

ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A 5TH GRADE PROBLEM SOLVER?

By Tom Stevens (c) 2010



How Do You Solve Problems?

As a small town mayor I recently had the opportunity to address a class of smart 5th graders who are launching a *Future Problem Solvers* group - based on an international program founded in 1974 by the late Dr. E. Paul Torrance. *Future Problem Solvers* serves to help students learn to think creatively and productively about critical issues.

These youngsters are bright, concerned about our future world, and ready to make a contribution now. Some interests of the group are the practicalities of responsible “green” living, dealing with invasive species, and how to ensure people have safe and clean water far into the future.

Learning an action-based problem solving model is central to the group. The model has five steps:

- Accepting the Challenge - brainstorming areas of concern and writing “if...then” statements;
- Identifying the Underlying Challenge - recognizing the most significant problem;
- Producing Action Ideas - brainstorming ideas to overcome the challenge and creating action statements;
- Weighing Action Ideas - analyzing and evaluating action ideas to select the most promising;
- Creating an Action Plan - elaborating on selected action ideas to create an effective plan.

As useful as it can be to follow a set procedure to solve problems, there are some things I suggested the students keep in mind as they proceeded. I suspect their model, and the additional considerations that follow, can be useful in your organization as well.

Find the right question

A critical part of good problem solving is making sure you are asking the right question. Every question has certain “assumptions” included. “How can we recycle better?” leads to different ideas and concerns than asking “What is the best way to reduce what we throw away?” or “How can we make trash valuable?”

Solutions can become problems

You can find a solution to solve one problem, but then that solution creates another problem. For example, some of our most obvious invasive species (like kudzu or ivy) were introduced to solve erosion problems. Some of the excessive nitrogen in our water comes from farm fertilizer, a solution to growing more food and increasing productivity.

To find a good idea, start with lots of ideas

My wife has a family reputation for taking great photographs. Her secret? Take LOTS of photos, and some of them are bound to be good. In a similar way, the way to get good ideas is generate LOTS of ideas, including bad ones and silly ones. Some good ones are likely to be in the pile. This is why brainstorming is such a valuable process. Unfortunately, it’s a process too often skipped because it is hard to avoid evaluating ideas as they are presented.

Build on other ideas

One of the best ways to keep generating and brainstorming ideas is to build on or add to ideas already presented.

Look at possibilities, not just problems

“Problem Solving” is not the only way to arrive at good action steps, and often is not the best way. A “problem” assumes that something needs to be fixed, corrected, or solved.

Another approach is to brainstorm “Possibilities” - i.e. what is going well and how do we get more of it.

The difference between these two approaches is the difference between overcoming an illness or injury, and increasing health.

Not all problems are problems

To classify something as a “problem” automatically assumes there must be a solution. In the real world, however, not all problems have solutions. I call these non-solution problems conundrums, predicaments, or sticky wickets. They call for responses, but no response will necessarily solve the situation - they are things you have to live with. Personal examples might be someone who simply doesn’t like you, growing older, or not being musically inclined.

Good ideas still need “buy-in”

Just because something is a good idea that makes sense doesn’t mean everyone will adopt it or follow the action step. It is important that leaders actively promote an idea, seek buy-in, and gain commitment from others to try it.



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