Step 1: Clarify the Problem

Overview

The first step of the practical problem solving method is to clarify the problem.

And, as you'll soon learn, this step actually has many facets associated with it… the first of which is to always protect the customer through containment.

This might require applying a so-called “Band-Aid” for the short term until a more permanent solution can be found.

You see, it doesn’t really matter how you accomplish this… you might need to throw people at the problem, or money at the problem, or inventory at the problem… just do whatever you have to do in order to protect your customers from the problems you're dealing with.

Once the problem has been contained as best possible it’s time to clearly describe the current situation. And in order to do this we must go see the problem with our own eyes in order to get the facts.

This will require talking to people throughout the organization in order to better understand the challenges at hand. You see, the perceived problem may be different depending on who you talk to.

For example, sales people may say “we have no product” while the planners say “sales is always changing our forecast” and production might say “we need a new machine.” The important thing to keep in mind is that all of these things may be true yet none may be the correct problem statement.

Questions to Ask When Clarifying Problems

Now there are also some questions that must be addressed as we work to clarify the problem.

- First we must understand what the ideal situation is. Many times organizations have no idea what good looks like… so before they work to improve things they must determine what success looks like.
- After this we must understand how solving the problem adds value to the customer and the company. Some refer to this as identifying the burning platform.
• Next, we must also work to **visualize the gap** between the current and ideal using things like pictures, charts, and graphs.
• And finally, while we’re practicing this process of going to see we must do our best avoid yes/no questions. Instead, we should ask open ended questions such as the 5W1H, which stands for **what’s** the problem, **where’s** it happening, **when** did it happen, **who** does it affect, **why** is it a problem, and **how** did it happen.

**How to Write a Good Problem Statement**

Writing strong problem statements is an extremely important part of the Practical Problem Solving methodology.

First of all, problem statements should be **focused on the current situation** while clearly identifying the gap.

Problem statements should also being **measurable and clear**. In other words, using words like “a lot” or “not enough” is not sufficient. Instead, we need to be clear and state exactly what we’re dealing with.

Next, a good problem statement **does not contain a cause**, or a suspected cause. For example, assigning the blame for Treetop’s poor on time delivery to a lack of accurate forecasts would be an example of assigning a potential cause. We don’t want to do this.

Likewise, a good problem statement **does not include a solution**. Now it’s often tempting to include both a potential cause and solution in the problem statement but we must fight the urge as doing this weakens the overall power of this problem solving process.

And finally, good problem statements are **factual, within scope, and short and to the point**.

Now most people like to tell a long story as part of the problem statement when in fact, the problem statement itself should ideally be one sentence. It’s OK to add another sentence or two to provide additional background, as long as it follows these dos and don’ts.