*Training and Development Consultancy*

# Quick Guide: Problem Solving

They're not really problems, they're improvement opportunities!! ... although I will admit that they don't always feel like that at the time. But the reality is, problems exist and if we use effective problem solving skills, tools and techniques, we can significantly improve the situation. So here are the **top ten tips** for improving your problem solving:

1. **Find problems!** Some will make themselves obvious, but some require a bit of seeking out. Be clear about what you are trying to achieve, why and how. Then monitor what is actually happening. Any differences are problems.

2. **Be selective**. Don't try to solve every problem – at least not straight away! Prioritise them in terms of the benefit the problem is blocking and the urgency.

3. **Look for the cause**. The previous 2 steps are only looking at symptoms. Cures should be focused on the causes, so the next step is to explore those. Techniques like Why, why? and Cause and effect (fishbone) diagrams will help. Try to find one or two key factors that you think are the main contributors and focus on them.

4. **Get creative.** Don't worry about solving the problem, concentrate on finding ways of shifting the factors identified in the previous step. Don't analyse solutions, just generate lots of them. Use group techniques like the standard free for all, mind maps, metaplanning or visioning.

5. **Reduce the number of options.** When you're fed up generating options, sort through the ones you've got. Look at key measures the solution needs to achieve (time, cost, quality) and discard those that don't fit. Listing pros and cons will help reduce further. Use SWOT analysis for smaller numbers of options.

6. **Pick a solution.** Selecting a way forward might be within your authority or you might need to escalate the final choice. In the latter case, offer a range of options that have differing strengths. It's usually worth expressing a preference yourself.

7. **Plan how to do it.** Once the solution is chosen, you'll need to sort out how it's going to be done. Identify tasks, their order, time, cost, resource requirements and make sure that the plan fits within any constraints.

8. **Do it!** A bit obvious, but it's important to keep an eye on it to make sure it's heading the way you wanted it to and adjust as necessary.

9. **Make sure that it has worked.** Once complete, check the initial problem and make sure the solution has brought it within acceptable levels. Perfection is rarely cost effective!

10. **Learn.** No matter how many times you use these tips, this will always be the last step. Look back over what you've done to identify ideas for future improvements.

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