

Exploring Leadership

PROBLEM SOLVING: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Problem solving is a process that includes multiple steps, but the first one is always defining the problem. You can't solve a problem if you don't know what it is, and sometimes you have to look beneath the surface to find the actual root of the problem rather than just the symptoms that have come to your attention. Also, like Ormie, sometimes you discover that solving one problem brings another one to light.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

- Show this [YouTube cartoon](#).
- Ask "Ormie the pig had a problem. What was it?"
- The cartoon shows him trying to solve it, which brings us to today's activity.

When you define the problem, you must consider whose interests are at stake, how many people are affected, and how many other problems there are to address. Only then can you decide on options and possible strategies for solving them.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

- Determine the steps involved in defining a problem.
- Define a problem presented in a scenario.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- Computer/Projector to show a YouTube video
- Enough problem scenarios for each group. (There are five in the appendix, and it is fine to give the same ones to multiple groups.)
- Pens/Pencils

EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES:

- Separate participants into small groups (3-4) and give each group a problem scenario.
- Instructions
 - One person in the group will read the scenario aloud.
 - Working together, the group needs to then define the problem(s):
 - Who are all the interested parties?
 - Does one person's problem create problems for others?
 - How many problems are represented by the scenario?
 - What is the root problem?
- On the back of the scenario, define the problem clearly in a complete sentence. Don't retell the story, but actually say what the problem is and who it is a problem for.
- If you have time, list a few possible solutions and their possible outcomes.

FACILITATOR TIP:

- The video has a lot of credits at the end, stop it as soon as the first one appears
- This is not a problem-solving activity; it is a problem-identifying activity. It might frustrate the participants that the goal is not to state a solution.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What part of defining the problem is the most difficult for you? Why?
- Did your group discover more than just one problem at the heart of your scenario?
- Do you think your solutions solve the problem for all the interested parties? Why?

APPLICATION DISCUSSION:

- Why does identifying the problem matter?
- What life scenarios would this skill be helpful in?
- Describe a complicated problem in real life that needs to be clearly defined before it can be solved.
- Can you think of a situation in life where someone solved a symptom instead of the root problem? What happened?



CONCLUSION:

Defining the problem is the first step in solving it. By defining problems clearly, it is more likely that the solutions we propose will have long-term, positive effects so that we don't have to keep revisiting the same issues.

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REFERENCES

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- <https://wordpressstorageaccount.blob.core.windows.net/wp-media/wp-content/uploads/sites/679/2018/07/Problem-Solving-Scenarios-Decision-Making-Wkst.pdf>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUm-vA0mV1o>



APPENDIX:

SO, WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Instructions: With your group, DEFINE THE PROBLEM(S). Who are all the interested parties? Does one person's problem create problems for others? How many problems are represented by the scenario? What is the root problem?

1 Sonya is a new nurse's aide. Most of Sonya's coworkers are Filipina. The Filipinas are fluent in English, but choose to speak their native language which Sonya does not understand. Sonya sometimes feels like an outsider when this happens.

2 Tom is responsible for giving a bonus to factory workers that have perfect attendance during the month. One worker missed one day due to a death in the family. The worker starts crying in Tom's office and tells Tom that she needs the bonus desperately since she is behind on her rent. The rules are clear and the bonus is for perfect attendance, period -- no *ifs, buts, or maybes*.

3 Sarah was recently hired to work as an evening secretary, and she is usually alone in the office unsupervised. Her son, John, needs 100 copies for a school project, and if he doesn't bring them to class tomorrow he will fail the project. He arrives at the office with his own paper. The copy shops are all closed.

4 Ryan is a first-year college student. Three weeks into the semester his family informs him that they have decided to take a trip to Europe and would like him to go. By missing a week of classes his grades (and therefore his scholarship) could be at risk, but this might be the last time he has a shot at a free trip to Europe.

5 It is Friday and Martina has a midterm exam on Wednesday, and she will need to study a lot. She just found out she has been scheduled to work all weekend, and she has class all day Monday and Tuesday. Martina desperately needs this job, and if she does not work this weekend, she might get fired.