

Knowledge Worker

Three Problem-Solving Elves

(July 2016)

Once upon a time there were three elves known far and wide for their problem-solving abilities. These were not the tall, beautiful elves found in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. No, these were much shorter elves, just about the size of a Hobbit but not quite. They were not bad looking, mind you, but it was their usefulness not their beauty that led people to seek them out.

One of the elves was named Rhee Pare. He was very, very good at fixing things that somehow got broken. Like a good plumber or mechanic, he could find out what was broken or had gone wrong, fix it, and have things working as good as new in nothing flat. Another of the three elves was named Rhee Fine. His specialty was improvement, and he could improve upon just about anything. A little tinkering and a little tweaking (and an occasional overhaul) was all it took; and whatever he touched worked better than before—always a little better and sometimes much better. The third elf was called Dee Sine. Her specialty was making things happen. She did not care how a problem came about or what the existing circumstances were. She could engineer a solution to just about any problem.

One day a businessman named Cee E. Oh came to see them. He came straight to the point: "My business is not profitable enough," he said.

"Here," said Rhee Pare, "let me have a look at it."

After looking over Cee E. Oh's business, Rhee Pare said, "I can't find anything wrong with it. Everything seems to be working the way it's supposed to. Are you sure it needs fixing?"

"Of course not!" snapped Cee E. Oh. "I didn't say it was broken, I said it wasn't profitable enough."

"Aha!" exclaimed Rhee Fine. "That sounds like my kind of problem. Let me have a look at it."

After his turn at looking over Cee E. Oh's business, Rhee Fine smiled and said, "I am happy to report that I see ways we can cut costs over here and boost sales over there. That will increase profits."

"By how much?" asked Cee E. Oh.

"I estimate by about 15 to 20%," answered Rhee Fine.

"Not good enough," replied Cee E. Oh.

At this point, Dee Sine smiled and inquired, "Just how much do profits have to improve, Mr. Cee E. Oh?"

"They need to triple," answered Cee E. Oh.

Dee, who had been peering over the shoulders of Rhee Pare and Rhee Fine as they examined Cee E. Oh's business, smiled again and said, "In that case I think you need a very different business because the one you have isn't capable of that kind of performance."

"I know that!" snapped Cee E. Oh. "That's why I'm here."

Knowledge Worker

Three Problem-Solving Elves

(July 2016)

Dee smiled even more and said, “If your goal is to triple the profits of your business, then I think you need a business that looks something like this.”

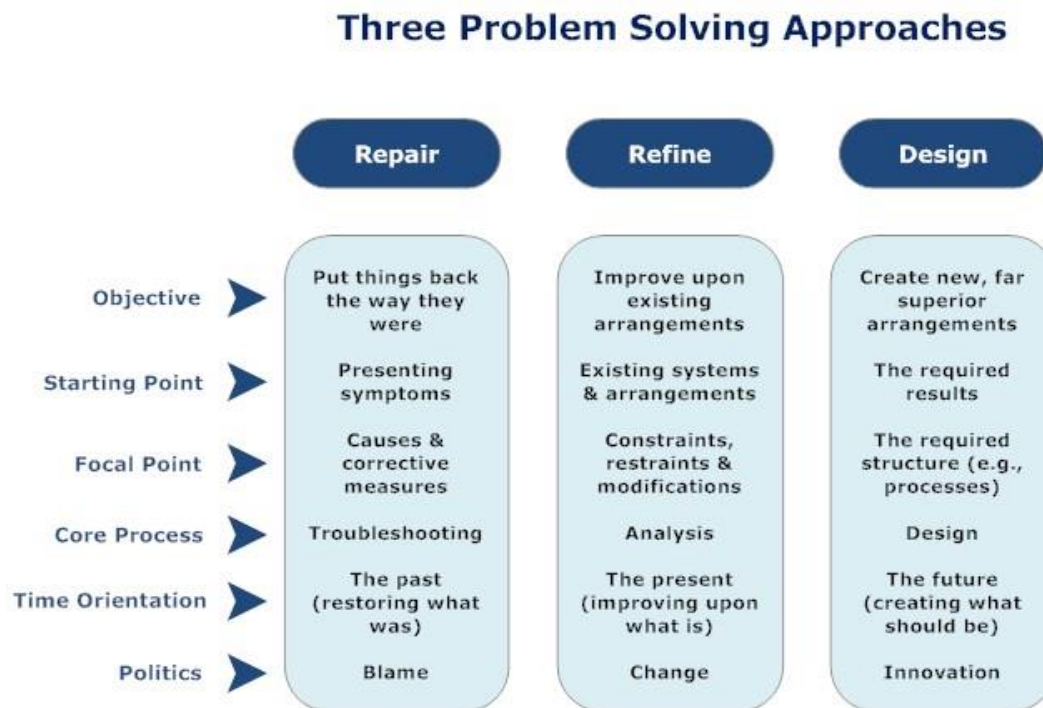
Whereupon Dee showed Cee E. Oh a sketch of the architecture of a new and radically different business, a sketch she had been working on since Cee E. Oh arrived.

Cee E. Oh studied Dee Sine’s sketch intently for a few moments and then, looking up, said, “I can see how that might work, but can you build it?”

“Of course,” answered Dee. “But let me ask you this: Do you want to transform your existing business, or do you want to build this new one from scratch?”

It was Cee E. Oh’s turn to smile. “Ah yes, *change management*. Let’s talk about this over lunch, shall we?” Turning to Rhee Pare and Rhee Fine, he said, “I will have need of you two as well, so please join us.”

The lesson in this little fable about problem-solving elves is that there are three basic approaches to solving problems: repair, refine, and design. Their distinguishing characteristics are presented in the diagram below.



© Fred Nickols 2012

Knowledge Worker

Three Problem-Solving Elves

(July 2016)

So, whenever you find yourself struggling with a problem, take a break, step back, and ask yourself this question: “Do I have the right elf helping me solve this problem?”

Further Reading

For more about these three approaches, see “Choosing the Right Problem Solving Approach” at www.nickols.us/se_choosing.htm

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers’ Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.