

10 Tips For Better Problem Solving

It's no surprise to business leaders that solving problems is a huge part of business success. Some business leaders thrive on managing problems, others don't. But what makes some leaders so much more successful at it than others?

Is it the techniques they adopt, the advisers they hire, or maybe the staff they deploy? In reality it's a combination of all these factors, with a heavy emphasis on focus. The ability to focus on problems for what they are - nothing more, nothing less - just issues that require objective and realistic thinking and action to be solved. Here are ten tips for solving problems that many business leaders use regularly:

1. **BELIEVE THAT** - "The problem is the process, not the people" - 85% of service, quality, and productivity problems are directly related to the design and management of a business process. Problem solvers know this and look to change the process before asking individuals to change or improve.
2. **LISTEN** - to the people who work for you, with you, and even against you. Successful problem solvers know there are multiple perspectives to issues and problems. They endeavor to listen and understand them all and then take the best and leave the rest.
3. **EMPLOY THE 80 / 20 RULE** - This rule is as true for solving problems as it is for making sales, i.e. "20% of your sales efforts produce 80% of your sales." The busy business leader is always asking "what's really important here, and where should I be spending my time to solve this problem?"
4. **USE DATA** - Business leaders are keenly aware of the power of opinions and anecdotal information. They stay clear of such, and endeavor to support every suggestion or recommendation with the best quantitative data available. They know that good decisions are based on good information.
5. **GENERATE IDEAS THROUGH OTHERS** - Business leaders revel in getting the best out of the people they work with. They know that great ideas can come from those who actually perform your work as well as vendors and trusted advisors. Problem solvers are always looking for multiple solutions to problems and opportunities.
6. **UNDERSTAND YOUR CUSTOMERS** - enough said!
7. **PLAN** and 8. **EXECUTE**- These two go hand-in-hand, particularly so for complex problems. Solving problems requires good discipline coupled with good methodology. Although not rocket science, solving complex problems does require a certain amount of management science, which is simply the deployment of a common sense problem solving sequence - e.g. 1-define the problem, 2- analyze the problem, 3-develop alternatives, 4- select and plan a solution, 5- implement the solution, 6-evaluate and adjust. Of course there are times when problem solving requires making a decision based on your gut instincts. And when that's the case by all means do so. But don't fool yourself either - when possible, use an objective problem solving process.
9. **FOCUS ON RESULTS** - Successful problem solvers quickly distinguish symptoms from problems and don't get hung up on opinions vs. facts or style vs. substance. They search for root causes to problems and drive for comprehensive results that will solve problems both short and long term.
10. **UNDERSTAND CHANGE** - Successful business leaders understand that in order to solve most problems, someone, somewhere, somehow - has to change - maybe a little, maybe a lot - but change. The implications of this simple fact are significant since you know that change, for most people, is difficult. Therefore executing a solution will require helping people get through the change - and you must be prepared to provide that help.

This list of tips is certainly not complete. However, using just a few tips at the right time and the right place, will improve your problem solving ability significantly.

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