CHAPTER 1 WHAT IS PROBLEM SOLVING?

INTRODUCTION

We all encounter and solve problems daily, both in our private life and our work life. Some problems are more significant than others and warrant more attention since the implications of making a poorer decision can be much bigger.

How can a 'problem' be defined? It can be identified as something which needs attention to be resolved, this can refer to a situation, a thing, or a person. Of course, what is a problem to one person may not be to another which can cause friction.

The process of problem solving involves the definition of the problem, identifying the cause of the problem, identifying, and selecting solutions, and finally implementing a solution for resolution. The length of time that this process takes, will be based on how large the problem is.

Consider Timing and Resources

Some problems are bigger than others and the implications of making a bad decision can be exceptionally significant. When problems are complex and getting the right solution is very important; it can warrant a lot of time, effort, and perhaps other resources, to make the very best decision. Taking time to make decisions though will delay action; and in a time-sensitive situation, a poorer decision made fast might be better than a better decision made more slowly.

Many decisions in both personal and work life are often made quickly, without a lot of consideration. Often the implications of a fast decision do not make a lot of difference in the grand scheme of things.

There are lots of different ways to work through solving a problem and using the right approach in each situation is a valuable skill.
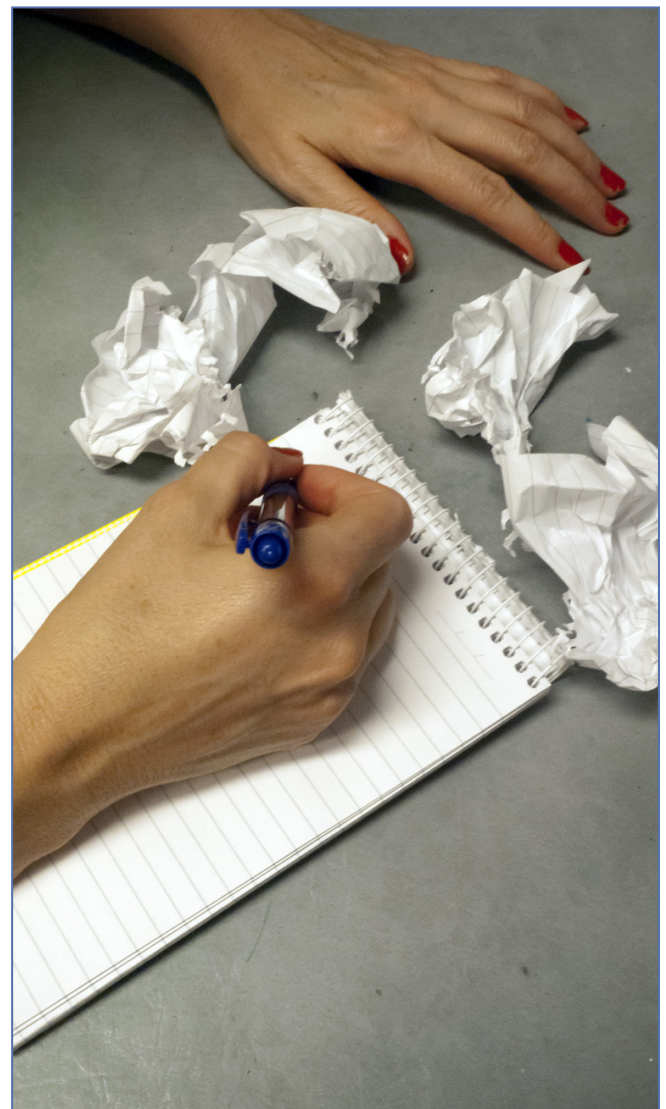
WHY ARE PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS IMPORTANT?

There are many reasons why problem-solving skills have a high level of importance both within the workplace and in someone's personal life. This includes:

- Control over our environment – the ability to solve problems helps us to identify opportunities, it supports the ability to innovate and think differently. This is a skill which is appreciated by organisations but also as an individual it may open avenues which without that approach would be closed off. This in turns enables a certain level of control over what is happening within our lives, both at home and in business.

- Control over our future – by problem solving it is possible to make changes which can have an impact over what we are able to achieve. Considering different possibilities, weighing up alternative solutions can provide more opportunities than taking the first option.

- To fix something that is broken – within our personal or business lives, there are many things that are flawed. Processes which aren't effective, activities that aren't positive for us, and things which just aren't going right. Without problem solving there is a risk that these negative aspects continue without being fixed which can have big impacts on us.

- Addressing potential risks – risks are things which might happen and have a negative impact on a business or a person. The ability to identify these risks is one thing, but finding ways in which they can be avoided is another – this is where problem solving skills come in.

- Improving performance – within a business, or as an individual, there are intricate webs of relationships meaning that the way in which one person acts will often influence someone else. This interdependency on one another, allows more complex issues to be addressed and creates a culture of continuous improvement. Problem solving supports the ability to understand these relationships and adapt to change.

- Seizing opportunities – if problem solving skills are held, it is much more likely that an opportunity will be recognised as the scoping skills involved help people to think differently – less one dimensional.

# PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS AT WORK, IN EDUCATION AND ELSEWHERE

The benefits that come from developing problem-solving skills are numerous and can be applied in many different circumstances. Some of these include:

- Improve your CV/Resume and increase chances of promotion – more and more employers are looking for recruits who are more dynamic than ever before. The more skills that can be presented to a potential employer, the less training that they will see is required. This

makes an individual a very attractive proposition. Equally within an existing team, managers are looking for team members who can take on additional responsibilities. Often, the higher up an organisation you go, the bigger the chance that you will need to be able to react to issues and find solutions. Having those skills will make you stand out from others.

■ Creative thinking towards problems – in many challenging situations, people will need to be much more creative in finding solutions. This has changed over time as there is now an expectation that more can be done with less, i.e., the number of resources available is reduced. This requires creativity rather than considering standard approaches.

■ Designing research – there are many circumstances when research will need to be carried out. Whilst there are standard approaches which can be taken, there is also often the need to consider different options. This is reflected in the design of the research, working to achieve the same outcome but from a different angle or approach.

■ Finding new ways to promote products – as a manager within a sector which requires sales of products and services, it is often very competitive. Problem solving skills help support people to find different ways of doing things, looking at a variety of options and exploring new approaches. A problem solver will be able to efficiently carry this process out to select an approach which is not necessarily the normal approach.

■ Devise projects – to fully understand a project there is an element of problem solving, getting to the route of the issue at the heart of the project can be one of the first steps i.e., identifying the reason for the project. This then becomes the basis for developing the solutions, which are also grown out of a problem-solving approach as different ideas are reviewed and evaluated.
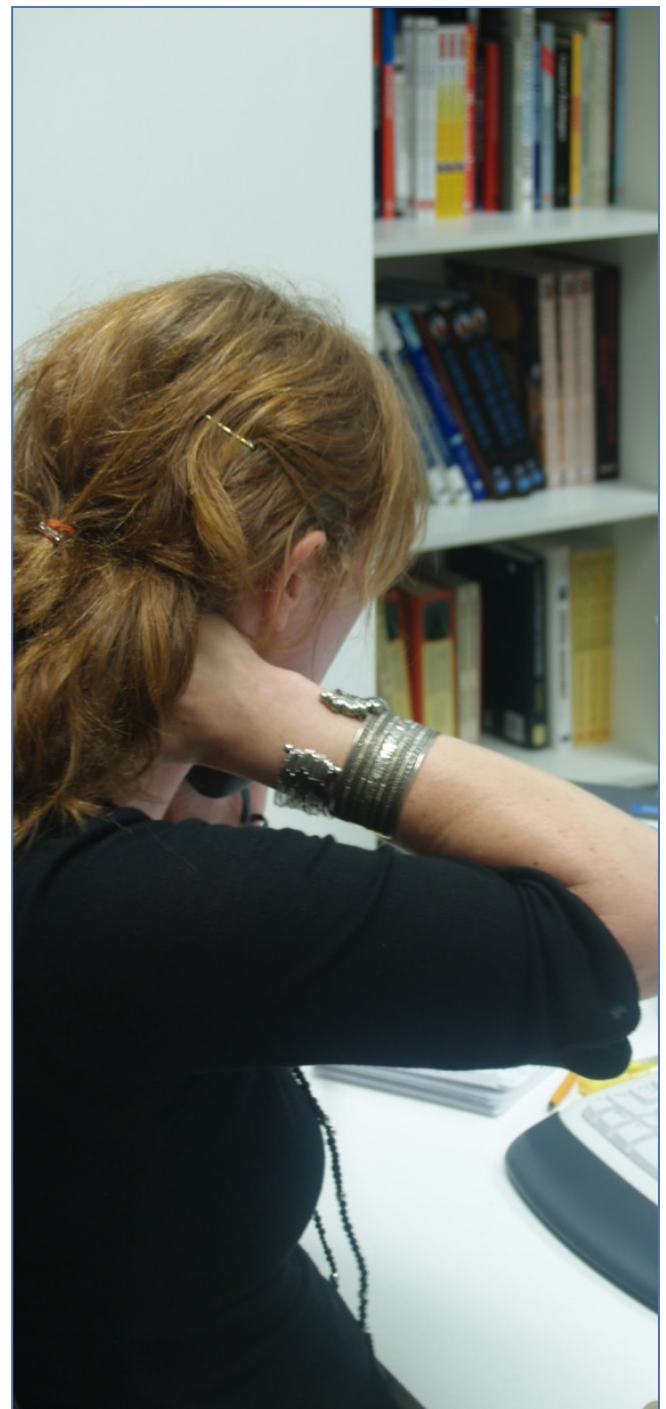
PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Before considering solutions to problems, let's briefly consider some useful skills a problem solver can have:

- **Active listening** – active listening is when we pay full attention to what someone else is saying. You are not thinking about your lunch, or what you are going to say next, but really listening to what someone else says. By doing this, we can ensure that we are fully informed and have the facts that they are trying to convey.

- **Information gathering** – this refers to being able to collect data, information, and facts. It is a useful technique, knowing how to search out and find information.

- **Information analysis** – this is being able to critically think about and evaluate information that we are given without jumping to obvious conclusions.

Whilst these are useful skills for any problem solver, not all decision makers are good problem solvers. However, ensuring that you have the right people around you to help you to decide can overcome this hurdle.

PROBLEMS OR OPPORTUNITIES?

When something happens, we must also consider whether it is a problem or an opportunity – although, of course, something can be a problem AND an opportunity. All of us encounter a vast number of problems – some small, and others large. In a workplace, managers have problems thrust onto them by subordinates, and outside work problems can be thrust onto you by friends, acquaintances, and family members. Some people are overwhelmed by problems, whilst others can have a natural inclination to want to solve every problem personally. As a problem solver, it is important to recognise that good decisions are often made by more than one person. Teamwork and collaboration are important.

There are three common ways we can deal with problems and opportunities:

1) Anticipate

We can try to avoid problems occurring in the first place:

- Identify potential problems before they arise.

- Create conditions to avoid problems arising.

- Establish contingencies to deal with problems when they arise.

A note on Contingency Planning – A Risk Assessment Process

Contingency planning is a valuable strategy for organisations who want to minimise the impact of problems on a workforce or business. It is a critical element of planning and should be worked into the core business plan.

Business continuity and contingency planning have a similar focus but over different timeframes. Business continuity

ties in with long term succession planning, whereas contingency planning usually sits in the business's short-term planning for responding to unexpected problems or emergencies.

In people resourcing, contingency planning focuses on finding and growing talent who will be able to fill leadership or important positions in the future.

Decision making and problem solving are driven by neural process – and affected by existing habits. This habitual action can make asserting contingency plans challenging. However, when it is recognised that neuroleadership practices and strategies drive effective changes when problems are anticipated, then productivity or systems can continue.

To do this, organisations using neuroleadership look at the language and framing around decisions and problems, priorities within the organisation, then the habits that form routines to support decision making and problem-solving processes that are necessary for meeting identified organisational priorities. That is often achieved by the implementation of training and support systems.

2) Delegate

Some problems are not yours. They can be passed back to other people i.e., we can delegate. As already stated, some people may want to solve all problems themselves, but this is not always a good technique. For example, a manager may try to solve all problems when it may be better to ask the member of staff who has raised the problem, or is doing the work, to come to them with

ideas for solutions. The person who is doing the job knows how it works, knows it better (probably) than the manager, and therefore may be able to come up with a better solution. They can then talk to the manager about it and together they may decide on the way forward.

3) Problem Solving

When is a problem an opportunity? Problems can occur due to a single event, or multiple events like when a series of things goes wrong. They may arise due to misunderstanding, bad luck, ambiguity, and so on. Opportunities are usually the result of a single event or action. Many things start as a problem but can lead to an opportunity.

For example, think about mobile phones and cell phones. The very first mobile phones were two-way radios. They were used by taxi drivers and emergency services to communicate with each other. The first patent for a wireless telephone was registered in 1908 and in the 1940s engineers began to develop cells for mobile phones to work. Think about the world today. Many people have mobile phones or smartphones. For many of us, it is something we would struggle to do without each day. So, the development of mobile phones was a series of problems and opportunities – How do taxi drivers communicate? How do emergency services communicate? How can we use that technology to sell to the general population? The first text SMS message was sent in 1992 as Neil Papworth was trying to develop a messaging service for Vodafone. Services developed for specialist reasons and to resolve specialist problems resulted in the solutions becoming opportunities for wider usage.