



# Exploring Leadership

## PROBLEM SOLVING: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Problem solving is like solving a mystery—you need to uncover the real issue before finding the solution. The first step is always defining the problem. Without clearly understanding the issue, any solution might only treat the symptoms rather than the root cause. Sometimes, like Ormie the pig in the cartoon, solving one problem uncovers another. That is part of the process!

### CONVERSATION STARTER:

Show this [YouTube cartoon](#) (3:58 minutes). Ask the group: "What problem did Ormie the pig face? How did he try to solve it?" Use the discussion to introduce today's activity.

When defining a problem, it's essential to consider who is impacted, how many people are affected, and whether other issues are tied to it. Looking at the bigger picture helps identify the true root of the problem. Once you have this clarity, you can explore potential solutions and strategies that address the core issue, not just surface-level symptoms.

### KEY OBJECTIVES:

- Understand the steps involved in defining a problem.
- Clearly define a problem presented in a scenario.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- Computer/projector to show the YouTube video (3:58 minutes)
- Copies of problem scenarios for each group (see Appendix)
- Scissors to separate the scenarios (duplicates are fine)
- Pens or pencils

## EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES:

In this activity, you'll work together to uncover the root cause of a problem. The goal is to learn how to break down situations and clearly define issues.

### FACILITATOR TIPS:

- Stop the video as soon as the credits appear to keep the focus on key content.
- Remind participants that this is a problem-identifying activity, not a problem-solving one. Set expectations to avoid frustration.

- Divide participants into groups of 3–4 and provide each group with a problem scenario and pens or pencils.
- Choose one person to read the scenario aloud.
- As a group, define the problem(s):
  - Identify who is affected.
  - Determine if one issue creates others.
  - Count how many problems are in the scenario.
  - Pinpoint the root problem causing the others.
- Write a clear, one-sentence definition of the root problem on the back of the scenario. Be specific and avoid retelling the story.
- If time allows, brainstorm a few solutions and their potential outcomes.



## REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- How did identifying all the interested parties help your group define the root problem?
- What part of defining the problem was most challenging for your group? Why?
- Did your group discover more than one problem in your scenario, and how did this change your understanding of the root problem?

## APPLICATION DISCUSSION:

- Why is it important to clearly identify the problem before solving it?
- Can you recall a time when someone treated a symptom instead of solving the root problem? What happened?
- In what ways can defining problems thoroughly improve your ability to work through challenges in relationships, school, or work?
- Think of a real-life problem that needs a clear definition before it can be solved. How would you approach defining it?



## CONCLUSION:

Defining the problem is the foundation for effective problem solving. Clear definitions lead to lasting solutions that address root causes, rather than short-term fixes. By taking the time to fully understand the problem, we can create meaningful, long-term results and avoid revisiting the same challenges repeatedly. Success starts with asking the right questions and achieving clarity.

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## REFERENCES

- 7 Steps to an Effective Problem-Solving Process: <https://crestcom.com/blog/2016/09/01/7-steps-to-effective-problem-solving/>
- Problem-Solving Scenarios: <https://wordpressstorageaccount.blob.core.windows.net/wp-media/wp-content/uploads/sites/679/2018/07/Problem-Solving-Scenarios-Decision-Making-Wkst.pdf>
- Ormie the Pig: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUm-vA0mV1o> (3:58 minutes)



## APPENDIX:

### SO, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Instructions: In your group, work together to define the problem(s). Who is involved, and how are they affected? Does one person's problem create issues for others? How many problems are tied to the scenario? What is the root cause of these issues? Write your answers on the back of your paper.

- 1** **Sonya's Story:** Sonya, a new nurse's aide, feels like an outsider because most of her coworkers, who are Filipina, speak their native language around her. Even though they are fluent in English, Sonya cannot understand their conversations.
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- 2** **Tom's Dilemma:** Tom oversees bonuses for workers with perfect attendance. One worker, who missed a single day due to a family member's death, pleads for the bonus, explaining she desperately needs it to pay rent. The policy clearly states no exceptions.
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- 3** **Sarah's Choice:** Sarah, an evening secretary, works unsupervised. Her son, John, urgently needs 100 copies for a school project. He brings his own paper, but the copy shops are closed. If he doesn't submit the project, he will fail.
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Instructions: In your group, work together to define the problem(s). Who is involved, and how are they affected? Does one person's problem create issues for others? How many problems are tied to the scenario? What is the root cause of these issues? Write your answers on the back of your paper.

- 4** **Ryan's Opportunity:** Ryan, a first-year college student, faces a tough decision. His family invites him on a free trip to Europe during the semester, but missing a week of classes may hurt his grades and scholarship.
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Instructions: In your group, work together to define the problem(s). Who is involved, and how are they affected? Does one person's problem create issues for others? How many problems are tied to the scenario? What is the root cause of these issues? Write your answers on the back of your paper.

- 5** **Martina's Conflict:** Martina has a midterm exam on Wednesday, but just found out she's scheduled to work all weekend. With classes all day Monday and Tuesday, she desperately needs the job, but fears losing it if she can't work the weekend.