Step 2: Break Down the Problem

Overview

Once it’s been recognized that there’s in fact a gap or a problem between the current and ideal situations, more often than not the reasons for this gap are many as well as ambiguous.

In other words we still may have quite a lot of work to do before we can single out a specific problem to tackle. So let’s spend some time discussing how to go about breaking down a problem.

The first step we need to take is to breakdown and organize the original large problem into smaller, more concrete problems.

There are many ways to organize these smaller problems, however the most often used principle for arranging them is by asking questions such as, “What is the problem”, “Where is it happening?”, “When does it occur?” and “Who is being impacted?”

By doing this we’ll be able to break the process down into manageable pieces in order to solve one at a time as each may be contributing to the overall problem.

In essence, all we’re doing is breaking the problem down in such a way that allows us to move forward effectively and efficiently by focusing on key issues.
Something very important to keep in mind in this step is never to ask WHY or to jump towards causes or solutions since will happen soon enough.

**Points of Cause**

Now, once we’ve successfully broken the problem down we’ll be in position to confirm the facts and determine the **Points of Cause** which describes where the problem is happening within the process.

Now in order to be able to identify the point of cause or in some cases causes, we must try to visualize the process since where there is an output there’s a process. To do this we can use things like flow charts and other graphs as we’ll soon see.

**Tools to Break Down the Problem**

There are many tools that can help you visualize the what, where, when and who of a problem such as Pareto Diagrams, Tree Diagrams, Pie charts and Scatter plot diagrams.

Please refer to the video lesson in order to learn more about these tools.

**Prioritize Issues**

Once you’ve been able to identify the primary points of cause it’s time to prioritize the problem.

To do this there are some questions that will help prioritize what problems are attacked first, second, etc.

First we must determine the **level of importance**. To do this questions such as how long has this issue existed and what impact is it having on team members as well as the company can be asked.

Next, we must assess the **level of urgency** by asking questions such as who does this problem affect and does it affect the company’s key performance metrics?

And finally, we must assess the **potential for expansion** by asking questions such as what will happen if we ignore this problem? Will it stay the same or get worse?

Once you and your team have prioritized the problems or issues you’re addressing you’ve accomplished the primary objective of this second step and are ready to move onto step 3 of the Practical Problem Solving process.