

A Simple Model for Problem Solving

Several years ago, generally fed up with what everybody else seemed to perceive as the role of manager, I went to the door of my office and shouted down the hall, “Don’t bring me any more problems. Bring me some solutions.”

I, like a lot of managers, had about had my fill of problems. Unfortunately, this approach to problem solving didn’t work. I had new problems to deal with before the noise had died.

Later, I learned that it wasn’t whether you had problems to deal with (everybody does), but how you deal with them that makes the difference. In this article, we’re going to look at a three-question method for reducing the number of problems you have to deal with and at a three-step model for dealing with those problems that are left.

We can sort out a lot of so-called problems by asking two questions: Is it a problem? Is it a problem I need to solve?

Is it a problem?

You may have run into a situation like this. Thirty days ago you put a salesman on probation. There’s been no improvement, and today you’re going to have to fire him. You’re sitting at your desk, chewing over the “problem.”

The problem here is that you’re not really dealing with a problem; you’re dealing with an unpleasant circumstance, and all that stewing over it will do is increase your gastric acidity.

IDHAC (I don’t have a choice) and problem are mutually exclusive terms. If there is no choice, there is no

problem and any time you spend trying to solve it is wasted. In the example above – firing the salesman – the best thing you can do is do what is required and move on to something else.

Problems we solve. Circumstances we simply accommodate.

Is it a problem I need to solve?

It seems like any problem (or perceived problem) tagged sales, salesperson, or customer automatically attaches itself to the sales manager. Consequently, we spend much of our time reacting to problems.

We should take Peter Drucker’s advice. He said, “*Resources, to produce results, must be allocated to opportunities.*” Our time and mental energies are among our most limited resources; if we spend all on problems, we don’t have anything left for opportunities.

Before tackling a problem, ask two questions: Is it worth solving? Is it my problem?

Some problems simply aren’t worth the bother; the benefits of solving them don’t pay for the time spent on them. One distributor thought that his salespeople were using the company’s phones for personal calls, some of them long distance. He had a system installed that provided a printout of every number called and the length of the call. He spent hours poring over the printouts. He even found a few personal calls. But he didn’t come close to paying for his time.

Yet, there’s something programmed into us that says that if there’s a problem, there has to be a solution. Prob-

bly. But, so what? Our time is valuable and needs to be spent where we can get the greatest return.

The second part of this question is whether — given that we are dealing with a problem, and it is important enough to be solved — we are the one who has to solve it. People problems coming up from the ranks deserved to be shoved right back down to the ranks. For instance, an inside salesperson and an outside salesperson in a distributorship were having a communication problem regarding orders from the customers. The outside salesperson wanted the sales manager to require the inside salesperson to report any significant orders from his customers to him. The manager's first impulse was to figure out a system, call both of them into his office, and tell them how it should be done. His second (and better) impulse was to call both of them in, tell them he understood the problem, and since they were the ones with the greatest interest in a successful solution, he wanted them to come up with one. He gave them a date to report back with the solution.

Not only did the sales manager save himself the time he would have spent working on the problem, but he also gave the salespeople an opportunity to do something about their own jobs and devise a solution that they would own.

Am I solving the right problem?

Too often we spend time trying to solve the symptom of a problem. The CEO comes in waving a sheaf of computer printouts. "We've got a problem," he says. "Our sales are down." You translate that to say, "The problem is that our sales are down."

Keep in mind that if the problem is properly identified, it will point to its

own solution. In the example above, the obvious thing is that if the problem is that sales are down, the solution is increase sales. That doesn't give you a very clear action plan.

If the solution indicated by the problem doesn't direct you to an action, just keep asking why. Buried somewhere under the symptoms is a real problem.

An over-simplified problem-solving model.

Assuming that you are dealing with a real problem, one that you should be dealing with yourself, and that you have properly defined it, there is a simple and very useful method for solving it. It consists of three steps.

1. Envision the ideal solution.
2. Determine what prevents you from arriving at that solution.
3. Create a plan for removing the impediments.

It's a process called "backward planning," and it involves looking at a problem much as we look at a map. When we are plotting a route we start with where we are, then look at where we want to go, and only then do we worry about what roads will take us there.

It sounds simple, but if you spend enough time on step 1, expect some unexpected results.

In the accompanying fictionalized account, we'll see how a sales manager puts both the questions and the model to work.

The Case of the Empty Territory

Terry Meyers, the sales manager for Calcon Distributing, stood at the door to his office. He really didn't want to go

inside. Terry had been gone for nearly two weeks, first to an association meeting and then in meetings with vendors. He had called in four or five times a day, but he knew that there would be a lot on his desk that he hadn't gotten over the phone.

He took a deep breath and walked in.

Before he even made it to his chair he spotted the first red flag: another letter from Ringles Manufacturing. That would be Art Hooks whining about the pricing again. Terry picked the letter up, glanced at it and tossed it aside. What Art didn't know is that Calcon had just completed their customer profitability study, and Ringles wasn't profitable. There was no way Calcon was going to "become more competitive." One down.

The second thing he saw was a handwritten memo from Jerry Bingham. Jerry, as he did about every six months, was asking for a piece of somebody else's territory. Jerry was a good salesman, but he was bent on conquering new territory. Terry put that one aside to deal with later. Probably the same answer he gave him last time.

The next one was a surprise. A letter typed on plain white paper. Attached to it was a sticky note that said, "Since you were gone, Jimmy gave this to me. Didn't think it would do you any good to know this while you were on the road." It was signed Frank. Frank was the CEO.

It only took a second for Terry to see that Frank Cagle had resigned. He checked the resignation date and saw that he had given two weeks notice. That meant that he would be leaving at the end of this week.

"Great," he thought as he stared at the letter. "Now I've got to find me a new salesman. I've got an empty territory."

Terry leaned back and closed his eyes. What he needed right now was one more problem. Especially this one. Guess it's time to run a classified.

He opened his eyes and started looking for the file he kept the "Industrial Sales Professional" ad in. It never got far from his desk since they seemed to be looking for a new salesperson several times a year.

Just as he picked up the file, he remembered something he had heard in the breakout session at the association meeting. "Are you solving the right problem?" The guy had said that a properly defined problem indicated its solution. "OK," Terry thought, "My problem is that I'm missing a salesperson. The solution is hire a salesperson." He put the file down and leaned back again.

He had been told that he should visualize the ideal solution. The ideal solution is having a good salesman out there growing the territory. The solution is still "hire a salesperson." But, he wondered, is that really what we want. He stopped trying to deal with answers and let his mind wander.

What we are really looking for, he thought, is very satisfied customers and the lowest appropriate cost of sales. Does that indicate "hire another salesperson."? Not necessarily. Another speaker at the convention had talked about how we needed to sell to customers as they wanted to be sold to. That might mean something other than an outside salesperson calling on them.

Calcon already had one significant account that was handled primarily by

inside sales. Outside sales or engineering handled on-site trouble shooting or new product demos; the day-to-day business was handled by Juliet in inside sales. That was working there.

What, Terry wondered, would happen if they didn't put a new salesman in that territory? What if they used this as an opportunity to look at different ways of selling to the customers? That certainly sounded better than interviewing another ten or twelve applicants for the sales position.

Okay. He had envisioned the ideal solution. Now what was the next step? Something about listing the things that could keep you from getting to the ideal solution. Terry started making notes. At the top of the list was Frank. So far as he was concerned, every significant account should be called on regularly by an outside salesperson. He tolerated the one exception they had as just that — an exception.

Then there were the outside salespeople. How would they feel about being told that some accounts could be handled just as well without them? And the really big one: how will we go about finding which customers want outside salespeople, which didn't and which wanted some sort of hybrid system. What would they do about the customers who did want regular sales calls? Terry thought a few more minutes, but couldn't come up with any more impediments. He figured those four were enough?

Now, the third step was to deal with the impediments. Terry began to list some possibilities. First, make this a test. Frank would be more likely to buy it. The outside salespeople could learn to love this system if their commissions were protected. It would also give them

more time to find and capture new accounts. And, so far as the customers were concerned, the best way to find out how they wanted to be sold to would be to ask them.

Terry reviewed his notes. It's a different route, he thought. Maybe a better one. But it certainly felt better than the knee-jerk solution he almost had.

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