

Four Tips for “Beefing Up” Your Problem-Solving Tool Box – Part Three

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This is part three of a four-part guest post contributed by Fred Nickols, Managing Partner of Distance Consulting LLC. All four parts focus on improving your problem solving efforts.

Tip #3: Think of problem solving as a “cover-the-bases” activity

Information does not make itself available to suit the requirements of anyone’s problem solving process. Solving a problem in a complex organization has much in common with detective work. We are forced to follow leads and unearth clues. Further, it is generally the case in complex organizations that no one individual possesses all the information necessary to solve a given problem. Vital information appears in bits and pieces. We have different backgrounds, perceptual filters, and value priorities. Different people seek and assimilate information in different ways.



Figure 3.

Consequently, if you listen carefully to almost any discussion of a problem in a group setting, what you’ll hear is conversation that shifts from problem to symptom to cause to solution and back again, often in no particular order. Such “bouncing around” is natural. Don’t worry about it. Above all else, don’t try to force yourself (or others) to follow some lock-step, linear process. The task of problem solving is very much a type of intelligence work, a matter of piecing things together.

A systematic approach is necessary but the point of having one is to make sure you tend to all the things that need tending to, that you “cover the bases,” not trot around them in a 1-2-3 fashion. Figure 3 depicts a set of 12 “bases” to be covered or tasks that typically need tending to in the course of solving a problem.

Ordinarily, bases 4 and 5 are mutually exclusive; you do one or the other but not both. If you’re dealing with a problem where something has gone wrong, then your best bet, at least initially, is to focus on finding and fixing the cause of the problem. On the other hand, if you’re out to achieve some state of affairs never before attained, or if the cause of the problem has been found

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but can't be corrected, then you'll have to design and engineer a solution to the problem. In either case, you'll have to settle on a course of action and carry it out.

