ENTERPRISING RURAL FAMILIES

Problem Solving

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Problem solving is a daily task for most of us.   Problems provide opportunities for things to go south pretty quickly.   However problems can provide an opportunity for a change in course. I was prompted to think of this topic for this month's Enterprising Rural Family newsletter when a young client exclaimed, "my mom always said there's more than one way to skin a coon!"   My mom use to say there was more than one way to skin a cat!   I didn't see the situation we were in as a problem, a coon or a cat, I saw an opportunity for a creative workaround.

Problem solving is a core component of every leader's skill set. There are days it feels that problem solving is why I exist, I strive for the courage to tackle them head-on before circumstances force at hand.   Having the wisdom to step back and observe the problem at-hand through a broad lens is important. We need to see around, beneath, beyond and behind the problem itself. Try to see well-beyond the obvious. The most effective leaders approach problems through a lens of opportunity.

We must be resilient in our quest to create and sustain momentum for our enterprise and the people we serve.   Self-promotion, power plays, ploys and envy are realities we face when dealing with people which complicate matters.   Competitors can create problems for us when they unexpectedly sign on a long-standing client, or establish a new industry relationship, or develop a new product.   Business expansion can keep us on our toes and further distract us from solving existing problems by creating new problems.

Another reality we face is there's more than one way to describe most problems.   We don't want to become so linear in our approach to the problems that lie in front of us that we are not able to see the possibilities that lie within the problem.

Karl Popper who is generally regarded as one of the 20th century's greatest philosophers of science is created with saying "All life is problem solving".

Effective leaders connect the dots and map-out a realistic plan of action. They have a strategy for how problems will be approached and managed. They recognize there are strengths that the people around them possess which can be tapped for a solution. They take enough time to step back and assess the situation and the opportunities that each problem presents. And as wonderful as having a process is, leaders will make the problem solving process more efficient by recognizing that problems aren't all best resolved by the same strategy.

Some strategies to consider in deploying your problem solving

1. Effective Communication

Problem solving requires honest and transparent communication which allows everyone's concerns and points of view to be freely expressed. Employees cannot fear that by speaking honestly they may expose theirs or someone else's' wrong-doing and jeopardize their jobs. The leader must have the ability to facilitate an open dialogue with others in an environment that is safe for people to share why they believe the problem happened as well as what they may see as specific solutions.

2. Dismantle Silo Mentality

In a workplace where silos exist, problem solving is more difficult because of self-promotion and protection.   Effective problem solving involves transparent communication which focuses on the health and success of the whole enterprise.

3. Closed or open minded employees

Problem solving is about people working together to make the enterprise and the people it serves better. If you are stuck working with people that are closed-minded, effective problem solving becomes a long winding road of misery and missteps.

Closed- minded people in the workplace enjoy creating unnecessary chaos so that their inefficiencies are not exposed. These types of people slow the process down while trying to make themselves look more important.   Close-minded employees turn things around to make it more about themselves and less about what is required to convert a problem into an opportunity.

There are some in the workplace who are open-minded and will see beyond the obvious details before them, they will tackle the problems head-on and get on with the business of driving growth and innovation.

4. An effective strategy

There are a myriad of problem solving strategies which can be utilized.

When you're stuck on a problem, looking at it with a fresh eye can be what you need to come up with a great solution. The Reframing Matrix, a three step approach can help reframe problems.

The tool was created by Michael Morgan and published in his "Creating Workforce Innovation" book. The technique is based on the notion that different people with different experiences approach

problems in different ways.   The matrix helps you to think about the problem and explore possibilities from other's perspectives.

Step 1

On a piece of paper draw a simple four-square grid.   Leave a space in the middle of the grid to write down the problem that you want to explore.

Step 2

Now, decide on four different perspectives to use in your matrix.   There are two useful approaches for doing this the 4P's Approach and the Professions Approach.
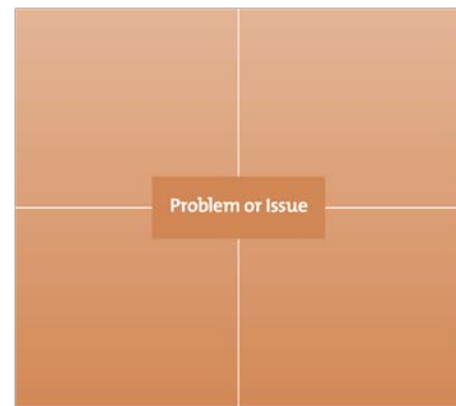
The **4Ps Approach** helps you to look at problems from the following perspectives:

- **Product Perspective:** Is there something wrong with the product or service? Is it priced correctly? How well does it serve the market? Is it reliable?
- **Planning Perspective:** Are our business plans, marketing plans, or strategy at fault? Could we improve them?
- **Potential Perspective:** How can we increase sales, or productivity? If we were to seriously increase our targets, or our production volumes, what effect would it have on the problem?
- **People Perspective:** What are the people impacts and people implications of the problem? What do people involved with the problem think? Why are potential customers not using or buying the product?

These examples are just some of the questions that you can ask as you look at your problem using these four perspectives.

The **Professions Approach** helps you to look at the problem from the viewpoints of different specialists, or constituents. For instance, the way a marketing agent looks at a problem would be different from the approach that a civil engineer or a lawyer would use. Or, the way a CEO views a problem may be different from the way a farm manager sees it.

Step 3

The final step is to brainstorm factors related to your problem from each perspective and to enter your findings in the appropriate quadrant of the matrix.   You may want to involve other employees to help ensure broader insights.

You know that you have great leadership in your organization when problem solving becomes a seamless process that enables the people and the enterprise to grow and get better. If problem solving creates chaos, you may have a serious leadership deficiency.

Problem solving is the greatest enabler for growth and opportunity. This is why they say failure serves as the greatest lesson in business and in life. Be the leader that shows maturity, acts courageously, and requires accountability.   Strive to become a master problem solver. Each experience teaches us all new things. Embrace problem solving and the many unseen treasures it represents.

Product Perspective

Product is new to the market.

Could have a more attractive design.

Doesn't work properly in certain situations.

Partner Perspective

Could market to further segments.

Are we using the right marketing strategy?

Business strategy doesn't support this new product.

New Product Not Selling Well

Potential Perspective

We could raise sales by distributing to new countries.

We don't have enough resources to make more products.

People Perspective

Customers find it hard to use the product.

Target customers don't know about product.

Customers won't try new products.

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts

Winston Churchill

A Mistake is a terrible thing to waste.

Have you witnessed someone, or perhaps you yourself have lost sleep and peace over not knowing what to do….the fear of making a mistake has paralyzed you from doing something, anything? Just the thought of possibly making a blunder, or not being perfect keeps us stuck. Somewhere we determined that genius and perfection happens automatically and without any failures or stumbles along the way.

There is something worse than making a mistake…doing nothing.   It keeps us from learning and growing. Doing nothing keeps us from connecting with other people, stretching beyond what we know and perhaps from fixing a problem that's bleeding us dry.

Noticing our mistakes helps us get in touch with our commitments—what we really want to be, do and have. Facing mistakes often takes us straight to the heart of our fears and when we are in that honest place within ourselves facing those fears, they can disappear.

Telling others we are trying something new, or are uncertain can minimize their shock if we stumble. It might even garner some encouragement or empathy for our situation.

Mistakes teach us about ourselves and help us learn to tell our truth.   It's pretty natural to wish for an eraser to remove the mistake, or to wish for a do over button.   Being honest about our failures and limitations offers us opportunities to speak the truth.   Admitting the truth increases our capacity to change, to concentrate on learning and growing.

Mistakes teach us to take responsibility.   Blaming others is shamelessly the easy path. Standing up and admitting to our role is growing our personal ethics and accountability.

Allowing ourselves to make mistakes is the only way we can allow ourselves to try, learn and do new things. Thomas Edison's teachers said he was "too stupid to learn anything".   He was fired from his first two jobs for being "non-productive". As an inventor, Edison made 1000 unsuccessful attempts at inventing the light bulb. I'm grateful Edison learned from his mistakes. The light bulb is a wonderful legacy!

Perhaps it's a paradigm shift we, who fear failure, need to seek. "To have tried and failed is better than to never have tried at all" (-Sean-Paul Thomas).   "A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing"(-George Bernard Shaw).