Management Tool

Problem Solving Skill: Finding The Right Problems to Solve.

Problem solving skills are normally seen as reactive tools. That's to say, they're applied to existing problems, once these have been identified. However, problem solving can also be done pro-actively. The application of key questions to existing situations, even in the absence of obvious problems, can still yield benefits. Asking why and why not, is perhaps the key to innovation and improvement.

Consider this little known but momentous exchange:

Having snapped the last photograph, Edwin reminded his daughter that she'd have to wait until the roll of film was developed. The usual processing time was one week and for almost everybody this seemed acceptable. Everybody, that is, except the child. "*Why,*" she asked, "do I have to wait a week to see my pictures?" After all, a week can be a long time for a young child. Edwin could have responded like countless parents faced with this most ubiquitous of childhood questions. "Because that's just the way it is." Instead, Edwin Land chose to say "why not?" His daughter's simple question sparked a challenge that had never occurred to him. "How might I make a camera that creates instantaneous pictures?" Within about an hour, he had formulated several solutions. Within approximately four years, Edwin Land had commercialized a product. The Polaroid Land camera was the world's first camera capable of taking photographs which developed within minutes.

Finding the right problems to solve is an invaluable problem solving skill. This can be done by firstly asking questions about the current situation. Follow this with questions about the likely future. The result: pro-active problem solving, may just open the door to creativity and innovation.

Frustration and unrest with the current situation is often a good place to start. Use the first table below to evaluate current issues and to brainstorm any possibilities which could arise from those. The second table contains questions which might help you to identify future possibilities. Remember, the key to this problem solving skill is to ask: why not?

Just as this same question is routinely asked by innovative experts such as Toyota:

- **Two words that are filled with possibilities.**
- **They can turn a challenge into an opportunity.**
- **An obstacle into an inspiration.**
- **It's a question we ask ourselves at Toyota every day.**
- **Because we're continuously looking for new ways to improve what we do.**
- **By asking tough questions.**
- **Can we make a car that has zero emissions?**
- **Can we improve the economy of a community?**
- **Can we enrich the lives of people around us?**
- *Why not?*

Possibility Questions: Dealing with the Present

Questions	Your notes
CURRENT ISSUES	
What are your customers' major complaints and difficulties with the products/services you provide? (Think about internal and external customers.)	
What small problems do you face now that could grow into big ones?	
What barriers prevent open communications with and between teams in your part of the organisation?	
How could you improve quality?	
What goals do you tend to fail to achieve?	
What are your most difficult people problems?	
What is likely to cause your next crisis?	
What information will make your job simpler or easier?	
What problems experienced by other organisations in your industry sector do you want to avoid?	
What competitors' ideas could your organisation adopt?	

The Happy Manager

Possibility Questions: Looking to the Future

Questions	Your notes
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE	
What challenges, issues, problems and opportunities do you think your organisation will face in the next couple of years?	
What training do people need to meet new challenges?	
What customers' needs will change in the next few years?	
What will be your customers' biggest problems or challenges in the next few years?	
What would you most like to see happen in the next few years?	
What new pressures might your organisation face – e.g. from customers, the community, the media, politicians or regulators?	
What might cause your valued employees to leave?	

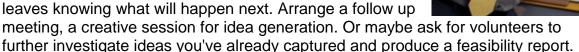This questionnaire is adapted from Min Basadur's "The Power of Innovation".

Tips for Implementation

You could either work through the possibility questions on your own, or discuss them with your colleagues. If you decide to use this activity with your team, here is a possible process:

Aim: to identify problems worth solving.

- Hand-out the "current questions table" and ask colleagues (in groups) to talk through the questions.
- Capture ideas from the groups, allowing each to feedback the results of their discussions
- Repeat the process for the "future questions table".
- Summarise your findings by asking which problems offer the greatest opportunities, and are worth solving?
- List the potential focus areas, recording any insights, ideas or initial solutions.

Conclude with a round-up of the ideas and possibilities. Decide on follow-up actions or meetings, so that everybody leaves knowing what will happen next. Arrange a follow up meeting, a creative session for idea generation. Or maybe ask for volunteers to further investigate ideas you've already captured and produce a feasibility report.

Remember, it's not enough to just ask "why not". This only becomes a problem solving skill when the next step is action!