Nose & Throat) beds. It has an annual budget of £20,000,000 but last year overspent and has been warned by the Department of Health that it cannot do so again.*

*In common with other hospitals, Banbrook has been told by the Department that it has six months (the halfway point of this financial year) to reduce the hours of its junior doctors to 70 hours per week.*

*You have just taken over as General Manager at Banbrook (the previous GM has taken a new post outside the NHS!) you have to develop a plan to meet the Department requirements. What information do you need?*

## Chapter 9

# Identifying Options, Opportunities and Solutions

Sometimes our ability to create options for resolving problems and seeing opportunities for performance improvement is restricted by the way we think and approach situations.

The deliberate search for alternatives is an extremely important part of the skill of thinking because this counteracts the natural tendency of the mind towards certainty and security.

If you were asked how you could get from England to France, you would usually come up with 2 or 3 options. Today you should try to think of 25 different ways. Each point must be clearly different (i.e. you cannot say “fly with BA”, “fly with Air France” ...!!).

## Ways To Get From England To France!

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
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11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.
21.
22.
23.
24.
25.

## Chapter 10

### Ten Key Reminders

- Change the word 'problem solving' to opportunity search.
- Always be clear about the outcomes you want.
- Change the questions you ask yourself about 'problems'.
- Change the language you use with others when it comes to 'problems'.
- Change the way you are using your Body / Physiology.
- Take responsibility.
- Control your mind's focus.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Brainstorm all your solutions (10, 20 or 100) – before you start evaluating them.
- Take massive, intelligent action.

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