

Problem Solving: Asking All the Questions

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Sometimes the hardest part of problem solving is the identification of the actual problem. We sometimes see a symptom, quickly formulate a solution in our minds, and then approach the problem as the best way to implement the solution we have thought of. And sometimes no matter how good our intentions are, we fail to see the “bigger” problem that exists. I’ve mentioned this before and I have seen it in corporate America where someone wants a pet project and they rationalize it by coming up with “problems” that would be solved if they implemented their project. This is actually creating an excuse rather than problem solving. On the other hand, sometimes we don’t want to solve the “bigger” problem but only want to deal with the immediate symptom. An example would be controlling the flooding of a river. The immediate solution involves sandbags and not the tougher social question: Should people even be living that close to a river?

Generally I simplify problem solving to 1) State the **Problem** 2) Gather all the **Information** you can about the problem, 3) Formulate possible **Solutions** based on that information which you gathered, and 4) from those solutions, pick the best **Answer** to the problem. Again, sometimes we tend to jump to information gathering before we have actually defined the problem. Even worse, sometimes we find ourselves jumping to solutions before we have defined the actual problem or have thoroughly asked all the pertinent questions about the problem or what we think is the problem. Several of my favorites in this category are proposed solutions to mass transportation, energy and global warming. All of these topics involve larger and harder questions involving not only economic impact but social impact. The solutions to these three often seem to have economic bias or pet project status. And most of these solutions are being pushed toward our political leaders from those that have their own agenda – which more often than not is personal economic gain. I will touch on all of these topics in future blogs, but my point is when problem solving, spend the time to actually define the true problem and to ask the right questions. It is often more “fun” to jump right to the solutions. If you were the mayor of a city or governor of a state – would you rather be asking questions such as “Do we want the population density in a particular area to increase?” or would you rather say to a contractor bring us some pictures and proposals of what a mass transit system might look like?” Jobs and economic progress tends to keep people elected.

But without jumping off the subject, the next time you are faced with a “problem” take the time to actually write down a problem statement and gather as much information as possible. Ask hard questions about the problem: Who, What, When, Where, How much, Economic Impact, and Social Impact of the problem. Every problem is different and thus the

questions you need to ask will be different for each problem. Again these should be questions about the problem and not the solution. You will ask these questions again in picking the best solution.