



Westside Toastmasters is located in Los Angeles and Santa Monica, California

Five-Step Problem-Solving Approach

People who are really good at solving problems go about it systematically. They have a way of placing the problem in context. They don't jump to conclusions. They evaluate alternatives.

A good way to become a systematic problem solver is to adopt the following five-step problem-solving process.

1. **Identify the problem.** This is critical: you must try to solve the *right* problem. Don't try to solve a problem the customer sees as low priority or unimportant. Identify the right problem by asking the right questions and observing. You cannot identify the customer's problems by presenting your products. What's leading the customer to feel there is a problem? Is it something specific, or is it an intuitive sense that things aren't as they should be? Can the customer define the problem?
2. **Analyze the problem.** How often does the problem occur? How severe is it? Are there any special circumstances that are present when it occurs? What might be the causes of the problem? Can you rule out any causes? How long has it been going on? Has it gotten worse? How is the problem affecting other processes or people?
3. **Identify decision criteria.** How will you and the customer make decisions when it is time to decide? How will you weigh the criteria? Can you identify independent standards that can be used?
4. **Develop multiple solutions.** Don't stop at the first solution that you or others identify. It may be good, but much better ones may exist. Evaluate alternative scenarios. As objectively as possible, assess the pros and cons of each.
5. **Choose the optimal solution.** Use the criteria you developed in the third step of this problem-solving process to choose the best solution. Develop a base of support that will ensure you can implement the solution. Prepare for contingencies.

When you solve problems systematically, you save time, achieve better solutions, and increase your credibility with the customer and the perceived value of what you've done. If you can solve problems the customer is facing more expeditiously than someone else, the customer will appreciate the time saved.

Problem solving involves some considerations beyond those addressed by the five-step process. Once you have identified the problem you can sometimes rely on a known solution or a combination of known solutions. At other times, no ready solution is apparent. In that case, you may need to do a *business case analysis* to determine whether it will be profitable for your company to develop a solution. This includes asking what might be involved in developing the solution, how much time the process would require, and how well suited your company is to do the job. The issues become more complicated, but the problem-solving process may also be more rewarding.

You may need to tap into the knowledge you have acquired in solving similar or even dissimilar problems or the knowledge that exists in your company. You might need to have someone initiate research and create a solution from scratch (which can be cost prohibitive), or you can find a partner that already has the solution you need. You will need an innovative approach. Deciding to create solutions and driving them through the organization is part of what makes exceptional sales leaders exceptional.

An Example of Problem Analysis

Let's assume for the moment that a company wants its salespeople to improve their ability to uncover the high-priority problems the company's customers are facing and that they are not getting the information they need to do so. The reality is that there are a limited number of reasons people don't do what they are supposed to do.

- They don't know they should do it (caused by poor communication).
- They don't know how to do it (caused by a lack of skills).
- They don't want to do it (caused by a lack of motivation or a lack of rewards).
- Something keeps them from doing it (caused by a lack of resources or tools).

So if the company wants to change the skills, behaviors, and performance of its salespeople, the question is, what is the *reason* they aren't doing what they should or could be doing? Using the reasons listed, we can start to isolate the problem or problems. If the salespeople don't know how to identify customer problems, then training would be an appropriate solution. Most times, the issue isn't as simple as not knowing how to do something. Experienced salespeople already use a variety of skills, so it may be an issue of refining or advancing those skills. It may also be a case of changing habits that have developed over time, habits that interfere with doing the right things.

The salespeople may not want to do it because their managers don't approve of it when they do (a negative consequence). In this case, if they already know how to do it, the solution must involve working with the managers to gain their support or to provide them with the skills they need to understand customers' current needs. The idea is to use a systematic approach in isolating the problem. Don't rely on superficial observations.

