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Decision Making and Problem Solving

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Decision Making and Problem Solving

Arnold J. Bateman

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It's only human to feel threatened at times. Some of our own private problems make us feel personally insecure, helpless, and angry.

Put us in a group and those threats are magnified. Will those other people "use" us? Will they force decisions on us? Will they even listen to us?

Here's our first problem in working in a group. "They" feel just as threatened by us as we do by them.

The group is a breeding ground for conflict. That's counterproductive. Instead, "we" and "they" need to abandon the adversary attitudes, "play fair" by agreed ground rules, and make the group an area for problem solving.

If, when issues arise, we use the problem solving method, we will be using the "how-to questions." Problem solving is very much concerned with the exercise of fact and logic. It involves examining "how to" solve the problem.

Conflict, on the other hand, is an exercise of power.

The conflict methods are well practiced; the problem solving methods often are not.

Main ingredients for problem solving

1. Recognition and understanding of the problem.
2. Sufficient expenditure of time to solve the problem.
3. A set of skills which lead to mutually acceptable and high quality outcomes.
4. Equal power, the absence of power, or willingness of those with greater power not to exercise all of it.

5. A sincere commitment to the value of cooperation, a feeling that cooperation is beneficial for both parties.

6. Awareness of the cost of not agreeing. People need to be aware of the costs of defeating or suppressing each other. This is very important when they depend on each other to accomplish their needs.

7. Access to a third party. Evidence indicates that a third party can often facilitate problem solving.

8. Trust. In terms of behavior, people who trust each other give each other information that makes each vulnerable to the other and are willing to be influenced by each other.

If I don't trust you, I try to control you as much as possible, and I don't tell you things that will make me vulnerable to you. Perhaps equally important, if I withhold information from you, whatever my motives, I risk making you think that I don't trust you.

Steps in problem solving

1. Create a common ground by reviewing and altering the conditions, and the perceptions and feelings of the people involved.

People who engage in conflict tend to describe a we-they distinction between each other (We are the good guys; they are the bad guys). Each party may also have the feelings of threat, or defensiveness, or anger which will interfere with problem solving.

When any or all of these characteristics exist, they must be dealt with before any discussion of goals and solutions begins. We-they distinctions can be reduced if the parties are brought together to identify their needs, with particular emphasis on shared needs.

This can be done by focusing upon written statements on a single piece of paper or blackboard, which helps people to think, "How can we defeat the problem" instead of, "How can we defeat you"?

Solutions should not be discussed at this point since the purpose is to stress common interests.

Problem-solving language should be descriptive and not judgmental. Individuals must be able to describe their own feelings and to give descriptive feedback to others in a way that is not offensive.

For example, to say, "I don't agree with you" is descriptive and usually elicits the response, "Why?" The contrast is, "You are wrong." The natural reaction is temper and counterattack.

Judgment words like right, wrong, unfair, stupid, autocratic, or poor communicator have little or no value in problem solving.

2. Identify the goals, needs, and values of each party and clearly identify the problem.

Once the parties are ready to focus on a problem instead of each other, and have the ability to use descriptive language, the next step is to identify the problem. The question that should be asked is, "to do or accomplish what?" Many people will focus on solutions first.

However, the first step is usually one of moving back from solutions to problems. For example, when a committee chairperson says to his organization president, "I need more committee members," the president can argue and create a conflict or ask for the purpose. If the president says, "to do or accomplish what?" the answer could be "to handle promotion for special programs." Now that the problem is identified the need may be met with one of several solutions.

3. Make an exhaustive search for solutions.

Research on this subject indicates that people have a tendency to stop with the first solution that seems acceptable.

Brainstorm and list all the ideas that come to mind. You should refrain from evaluations until all ideas have been listed.

4. Agree on the solution by consensus.

When large numbers of people are involved it may be necessary to choose a solution by voting. The real damage with voting, however, is it ends with a winning group and a losing group, and this win-lose outcome contains the weak element and may undermine the acceptance of the solution.

Consensus game rules

1. Don't vote, trade, average, flip a coin, etc. Keep talking until a suitable solution is reached.

2. Don't argue endlessly for your own position. Generate facts and logic, but listen to the other members' reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point.

3. Don't give in only to reach agreement and to avoid conflict. Yield only to positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.

4. Use descriptive language rather than judgmental language in discussing the issues.

5. Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements, if handled right, can help the group's decision because with the wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will hit upon a more adequate solution.

A problem solving worksheet has been provided to assist you in working through problem solving and decision making in an organized manner.

Problem Solving and Implementation Worksheet

1. The issue is. . .
2. What is the current situation?
3. What is the desired situation?
4. List all possible solutions.
5. List the three most feasible solutions.
6. List the above solutions in priority order from 1 to 3.
7. List both good and bad consequences for each of the three solutions.
8. Reprioritize.
9. What is the one mutually acceptable solution?
10. List all real or perceived barriers to implementing the solution.
11. List steps needed to remove each barrier.
12. Develop a cooperative plan of action to implement the solution. Don't forget to enlist help of other resources.
13. Implement the plan of action.
14. Evaluate implementation of the solution.

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