

Chapter One

Getting Started

First say to yourself what you would be;
and then do what you have to do.

—*Epictetus*

“I think we could accomplish so much more! But no matter how much I try, I can’t seem to get team members pulling in the same direction.”

“Our company is downsizing, and I have to make recommendations for layoffs. I feel so numb! I don’t know where to start, but I have to make decisions this weekend.”

“We just spent two years installing a new information system. So much effort and so much money! But instead of benefits, we’re getting more customer complaints than last year.”

“We must get to a different level with operations, or we will start losing customers to the competition. Our product quality is consistent, but we keep missing our delivery dates.”

Every day we face new problems. At work, at home, in our communities, and everywhere, problems are part of our path. What is it for you today?

- Expanding your business
- Downsizing
- Laying off employees
- Creating a new product line
- Implementing a strategic plan

8 THE SOLUTION PATH

- Relocating the organization
- Dealing with high turnover
- Losing a valuable employee
- Reorganizing the company
- Installing a new information technology system
- Creating a learning organization
- Building a team
- Dealing with difficult team members

The list of challenges we potentially face at work is endless. If you want to start addressing them, you have come to the right place. Simply by picking up this book, you have taken the first step along the “solution path.” This book does not promise to give you expert answers to each and every one of the situations listed, nor does it promise to make all of your problems go away. But it will provide you with a methodology that you can apply to problems across the board. This methodology will allow you to capitalize on your own potential and the capabilities of your team.

This chapter will get you started by giving you the outlines of that methodology. It will also help you consider which of your present problems you may want to address as we proceed through the book.

Problem Solving in Action: The Mailing House

The best way to get a sense of the methodology I will be presenting here is to look at an example of how one company was able to solve a serious problem successfully.

Delores was the president and owner of the Mailing House, a company dedicated to doing mass mailings for a variety of clients. Over a ten-year period, she built her organization from a five-person operation functioning out of her garage to a fifty-employee company with its own facility. Eventually she landed a huge con-

tract with a major grocery chain, which brought the company to a completely new level. Delores hired her colleague, James, as the new vice president of operations, and within one year, the company doubled in size and was operating in a redesigned facility.

Then trouble hit. A national retail chain bought out the grocery client, and the Mailing House's contract was not renewed.

At first, Delores and James spent hours and hours trying to figure out why this had happened to them. They focused on coming up with tactics to contact the new ownership and regain the account. But they were not successful. After four months, they had to lay off five employees. And their fears about the potential failure of their business started spreading to their staff.

Dolores was shaken but not defeated. She decided to stop focusing on the lost account. Instead, she would concentrate on creating new opportunities. She and James called a companywide meeting to try to harness the energies of the group. The two leaders discussed their vision and their ideal picture of what a successful resolution of their current crisis might look like. With the help of the team, they generated several ideas for fulfilling their vision. They organized their thoughts into a solid solution that was acceptable to all participants. They then devised a step-by-step action plan to implement their solution. Within six months, the Mailing House had many new accounts and a new product that they had created for existing and new clients: office supplies. They were on their way.

The Methods of the Solution Path

Delores's success in overcoming her challenge began with her decision to stop focusing on the company's current problem—losing its major client—and to move from fear to positive action. Her next successful move was to call on the collective energy of her employees in the solution effort and engage in effective facilitation to come up with strategies and action steps to help them get out of their bind.

10 THE SOLUTION PATH

Thus Delores built her solution process on the very principles that form what I call the cornerstones of this book's approach to problem solving:

1. Thinking positively is essential for addressing challenges.
2. Working with individuals and teams is imperative for creating solutions.
3. Employing effective facilitation is critical for harnessing group energies successfully.

These cornerstones are key to finding the solution to any problem. Positive thinking inspires you and others to begin and continue your work on problems, despite the difficulties you may encounter. Involving others allows you to multiply the amount of creative thinking that can be applied to the situation at hand. And working with others effectively through skilled facilitation lets you maximize the time spent on the problem.

Delores and her team also engaged in four major steps that serve as the backbone to the methodology that will be fleshed out in this book, namely:

1. Envisioning your ideal outcome
2. Creating ideas for solutions
3. Sorting and synthesizing ideas into a holistic solution
4. Developing a step-by-step action plan and implementing the solution

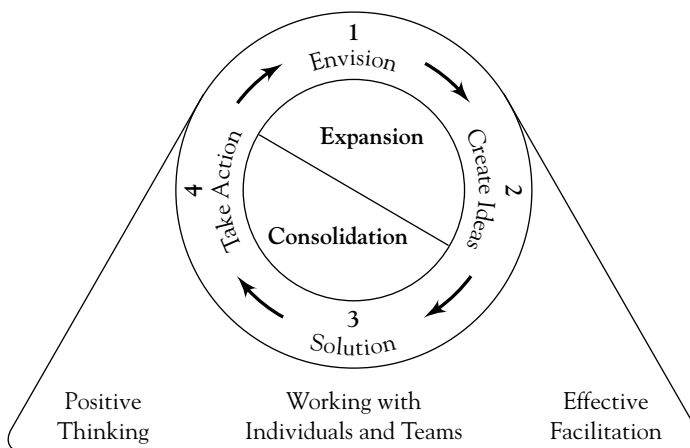
Figure 1.1 illustrates this four-step problem-solving methodology and the three cornerstones on which it rests. As the figure indicates, the parts of the process involving "envisioning" and "creating ideas" make up the "expansion" phase of problem solving. The main questions you will be addressing at this stage are "What would our situation look like if things were ideal?" and "How many different ideas can we come up with for moving toward that out-

come?” This phase has to do with broadening your horizons and thinking big. This means that believing rather than doubting must be your best ally during these two steps. Believing means that all ideas, all possibilities, need to be considered.

The parts of the process involving “developing the solution” and “taking action” make up the “consolidation” phase of problem solving. During this phase, you play the “doubting game” while still continuing to believe that things will work out in the end. Your main questions in this phase become “Does this solution work?” “Does it take into account the most serious risks?” and “How can we make things work?” You take a more critical look at your options, narrow them down and combine them where appropriate, and make concrete short- and long-term plans to turn your situation around.

Whereas in an ideal world these steps would be sequential, in practice they are usually not. Often you will find that you’ll need to go back and forth between them. For example, you may have decided to expand your production volumes based on higher product demand levels. Yet by the time you get to the stage of developing

Figure 1.1 Methods of the Solution Path



12 THE SOLUTION PATH

the solution, the external parameters of your situation (for example, the economy) may change dramatically, resulting in lower product demand levels. This will force you to go back to the first step, in which you must create a new vision for your situation. Or you may be working on reducing product costs. You may be at the stage of taking action when a team member comes up with a much better idea, which has to be incorporated. This will take you back to stage 2 of the process. The steps of this problem-solving methodology, then, function together as part of an iterative process in which data from a later stage may need to be brought back to an earlier stage and reworked.

Action Exercises

Let us now begin to take action on the challenges you yourself are facing. This is the first of many exercises that I provide to help you apply the principles of the book to your own work situation. To utilize these exercises most effectively, I strongly recommend that you write down or type your responses. This will help you organize your thoughts and come to new insights. You may want to establish a separate notebook for this task or record your notes in a computer document.

Given that most organizational solutions are the result of group efforts, my recommendation is that after you create your problem-solving team in Chapter Three, you also come back to this chapter to complete the activities with that team. Keeping a progress log for your team as you move toward developing and implementing your solutions may be useful in this regard. If you maintain your log in a three-ring binder, for example, you can include both the results of these exercises and notes from your meetings as a team.

The first exercise in this chapter tests your readiness to embrace your current problems and to start creating opportunities. The second exercise asks you to articulate what you believe are your most crucial workplace challenges.

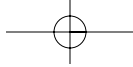
Exercise 1.1: Opportunity Readiness Questionnaire

1. Are you sick of feeling stuck because of your current work problems?
2. Are you tired of complaining about your present work problems?
3. Are you spending a lot of time analyzing why your problems exist?
4. Do you find that you're spending a lot of time wishing things were different?
5. Has your work environment stopped energizing you and your team members or colleagues?
6. Do you find that you are underutilizing your potential or that your team or colleagues are?
7. Are you imagining endless "what if" scenarios to predict what could happen to you if you acted one way or another on these problems?
8. Do you find that you are postponing taking action until tomorrow?
9. Do you feel capable of creating change if you had the right help?

Did you answer yes to at least three questions in Exercise 1.1? That means you are ready to start creating opportunities out of your current problems.

Exercise 1.2: Identifying Your Major Work Problems

Think of three current work challenges, important issues that you need to resolve and are dealing with daily. Although some of them might overlap and be part of a larger overall problem, try to articulate three discrete situations. Write them down.



14 THE SOLUTION PATH

Problem 1

Problem 2

Problem 3

Which is the most important for you to solve?

Which is the most difficult for you to solve?

Which seems to have the most possibilities for resolution?

If you had to address only one, which would you start with?

At this point, perhaps you are already beginning to recognize that your problems can also be seen as opportunities for change. Chapter Two will take you much further in this direction. It will help you start analyzing your fears about your challenges and will empower you to take positive action. Let's continue along the solution path.