

An approach to problem solving



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0845 300 1818

You can be absolutely sure that if someone says to you there are no problems, only opportunities, they are about to give you an opportunity to solve a problem for them.

The difficulty of trying to find one approach to solving problems is that there are so many different types of problem. A Cub Scout Leader may find running Pack nights a problem, but the Cub Scout who can't get the lid off the biscuit tin will think this problem far more important!

Most problems though, can be divided into one of two categories; practical problems concerned with doing things and people-based or emotional problems to do with how people feel and react together. Both types can be approached in the same way but the second requires far more sensitivity.

The diamond problem-solving process

One approach to solving problems is to employ the model set out below. It can be used to tackle any problem no matter what it is.

Each diamond represents a separate stage in dealing with the problem and each must be completed before moving on to the next.

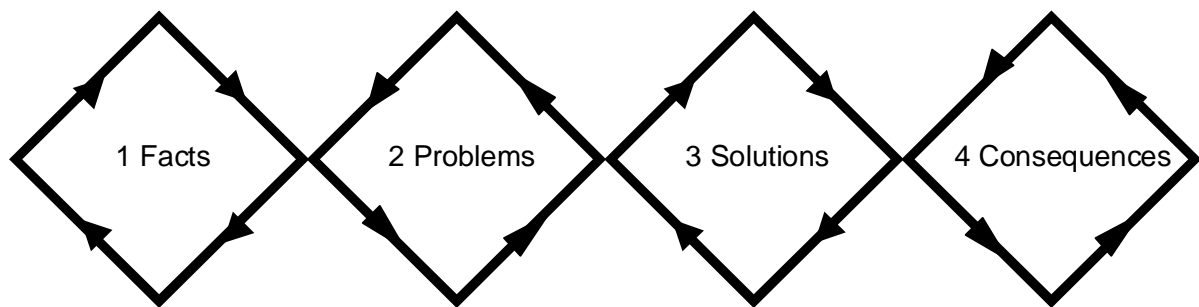
Establish the facts

To solve the problem you start at diamond number 1 and go round the diamond until you are sure that you have got all the facts you need. Areas of the problem which normally need exploring are people, places, events, and the time-scale of events. All too often the problem seems large because we don't understand the details. And the larger the problem seems the more we worry which makes the problem larger still! So make sure you have all the available facts and only move on when you are certain this is the case.

Examining the problem

Having examined the facts move on to diamond number 2 and make sure you fully understand the problem. Often to do this you need to step back and try to look at the problem without involving your feelings. Acting on emotions is often the simplest solution, but rarely the best. Sometimes it can be helpful to state the problem in writing, or to describe it to someone else.

Having looked at the problem go back to diamond 1 and check it against the facts. People with emotional problems very rarely tell you the whole problem or all of the facts at the first attempt. They select the facts that support their story or point of view, just like politicians do!



At this stage it is also important to ask yourself if the problem you are being told about is the real problem or if you need to question further. For example a young Scout in tears who tells you that the Scout Leader hates him/her has probably been severely told off. The real problem is that the Scout doesn't like being shouted at and is in need of some sympathy. Only establishing the real facts will show you the actual problem.

You will know that you are ready to move on when you can state the problem as a complete question, eg, "What is the best way to pack the minibus with this equipment so that everything fits in safely?"

Explore the solutions

Having established the facts and examined the problems, move on to diamond 3 and explore as many possible solutions as you can think of. Before making judgements, create as many options as you can. What you may regard as silly options can always be disregarded later. It is worth remembering. that every great inventor or problem-solver in history had their ideas laughed at - until they worked.

It is important to remember that to decide to wait or to decide to do nothing are both possible solutions.

The next step is to choose your best solution and check back with diamonds 2 and 1 that it will actually solve the problem. The temptation now is always to rush away and try it, but first...

Predict the consequences

Having chosen your solution, spend some time predicting the consequences of each option and then decide which action to select. Often you will find you have chosen your solution because it satisfies your feelings or it appears to be the easiest option. If, however, the consequence of your action is to create another problem you will have achieved nothing, so make sure your solution will produce the right end result. When considering the consequences always be aware that, if you are dealing with other people, they may not react as you expect them to. You must consider all the possible ways that they may react.

Finally, check the whole process through and put your solution into action.

How it works

Let's look at two examples of the system in action. One with a practical problem and one with a human problem.

Problem One: You are leading the Troop out on a hike and come to a stream. What do you do?

Facts

- 1 The camp site is on the other side of the river.
- 2 The Troop are expected back at the site in half- an-hour's time.
- 3 The stream is 60 cm deep.

Problem

How to get the Troop back to the site within half-an-hour and keep them happy in the meantime.

Solutions

- 1 All wade across.
- 2 Give them all piggybacks.
- 3 Walk up- or down-stream to the nearest crossing.
- 4 All build a bridge, raft or boat.
- 5 Dam the river and walk across the dry riverbed.
- 6 Call it a 15 minute Patrol challenge and let the Patrol Leaders sort it out for themselves.

Consequences

- 1 Everyone gets wet and has uncomfortable feet.
- 2 You get a hernia and it takes too long.

3 It may take too long for the time-scale.

4 It may not be strong enough to take the whole Troop.

5 Probably impractical and will damage the farmer's irrigation system down-stream.

6 If they get wet it's their fault and it provides an instant activity, employs more minds to the solution, and gives you the option to use the best final method.

I know which I'd choose, with a prize for the Patrol that gets me across dry!

The example, besides demonstrating the process, includes the key principle, that, when dealing with practical problems, you should look at all the means of help and advice available to you. Obviously then you must select from the help and advice you receive what you consider to be the best or soundest option. But often it helps just to hear other people's solutions, particularly when making decisions for a group.

The same is not true when dealing with people with emotional problems, particularly if someone is seeking your help with a delicate or sensitive matter. Firstly, it is unlikely that they will want a number of people to be involved or to know of the problem. Secondly, in such circumstances, the person who has sought you out needs your help to help them make up their own mind. They do not want to have it made up for them by you. Only they know the real problem and the relationship between themselves and any other people involved. The skills needed in this situation tend towards counselling skills, rather than problem-solving skills, and it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss these. However, if you require further information on counselling skills they are dealt with in a factsheet called *An Introduction to Counselling*.

Problem Two: As Akela you are concerned that your young Cub Scout Helper gets too involved in games and is too rough with the Cubs.

It is worth noting at this point that the feeling about a situation that something is wrong is not the same as the facts about the situation. The facts may be:

Facts

- 1 The Helper enjoys joining in rather than running games.
- 2 No one has actually been hurt or complained.
- 3 The Helper always attends and is keen and helpful.

Problem

How to deal with this potential danger without upsetting the Helper or risking losing their help.

Solutions

- 1 Stop the Helper taking part in games.
- 2 Explain your fears and ask the Helper to be careful.
- 3 Involve the Helper in joining in quiet games instead.
- 4 Use the Helper to run or plan other activities.
- 5 Do nothing and hope no accidents happen

Consequences

- 1 The Helper may lose interest and leave.

2 The Helper has the chance to understand your point of view.

3 The Helper may still join in noisy games as well.

4 The Helper may be suspicious of this change of approach.

5 You won't feel any better about the situation.

The choice must of course lie with the individual and would depend on the personal relationship between the two people involved at the time.

These examples hopefully demonstrate two different applications of the same process to help solve problems. Of course all problems are different and different people will react in different ways at different times. Often you will have to solve a problem with very little time to think, but for those occasions when you can make a little time to think a problem through logically, you will find that this approach works.