

Simple is as Simple Does: Four Steps to Problem Solving

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Take a look at your department's most popular customized training courses. Chances are they involve problem-solving. Whether the topic is Resolving Conflict or Overcoming Resistance to Change, the root skill set being addressed is problem-solving.

In 1944, Dale Carnegie defined an approach to problem solving in his *How To Stop Worrying and Start Living: Eliminating Fifty Percent of Your Business Worries*. Today, over 50 years later, I still feel his is still one of the most effective methods there is. Simple and time-tested, Carnegie's approach is has three steps.

Identify the problem

This may sound like stating the obvious, but it's a step that many people skip. A thorough, unemotional analysis of the problem is critical to resolution. Don't skimp on this step!

List all the possible solutions

Use your collective brainpower and problem-solving skills here. Let everyone offer solutions, regardless of how apparently impractical or inaccessible. An idea that sounds impossible may suggest a different solution that is well within your means. Get everything on the table without regard to details.

Choose the best solution, act on it and move on.

Here's where good leaders show their stuff. Evaluate all the solutions, and choose the best one. You can strive for consensus, but don't be afraid to act alone. Consider the worst case scenario. Now ask yourself: if that happens, can I deal with it? If the answer is "yes," go forward. As the saying goes, expect the best, but prepare the worst.

Think this 3-step approach is elementary? Take this quick test of your own problem-solving skills. Consider this:

A five-star hotel opened for business, promising the most luxurious amenities and first-class service. The hotel planned to build its reputation on delivering an unparalleled hospitality experience that would result in repeat customers and word-of-mouth referrals. No expense had been spared to make sure this happened.

On the hotel's first day in business, disaster struck. A guest came up to the Check-out desk, infuriated.

"There's a mouse in my room!" he thundered.

The irate customer got louder and louder, as the service staff attempted to address his complaints. When the service manager arrived on the scene, she asked what the problem was.

"We have a very upset customer," said a front desk staffer.

The scene continued, as the service staff focused on solving their problem. As they offered to give the angry man free drinks, pay for all his meals, and comp his room, a larger and larger crowd gathered.

So...what's the problem here?

Do you agree with the service staff? Is the problem the irate customer? If so, you've all made a critical error. The irate customer must be dealt with (preferably, in private), but the real problem is far simpler.

There's a mouse in the hotel!

That's identifying the problem at its most basic level. Once you have a handle on the real problem, you can figure out 1) how the mouse got there 2) how to get it out of the hotel 3) how to keep other mice from becoming uninvited guests.

Until you identify the problem at its most basic level, you can't solve anything. Once you have a grip on the issue at hand, you can apply Step #2 and Step# 3 of Carnegie's problem-solving method.

Some things are simple, but they are not easy. Dale Carnegie's 3-step problem-solving method is one of them. But keep trying; mastering it is well worth the practice!