

Four Steps for Solving Your Problem

Sue Dyer

How many times have you sat through meetings only to walk away wondering if your team could resolve any of the problems it faced. The ability of a team to identify and resolve problems as they become known is a critical skill. Many, many teams never learn how to do this. Those who do always outshine their counterparts.

Of course the best problem solving technique is to PREVENT the problem from occurring in the first place. But we all know that stuff happens! Here are four steps to help you address the root cause of your problem so that you resolve the underlying issue. Over time, if your team follows these four steps, your team will begin to build “problem solving muscles” becoming more and more adept at tackling problems, and trust will grow.

Step 1. Refuse to Get Upset

You need to be a part of the solution, but if you become emotionally charged you will be focused on your emotions and not on the issue at hand. *Once you are upset you become part of the problem.*

Tips for Step 1:

It get harder the longer you wait.

While a cooling off period can be beneficial when tempers flare, putting off problems only makes the solution more difficult. Over time people become more invested in the problem and in winning. This makes it much more difficult to resolve the problem.

Listen between the lines.

Arguments are not usually about what people say they are about – most have to do with the egos involved. By listening with empathy, between the lines, you will hear that people are telling you what they truly need.

Lead, don't manipulate.

You don't have to have authentic power to lead a problem solving effort. You just need a sincere desire to find a solution that gives everyone what they need. Manipulation tries to lever power over others. Leadership seeks to give hope that a true dialogue can occur.

Step 2. Resist Playing the Blame Game

When confronted with a problem it is only natural to want to find out “who is to blame”. The problem with the “blame game” is that communication stops as everyone becomes protective. In the mean time, *no one is working on solving the problem!* So keep focused on a solution.

Tips for Step 2:

You can't create good solutions in a vacuum.

The more you learn about the needs and constraints of the various people on your team, the better you will be able to create good, and possibly great, solutions. So ask.

Work to get off to a good start.

How a team starts a project is a pretty good indicator of how the project will end. So it is well worth the effort to make sure that yours starts out well. Open up communication and start teamwork from the beginning.

Silence your inner judge.

When someone is talking to you and you hear that little voice in your head saying “yes but that's not right,” or “yes but you don't really understand,” you have just stopped listening to that person. Instead, you're creating your rebuttal so you can prove them wrong and yourself right. That's how fast communication can break down – in an instant – in your own head.

Step 3. Agree on The Problem

It is easy to assume that you understand the problem, but is this the problem or just a symptom of the real problem? How can you tell? Others on your team may see the problem very differently than you do and have information that you don't have. It is important to create an atmosphere that allows everyone on your team to openly discuss the issue so you can find and agree on the core problem. *Because if you don't agree on the problem...you are never going to agree on the solution!*

Tips for Step 3:

Make conflict constructive not destructive.

Conflict need not be destructive, destroying relationships and communication. Conflict can be constructive, spurring discussion and pointing out areas in need of work, helping the team to improve. It's all a matter of attitude and approach



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Focus on the present – don't rehash the past.

When you analyze what happened and why it happened and who was responsible, you are trying to deal with your problems by focusing on the past. You have no power when you deal with issues in the past – you can't change the past. So bring your problems into the present; you'll be surprised how quickly you can resolve them.

Everyone owns the problem.

Everyone owns the problems that pop up equally. It's not *their* problem and it's not *my* problem, it's *our* problem. It's everyone's job to understand the problem and cooperate to work out a way to quickly solve it. Pointing fingers only stops conversations very rapidly.

Step 4. Co-Create Solutions

People don't argue with what they help to create and there truly is a collective wisdom in a team. *Tap that wisdom by offering your team a chance to help create the solution(s) to the core problem that you've identified.*

Tips for Step 4:

Allow the people closest to the problem to resolve the issue.

Quality decisions come from those closest to the issue. Quality goes down as issues move away from the team, and the issues tend to grow in cost and time.

Build on common ground.

When creating objectives, focus on those things that you all have in common. This will get everyone moving in the same direction – working together instead of against each other. Keep focused on those things you have in common, NOT on your differences.

Do the impossible.

Keep yourself open to possibilities. Try to look at old things in new ways, through new lenses. That's what seeing problems through the eyes of the others involved can help you do. It really is possible to create a solution that gives everyone what they need, and to walk away with a new level of respect and understanding.

Now you are ready to implement the solution(s). You can use the same process for identifying potential problems and preventing them from becoming actual problems!

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2. Resist Playing the Blame Game

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- Work to get off to a good start
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3. Agree on the Problem

- Make conflict constructive not destructive
- Focus on the present - don't rehash the past
- Everyone owns the problem

4. Co-Create Solutions

- Allow the people closest to the problem to resolve the issue
- Build on common ground
- Do the impossible

Sue Dyer is the founder and president of the International Partnering Institute, a non-profit educational organization that offers certifications in professional partnering facilitation and partnering competencies. Sue is also president of OrgMetrics, a consulting firm specializing in partnering facilitation and non-adversarial approaches to resolving disputes. To find out more, please contact Sue at suedyer@orgmet.com or 925 449-8300. You can visit us on the web at www.partneringinstitute.com and www.orgmet.com



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