

Getting to grips with problems

Overwhelmed? Follow these simple steps

LIZA VAN WYK

PROBLEM-solving is a ubiquitous feature of human functioning.

Human beings are problem solvers who think and act within a grand complex of fuzzy and shifting goals and changing ways of attaining them.

This has always been true, but it is doubly so today because we live in a time of unprecedented societal transformation.

When circumstances change at work or anywhere else, old procedures no longer work.

There is no formula for true problem-solving. If you know exactly how to get from point A to point B, then reaching point B does not involve problem-solving.

Think of problem-solving as working your way through a maze or resolving issues.

How, then, is it possible to improve problem-solving ability?

First, we need to recognise when we are engaged in problem-solving and accept it as a natural, normal and expected step towards a goal through the application of general and specific heuristics.

Second, we must not let anxiety take hold. Anxiety is a major spoiler in the problem-solving process. It stalks right behind uncertainty, ready to pounce.

Demanding and uncertain environments, the seedbeds of all problem-solving, are fertile ground for anxiety.

Uncertainty is an integral part of the business of solving problems.

Those who cannot bear situations in which it is impossible to see the way clearly to the end are emotionally ill-prepared to solve problems.

Following a structured problem-solving process can help.

The process has the following main purposes:

- Get to the root of the problem to solve it permanently; in other words, define the problem.

- State the problem in terms of a gap between the current state and the desired future (expected) state.

- Show why the problem is important, using facts and data where necessary.

- List the three most likely potential causes.

- List the three primary factors affecting the results from each of those causes.

- Verify the root cause by experimentation.

- Develop a list of potential solutions.

- Evaluate each one for feasibility and difficulty of change.

- Establish measurements to ensure that implementation activities are completed as intended.

- Assign a person to each task.
- Compare the implementation results to the original and desired states.

- Analyse reasons for success or partial success and take appropriate corrective action.

Once some or all of the above have been applied and implemented, you will realise that a problem isn't necessarily something negative.

A problem can be a desire to improve a work process or an individual performance that is already good – to take a workflow or person to the next level.

● *Liza van Wyk is chief executive of AstroTech, a skills development training company. For more information, visit www.astrotech.co.za, call 011 582 3222 or e-mail training@astrotechtraining.co.za*

Hope Mebabse is a technical specialist for McCain. Workplace spoke to her about her job

What does your job entail?

It's all about linking McCain SA Delmas's goals to global best practices by offering technical support to plants and related units and ensuring that the company stays abreast of technological developments in the industry.

This includes conducting new product and packaging trials, optimisation of technical efficiency at our plants, compiling best operating practice packages for various processes and optimisation of raw material usage

What are you trying to achieve?

The main goal is to ensure that the company stays abreast of global technological developments in the industry.

What does a typical working day entail?

The first thing you ask yourself when you enter the gate is: "What can we do better?"

With this question running through your mind, you set to work conducting research on new technology, running new product development trials and aligning the plant process with McCain's global best practices standards.

What would you call a really good day?

It's really a day when, without spending a single cent on anything new, you still manage to get a cost improvement on the production line just by being innovative with what you have.

What is your greatest challenge?

Change management. With every new way of doing things, there will be some form of resistance. This is not such an easy thing to do, but it is possible.

What has contributed to your success?

My educational background gave me a good foundation. The McCain graduate trainee programme also contributed a lot towards me understanding how McCain does business



GLOBAL THINKER: Hope Mebabse's job is to align McCain's processes with worldwide standards.



nice work
if you can get it

Oiling the wheels of food production

and what the ultimate goal of the company is.

The teams I work with also help me to have a strong grip on things.

All of these, together with my inspiration, have helped me a lot.

What is your background?

I studied biotechnology, which introduced me to food technology and process technology.

Before joining McCain I worked for a microbiology laboratory where

I built my ability to pay attention to detail.

I have also done a one-year course in production management.

Any hobbies and interests?

I love Christian music, I think music is the voice of God.

I love camping and going on safaris. In my spare time I also like to read and search the internet. There is always something new to be learnt.

Orientation the key to top temps

THE DEMAND for temporary retail staff is growing at all levels, but in some cases temp staff lack the orientation and skills to perform well.

Aslam Galant, who has 30 years of operations, HR and training experience in the retail industry, has recently been appointed business development and general manager at Isilumko Staffing.

He says proper up-front orientation paves the way for a successful temporary staffing service.

"The triangular relationship can be confusing for staff if it isn't properly explained. To secure commitment to clients and Isilumko, staff need to understand the roles and responsibilities of the staffing company and the client.

"A good start is to implement a proper 'in-house' induction programme for temps, focusing on the opportunity to develop their skills and introducing the concept of 'star performers'," says Galant.

"Companies, including retail stores, are looking for above-average people, to whom they could offer permanent employment. This is vital in an industry

where good staff, from junior level to middle management, are in short supply.

"When temp staff are first inducted into Isilumko Staffing, they need to be shown the values and ethics the company supports, such as hard work, commitment, top-class service to clients and development of employee skills."

Short-term assignments allow employees to explore and be exposed to different situations, where different skills would improve their own proficiency and give them direction in fields in which they may want to develop careers.

It's also important to get employees to understand the relationship between the recruitment company and the client and what their expectations are. Galant recommends that employees be inducted into their new employers' working environment before an assignment. This will help them to understand the company's culture and climate, the assignment, expectations, and opportunities for long-term employment.

"A thorough induction will contribute to better relationships between Isilumko,

the temps and the clients. All three partners have responsibilities and depend on each other," he says.

"If we provide a retail client with a cashier, there are two types of candidates we could supply. The first is a cashier who has the required skills, but who rings up the goods as quickly as possible to get the job done, without any consideration for the client.

"In this scenario the consequences could be stock losses or shrinkage due to incorrect ringing up of goods, poor customer service, incorrect inventory records resulting in incorrect ordering of stock, and loss of profits.

"Or we could provide cashiers with the required skills, who are accurate and also have a clear understanding of the consequences of their actions.

"Clearly most clients would want the cashier in the second example, as they have the skills, attitude and appropriate behaviour that will contribute to the profitability of the business. The same principles apply to positions at other levels of the retail hierarchy."



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