

Exploring Leadership

PROBLEM SOLVING: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Many people want to solve problems as quickly as possible. However, acting before fully understanding a situation can lead to frustration and ineffective solutions. One of the most important steps in problem solving is taking time to clearly define the real problem.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

If your car won't start, what's the problem? How do you know?
Many people immediately jump to a cause instead of identifying the actual problem. Why do you think that happens?

Sometimes the problem we notice is only a symptom of a larger issue. Before choosing a solution, good problem solvers gather facts, consider who is affected, and look for the root cause. Defining the problem clearly helps people focus on solving the right issue instead of treating only the symptoms.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

- Identify the root problem.
- Define problems clearly.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- One copy of Scenario Cards (Appendix A)
- One Defining the Problem Worksheet (Appendix B) for each group
- Pens or pencils
- Bowl or container

EXPLORATION ACTIVITY:

In this activity, participants will practice identifying the real problem before trying to solve it.

FACILITATOR TIPS:

- Encourage participants to use information from the scenario rather than making assumptions.
- There may be more than one reasonable root problem. Focus on the group's reasoning rather than finding one "correct" answer.

- Before the activity, cut apart the scenario cards (see Appendix A) and place them in a bowl.
- Divide participants into groups of 3–5. Have each group select a scenario.
- Give each group a copy of the Defining the Problem Worksheet (Appendix B) and pencils.
- Have one group member read the scenario aloud.
- Work together to discuss the scenario and complete the Defining the Problem Worksheet.
- Remind participants that they are not trying to solve the problem. Their goal is to identify the root problem before thinking about possible solutions.
- Invite each group to briefly share its scenario and read the root problem statement it wrote.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What facts helped your group identify the root problem?
- Did your group agree on the root problem right away? Why or why not?
- What made it difficult to identify the root problem?
- Why is it important to define the problem before trying to solve it?

APPLICATION DISCUSSION:

- How can defining the problem help you make better decisions in everyday life?
- Think of a time when someone solved the wrong problem. What happened?
- What are some situations at school, home, or work where identifying the root problem could lead to a better solution?
- How can taking time to gather facts before acting help you become a better leader?



CONCLUSION:

Clearly defining a problem is the foundation of effective problem solving. When people take time to understand a situation before acting, they are more likely to find solutions that address the root cause rather than just the symptoms.

The next time you face a challenge, pause before looking for a solution. Take time to gather facts and define the real problem first. A well-defined problem is much easier to solve.

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REFERENCES

- Crestcom: 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>



APPENDIX A: SCENARIO CARDS

Directions: Cut apart the scenario cards and place them in a bowl. Have each group select one card.

Scenario 1 – Your youth group is planning a community service project, but only a few members have volunteered to help. The event is only one week away, and there is still a lot to do. Some members say they are too busy, while others say they didn't know volunteers were needed.

Scenario 2 – A teacher assigns a group project that is due in two weeks. One student takes charge, two students rarely participate, and another student misses several meetings because of after-school activities. As the deadline gets closer, the group becomes frustrated.

Scenario 3 – A school club welcomed many new members this year, but few of them return after the first few meetings. Some students say the meetings are boring, while others say they don't feel welcome or included.

Scenario 4 – Your school is hosting a fundraiser, but very few people are participating. Some students didn't know about the event, some think it costs too much, and others are not interested in supporting the fundraiser.

Scenario 5 – A student has several assignments due on the same day, along with sports practice every afternoon. The student wants to do well in school and keep playing on the team but is beginning to feel overwhelmed.

Scenario 6 – A community park has become covered with litter. Some people blame visitors for leaving trash behind, while others point out that there are very few garbage cans and no signs encouraging people to clean up after themselves.

Scenario 7 – A student is often late to first period. Some classmates assume the student doesn't care, while others know the student has responsibilities at home every morning before school.

Scenario 8 – A new student joined the class a month ago but still spends most of the day alone. Some classmates assume the student isn't interested in making friends, while others think no one has made an effort to include them.

Scenario 9 – A school dance is only one week away, but very few students have bought tickets. Some students say they didn't know about the dance, others think it will be boring, and some say the tickets cost too much.

Scenario 10 – Your class is working on a science project, but supplies keep going missing. Some students think classmates are taking materials without asking, while others think the supplies were never organized in the first place.



APPENDIX B: DEFINING THE PROBLEM WORKSHEET

Directions: Read your scenario and work together to identify the root problem. Remember, your goal is to define the problem, not solve it.

Scenario: _____

1. Who is affected by this situation?

2. What facts does the scenario give you?

3. What do you think is the root problem?

4. Why do you think this is the root problem?

5. Write the root problem in one clear sentence.