20 Problem-Solving Success Tips
by
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❖ **Define the problem first.** Explain what the problem is—what went wrong, what are the symptoms, what is the impact on your business. Write it down. Everyone who reads it should understand what the problem is and why it's important. Caution: describe the problem, not what you will do to fix it.

❖ **Use your time for problems that are truly important.** Just because a problem is there doesn't mean you have to solve it. If you ask, "what will happen if I don't solve this problem?" and the answer is, "not much," then turn your attention to something more important.

❖ **Test your assumptions about everything.** Check the facts first. Be sure that you and your team understand the problem the same way, and that you have data to confirm that the problem is important. Test the assumptions about proposed solutions to improve the chances your solution will actually solve the problem.

❖ **Measure.** The key question to answer is, "How will you know when the problem is solved?" If you don't measure, you won't know for sure. Use measurements to learn and portray the truth—the real truth, not what you wish were true.

❖ **Measure the right things.** A common measurement trap is to measure something because it's "interesting." If knowing a measurement won't change anything (e.g., help you make a decision, verify an assumption or prove the problem is solved), then don't waste your time measuring it.

❖ **Use your project management skills.** Solving a big problem is a project: you're far more likely to solve it successfully if you treat it like one. That means you'll need to identify tasks, make and adjust assignments, and keep track of what is due when. Be sure to get appropriate management support for your project.

❖ **Look for solution owners rather than problem owners.** Everyone participating in the situation owns the problem, like it or not—and nobody likes it. Avoid the finger-pointing trap by looking for solution owners, i.e., the people who can do something to help solve the problem. Helping with a solution is much more fun than being blamed for a problem, so you're more likely to get the response you need.

❖ **Whatever you do, do it on purpose.** Doing nothing is a wimpy way to decide not to solve the problem—and is quite likely to leave you making awkward explanations when the problem resurfaces.

❖ **Communicate.** Don't leave you key stakeholders guessing. Being human, we tend to be bad about keeping others informed about the progress we're making, especially if there is little or no progress. You're more likely to get support and understanding if you get the word out honestly about what is happening.

❖ **Avoid "bug mentality."** Fixing bugs fixes symptoms: like taking aspirin for a headache, it may provide relief but does nothing to prevent the next headache. It's ok, and often necessary, to relieve the symptoms but you have to dig deeper if you're going to prevent problems from occurring.

❖ **Identify and fix the right root causes.** Complicated problems have multiple root causes, probably more than you can fix in a reasonable amount of time. Don't waste time or money on causes that are either insignificant in impact or only peripheral causes of the problem you're trying to fix.

❖ **Choose solutions that are effective—and implement the solution completely.** Identifying the right root causes is necessary, but unless you then implement a solution, you still have a problem. Double-check to be sure your solution plan really will eliminate the causes you've identified, and then execute the plan. It's easy to get distracted by other projects once you get to the implementation phase and never finish.

❖ **Reward prevention.** Although it's generally understood that it costs more to deal with crises than to prevent them, many companies do not recognize and reward those who push past the symptoms to the root causes, preventing future occurrences. If you want to focus on prevention, be sure to reward those who do it successfully.

❖ **Have the courage to say "no" when appropriate.** If you believe the problem can't be solved in the time-frame allowed or with the resources available, your best option is to say so right away. Accepting an assignment that you believe is impossible is setting yourself up for failure. Do, however, choose your strategy for how you refuse to take on the project: gather evidence, explain what it will take to accomplish the desired results, etc.

❖ **Meet your commitments.** Do what you promise and don't promise what you can't deliver. Meeting commitments strengthens relationships and builds trust. You need both to solve messy problems. If the situation changes and you do have to change a commitment, let everyone know as soon right away so they can make appropriate changes to their own plans.

❖ **Everything necessary, nothing extraneous.** Make sure you solve the problem completely, but don't get sidetracked into doing other things that won't make *this* problem go away. Put those extras aside to evaluate later as special projects.

❖ **Everyone necessary, no one extraneous.** Make sure everybody who can contribute to the problem solving effort is appropriately involved. Only have the people on your team who will contribute actively to solving the problem. People who need to know what's going on can be informed more efficiently in other ways.

❖ **Plan for things to go wrong.** We've heard it before, and it's still true: if something can go wrong, it will. Figure out what can get in the way of your problem solving effort and develop appropriate contingency plans.

❖ **Use completion criteria.** Define what successful completion of each task entails. Specify when it is due and what standard must be met to avoid misunderstandings and delays. You don't want to tell someone who has worked really hard to complete a task that they misunderstood and you wanted a sledge hammer rather than an ordinary hammer.

❖ **Acknowledge and thank everyone who helps.** Solving an important problem deserves recognition, and nobody else is going to take care of this for you. Make sure management and key stakeholders know what you and your team have achieved. Remind them of the risks avoided. Thank everyone who participated in the project. It's the polite thing to do, and encourages them to help you next time.