**Problem Identification**

*The first step to successful problem resolution*

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A problem occurs when there is a difference between what "should be" and what "is"; between the ideal and the actual situation.

A problem:

 expresses the difference between the hoped for and the actual situation

 is directly or indirectly related to a desired outcome or standard of behavior.

Identifying a very clearly defined and specific problem is the first critical step to successfully implementing the problem-solving process.

**Identify the Problem before the Solution**

When an individual faces a problem, the natural tendency is to propose possible solutions. Consequently, the thought and discussion focuses on the merits and problems of the proposed solution(s), rather than an in-depth discussion of the possible causes of the problem itself.

An inexperienced student will soon find out, that a great solution isn’t worth much, if the problem it resolves was not correctly identified.

For example,

A 9th grade student gets her Progress Report for Term 1. She is not doing well in three of her classes. When she brings it home to her parents they take away her phone thinking that with less distractions Jane’s grades will go up.

Unfortunately, when Term 1 report cards came out, Jane had not improved in any of those classes. The situation still existed because Jane’s parents had misidentified the problem (social distractions) and then applied an ineffective solution (taking away her phone.)

If Jane and her parents had done some additional exploration regarding the problem and asked the question, “why is she struggling in these classes?” their research could have uncovered the real cause of Jane’s struggles. . . . Jane is not passing in graded assignments.

If they had correctly identified the problem – Jane is not passing in graded assignments, they would have implemented a different (and more appropriate) solution.

**Identify the Problem, not a Symptom**

If you want to resolve the root problem, treat the cause, not the symptom. For example, if you take an aspirin for a fever, you’re treating the symptom (an elevated temperature) and not treating the cause. You might experience temporary relief, but if the cause is left untreated, it’s likely that the fever will return.

The same is true for resolving other problems. For example…

Jane was told to deal with the problem of her struggling in three classes (the symptom) so her parents started a new rule, “no phone for you!”

This no phone policy may certainly produce short-term benefits, but if Jane never identifies her lack of work ethic, then her grades will never improve. As a result, Jane may give up on her academics altogether or my just drop down to easier classes.

Sometimes numerous negative symptoms are all outcomes of a single root problem – so solving the root problem will resolve many related problems.

**Ask “Why?, Why?, Why?”**

Identifying a root problem may require you to ask several “whys?” For example..

*1 Why is Jane struggling with her grades?*

Because she is not passing in graded assignments.

*2. Why is she missing those assignments?*

Because she believes that she will earn course credit without having to work for it.

*3. Why does she believe she can earn course credit without work?*

1) Middle schools handle course credit differently and she hasn’t yet made the transition to high school.

2) She wants to avoid work because she has a fixed mindset. In other words if she tries at something and fails that it will mean she isn’t ‘smart.’ Thus Jane purposely doesn’t try.

Notice in this example that *two* causes of her poor grades surfaced. If Jane had not asked “why” then she would probably not have identified her role in creating this problem.

When you’ve done a good job of correctly identifying the root problem(s) then the task of identifying workable solutions is much easier.

**State a Problem Concisely and Precisely**

Sometimes the identification of a problem gets lost in translation. A well-stated problem is one that can be stated in a single sentence.

For example, in the case of Jane, the problem could be stated as “Jane does not complete assignments and is thus doing poorly in her classes because she believes that courses do not require work.”

Notice that this problem statement doesn’t focus on a solution – it focuses on the root cause of the undesired outcome, customer dissatisfaction. **It also summarizes the problem into a single sentence that contains the cause (does not complete assignments) as well as the effect (doing poorly in her classes).**

A statement that is written as, “Jane needs to do her work” is not correctly phrased as a problem, it is phrased as solution.

**The Acid Test**

One test for checking to see if the problem you’ve identified is the real problem, is to ask the question, “if the problem I’ve stated had been resolved from the very beginning, would this current situation be happening?”

Applying this test to the previous example…

If Jane’s parents had first asked, “if we take away her phone, would her grades automatically go up?” they could have quickly determined that the solution of taking away the phone wouldn’t resolve the larger issue. They should have been able to foresee the failure of the no-phone rule because it didn’t fix her bad grades due to a lack of work being passed in.

Answer the following 5 questions on a separate piece of paper:

1. Identify an academic problem you are currently facing.
2. Record at least 3 whys about this problem. Using your answer from the previous why to help form the next question. See the example above.
3. What is the root cause of your problem. (This is the answer to your last ‘why’ question).
4. State the problem precisely
5. Does it pass the acid test? In other words “If the problem I’ve stated had been resolved from the very beginning, would this current situation be happening?”