A TEAM PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

David E. Hartl

Problem-solving is among the most central and important organizational processes. Many procedures have been suggested to guide the process. The old four-step chestnut of "define the problem, generate possible solutions, try a solution, test for results" is still a good one for some problems, but it is limited. Today's organizational problems are more complex and require more sophisticated procedures to be effective. A ten-step process for use by organizational teams is outlined below that may produce more effective outcomes for you, your team, and your organization. This process is especially useful when the problems being handled are largely resolvable by developing agreements among members of the team and other units in the organization.

Here are the ten steps in the process and some coaching in how to use them to best advantage.

1. DESCRIBE THE GENERAL AREA OF CONCERN. To give your team the maximum starting perspective, begin describing the problem in general terms using a wide-angle view. Include aspects of the surrounding context that seem relevant; speculate on connected issues; tie in related people and organizational units; guess about possible causes; and so forth. Be sure that the description answers this question: What is it that is bothering you or the organization?

2. SPECIFY THE OVERALL GOAL AND DESIRED OUTCOME. Using terms that are as specific as possible, describe what overall result you want to achieve. This may include more than one outcome. It may describe some conditions that need to be created. Be sure that the outcome you describe will help to resolve what it is that is bothering you.

3. SEEK OUT AND/OR BRAINSTORM INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS AND IDEAS.
Generate as many facts, ideas, opinions, guesses, thoughts, impressions, assumptions, and inspirations as members of the team have about the general problem area. Avoid spending much time in evaluating these thoughts during this step; that will come in a few moments. Just capture the thinking of the team members for later analysis. It's OK, maybe even preferred, if this step seem to be a little chaotic. Out of the creative chaos will come the order that produces solutions.

4. SIFT IDEAS FOR SEPARATE BUT RELATED ISSUES AND IDENTIFY AGREEABLE ACTION OPTIONS. Review the results from the preceding three steps. Search for issues that can be pulled out and examined separately. Look for possible actions that will move toward resolution of the problem situation. Important organizational problems often don't have one solution. Instead, they are constellations of circumstances that add up to a problem. Nibble away at it. See how many small actions your team can discover and agree to that each contribute a little to improving the overall situation.

5. DOCUMENT EXACT TERMS OF AGREEMENTS - TEST FOR ACCURACY. As your team searches for action agreements, write each of them down using careful language to

state exactly what is going to be done, by whom, and by when to implement the action. Specify any conditions that are attached. After the agreement has been written down, review it with those involved to be sure the intent is clear and accurate. Do this for every action agreement.

6. MOVE TO THE NEXT SEPARATE ISSUE OR POSSIBLE ACTION AGREEMENT - SIFT, DOCUMENT, TEST, REPEAT AS NEEDED.   Systematically move through the separate issues you have identified as parts of the general problem area. Search for additional action agreements that can be documented. Continue this process until all the related issues have been explored.

7. REVIEW EACH DOCUMENTED AGREEMENT AND ANALYZE IT FOR IMPLICATIONS.
- Who needs to know about it? *Who will tell them and how?*
- What policies are involved? *Who will check and assure compliance or change?*
- What procedures are needed? *Who will specify them and tell everyone else?*
- What training is required for performance? *Who will plan it and assure it happens?*
- What executive or employee support is necessary for success? *Who will assure it?*
- What linkages need to be developed? *Who will develop the relationships for support?*
- What organizational allies need to be found? *Who will develop the alliances?*

8. DOCUMENT ACTIONS NEEDED FROM THE ANALYSIS OF IMPLICATIONS. Write down any new action agreements that will be required to handle any of the implications that turn out to be relevant to the problem area.

9. REVIEW AND TEST OVERALL ACTION STRATEGY.   Review the general area of the problem and the overall outcome you wanted. Look at each action agreement to assure it is appropriate and necessary to achieve the desired outcome. If appropriate, put the action steps into priority order or logical sequence. Make sure that the action steps are realistic. Double-check to see that each person named to carry out an action step is clear about what is to be done and the deadline. Check for individual commitment to follow-through at this time. Get people to overtly commit to taking the agreed action by saying out loud that they will, or by responding out loud in the affirmative when you ask them.

10. TEST FOR TEAM SATISFACTION WITH THE PROCESS AND LOOK FOR IMPROVEMENTS TO ADD NEXT TIME.   Could the team have defined the problem area more crisply? Could the outcome have been clarified more directly without beating around the bush as much? Could they have participated more in suggesting facts, ideas, opinions, etc.? Could people have demonstrated more willingness to take individual responsibility for implementing action agreements? Could the analysis of implications have been done more thoroughly or quickly? Could the documentation process be improved? What else might be improved?