Problem-Solving Systems

By Ron Willingham – *The People Principle*

Preface:

A leader teaches others to lead themselves – to solve their own problems, make their own decisions, act with strong positive values and produce agreed-upon results with their own given resources.

I'm not at all advocating that you turn all your decisions over to your people. Of course, you'll always make the major decisions, but the more decisions you can empower your people to make, the more broad-based a leader you'll become. You'll be freed up to do what leaders do – set the vision for your organization's future by selecting competent people, motivating and inspiring them.

How much of your time is spent solving problems that people should be solving themselves?

These Problem-Solving Systems contained in this manual come from the book, *The People Principle* by Ron Willingham. They are from Chapter 8, entitled; "Hey, Boss, I Have This Problem I Want to Dump on Your Shoulders!"

Introduction:

As a leader, a great deal of your own productive time is taken up by your own people asking you to solve problems that they're paid to solve and make decisions that they're employed to make.

Get-stuff-done leaders refuse to solve other people's problems; rather they train them how to do it and then empower them to do it. Contrast this with codependent people who assume that their role is to shoulder the world's problems and take responsibility that others should take. Consequently, they get mired down in the minutiae that, eventually engulfs and often immobilizes them.

So, not only is their own leadership effectiveness drained off by others, but they fail to build problem-solving and decision-making skills in their people. And since many people are thrilled to let someone else make their decisions, they shuffle all they can to other people.

Reflecting on human nature, Thomas Edison once remarked, "There is no expedient to which a man will not go to avoid the real labor of thinking."

Cynical? Well, maybe a bit, but observe human nature and you'll quickly see that many people will leave their thinking up to another person.

Leaders leverage their own time and talents by teaching their people to make most of their decisions and solve their own problems. Usually, the more they can do this, the more they get done through people.

How to Empower People to Solve Problems and Make Decisions:

In order to empower people to solve more of their own problems and make their own decisions, you'll need to do the following:

1. Teach them logical problem-solving and decision-making processes.
2. Refuse to allow them to shift responsibility to your shoulders.
3. Coach them on how to apply the processes.

How to Solve Problems with Customers:

The following is a simple and logical customer-service problem-solving formula. Copy this formula and give it out to your people. Whenever someone comes to you and asks you what you would do about a given situation, pull out a sheet, hand it to them, and respond, "I haven't the slightest idea. Why don't you go work this problem-solving formula and tell me what's the best way to solve it?"

Customer-Service Problem-Solving Formula:

1. *Understand* the problem.
    a. Get all the facts.
    b. Listen non-defensively to customers.
    c. Repeat the problem as you understood it.

2. *Identify* the cause.
    a. Find out what happened.
    b. Find out what should have happened.
    c. Find out what went wrong.

3. D*iscuss* possible solutions with customers.
    a. Suggest options.
    b. Ask for other people's ideas.
    c. Agree on the best course of action.

4. *Solve* the problem.
    a. Remove the cause, or
    b. Take corrective action.

     c. Ask the people involved if they are satisfied with the resolution.

This simple customer-service problem-solving formula helps your people set emotions aside and logically reach a satisfactory resolution.

Give this formula to anyone who comes to you with customer-service issues. Tell them they're better prepared to solve the problem than you are. Give them the formula, ask them to work through it; arrive at what they think is the best solution; and then come back to you to review their analysis.

This assignment may take ten minutes or ten days, but if you hold their feet to the fire and get them thinking and working through the formula, you'll equip them to work through many problems for which they don't need your help. Even for problems that may require your input, have them go through the formula analysis anyway before coming to you. Ask them:

1. What's the problem?
2. What's the cause?
3. What's your recommendation for a solution?
4. Will the customer be happy with this solution?

After you've reviewed their problem analysis, you can approve their corrective action or suggest changes. Whichever, you've bolstered the person and kept the problem-solving responsibility on his/her shoulders.

Now, let's consider the logic of this formula. First, customer-service problems usually involve emotions, and this can block logic and good judgment. Egos get involved. Turf must be protected. Battle lines are drawn. Using nonjudgmental listening, this formula allows your people to defuse customers' emotions by getting them talking.

It's here that your people's attitudes strongly influence the outcome. Their attitudes should be, "Let's understand the problem and work toward a solution that pleases you. Let me make sure I understand what caused the problem, discuss possible solutions, and then solve the problem."

When your people demonstrate genuine care and concern, they will resolve problems and strengthen customer relations.

Now, I realize that your people have other problems that don't involve internal or external customers. So let me share with you another simple problem-solving formula that works well when encountering process or functional problems.

A General Problem-Solving Formula:

1. Define the problem.
   a. What was the desired outcome?
   b. What was the actual outcome?
   c. What was the deviation or difference?

2. Identify the cause of the problem.
   a. What went wrong?
   b. Why did it go wrong?
   c. What unforeseen factors entered in?

3. Write down possible solutions.
   a. List everything you can think of that will remove the cause or correct the deviation.
   b. Research and seek the advice of others.
   c. Analyze each possible solution as to its ability to eliminate the cause or deviation.

4. Solve the problem.
   a. Seek to eliminate the cause of the problem.
   b. Choose best solutions and prioritize them.
   c. Begin doing them one at a time.

What Is a Problem?

A problem is the difference between what should have happened and what actually happened.

The first step is problem solving is to identify and understand the problem. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But, as I've said before, people who experience problems often move out of a logical mode into an emotional one.

A good problem statement often includes:

   a. What is known.
   b. What is unknown.
   c. What is sought.

A problem understood and well-defined in writing, gets your people a long way down the road to solving it.

Define the Problem:

Defining the problem gets your people to focus on solving the problem rather than being overwhelmed with the problem's repercussions. Often, the anxiety that we allow problems to cause within us blocks our ability to think. You've seen it many times. One of your people comes in and frantically tells you, "We can't make the scheduled visits and the intake department is already getting calls from angry customers, and everyone is screaming at everyone else…"

You've seen similar situations, haven't you? People focusing on the anxiety that the problem has created instead of defining the problem, identifying the cause, and taking corrective action.

Identify the Cause:

Theoretically, every problem has a cause and when the cause is identified and corrected, the problem gets solved. This is a bit simplistic, but the theory can at least keep people on a logical track.

There are many causes of problems. They can be functional – the computer malfunctioned. The can be operational – the assembly line isn't properly designed. They can be personal – two people are having personal conflicts.

In order to solve the problems, the cause of them has to be identified. You can help your people identify the cause by getting them doing these three actions. Identify:

1. What went wrong?
2. Why did it go wrong?
3. What unforeseen factors entered in?

Asking and writing down answers to these questions can help them get at the root cause of the problem. It's here that your people often stop and come to you for you to do their problem analysis for them. They ask, "We've got this problem. What do you want us to do about it?"

Very often you're drawn into allowing them to shift the responsibility to you. I know that sometimes you do need to handle it; but I'll guess that most often you don't need to solve it – your people are quite capable of doing that. They often just don't want to take the responsibility.

To condition your people to become problem solvers, you might encourage a dialogue like this:

ASSOCIATE: "Hey, boss, I've got this problem. What do you think I ought to do about it.

YOU: "I haven't the slightest idea. What do you think you should do?"

ASSOCIATE: "Well, I was hoping you could, you know, sorta, help me solve it."

YOU: "Tell you what. You take this problem-solving formula and work through it. Let me take a few minutes and explain it to you. (give person a sheet with formula printed on it and explain it.)

"Go work through it and then come back to me with your ideas. We'll sit down and go over what you think the problem is, what caused it, and how you think we can solve it."

ASSOCIATE: "You mean you aren't going to continue to be codependent and allow me to dump all this stuff on you that I don't want to take responsibility for?"

YOU: "Yeah, something like that! Bye for now…"

Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a bit! But you get my drift!

Empowering Your People:

Enough has been written about empowering people to educate everyone from here to Pluto. A lot of it is good advice, but much is wasted and empty. Here are some factors that influence the empowerment of people:

1. They must understand the objectives.
2. They must understand the rules, values, and guidelines to stay within.
3. They must take responsibility.
4. You must give them freedom within certain limits to solve problems and make decisions.
5. You must not beat them up when they make a wrong decision. It must be a learning experience.
6. You must encourage your people to own each problem they encounter.
7. You have to train and build your people, and then trust them to do the right things.
8. you must celebrate victories and growth.
9. You must get cross-functional teams working on problems and objectives.
10. You must help each person see how his or her role fits into the overall success of your organization.

This is a new role for many managers. In the traditional, top to bottom, hierarchical type of management structure, managers made decisions and passed them down to subordinates. That's not an efficient organizational structure.

People Assume Responsibility When Basic Needs Are Met:

Before people assume responsibility for making decisions and solving problems, they must have:

1. A clear understanding of your organization's vision – what you will look like in the future.
2. A clear understanding of their job roles and how they fit into that vision.
3. Training to look for and solve problems.
4. Encouragement to be creative and innovative.
5. Acknowledgment of and reward for their successes, even attempts.
6. A sense that they are genuinely valued and given autonomy.

A few people resist change so much that you'll never convert them; at least it would take too much time and effort to try to change them. So, you carefully look for the right qualities in new people.

An Organization That Thrives on Empowerment:

When it comes to empowering their people, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel says that it begins with the hiring of their people. About twenty people are interviewed in order to hire one new employee. They look, not for experience, but for friendliness and natural human-relations skills. In extensive training, they teach people the culture of Ritz-Carlton. They learn about the whole operation, front to back.

Each employee carries a Credo Card inscribed with the following:

> The Ritz-Carlton Hotel is a place where the genuine care and comfort of our guests is our highest mission.
>
> We pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilities for our guests who will always enjoy a warm, relaxed yet refined ambiance.
>
> The Ritz-Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instills well-being, and fulfills even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.

Their battle cry is "We are Ladies and Gentlemen Serving Ladies and Gentlemen!"

They identify three steps of service:

1. A warm and sincere greeting. Use the guests' name, if and when possible.
2. Anticipation of and compliance with guests' needs.
3. Fond farewell. Give them a warm good-bye and use their names, if and when possible.

On the inside of the fold-over card, they outline twenty "Ritz-Carlton Basics" to be practiced by all their people on a daily basis.

Each employee carries a Credo Card at all times. They focus on one of the twenty basics each day. Every employee of every hotel around the world focuses on that same basic the same day. Talk about synergy. Can you imagine the energy and power generated by every employee around the world focusing on the same action each day?

Because the Ritz-Carlton selects the right kind of people, trains them, communicates their vision and beliefs and core values, their employees look for creative ways to solve problems and satisfy guests.

Taking Ownership of Problems:

One of the points on the Credo Card is, "Any employee who receives a guest complaint 'owns' the complaint." Everyone is trained to take ownership of problems as they spot them. Each one is empowered to solve a problem up to $2,000 without asking anyone.

This practice shifts tremendous decision-making powers to all employees. Obviously they have to be trained to accept this level of responsibility. Not just trained to handle problems, but also trained emotionally to accept responsibility and move ahead confidently with corrective actions. Of course, this practice influences the type of people they hire.

It also makes a powerful statement of confidence in their people. It says, "We trust you to use your best judgment and take care of problems as they occur."

When you're confident in your people's ability to act responsibly, they'll work hard to live up to your faith in them.

Releasing Control:

Empowering people means, in a sense, relinquishing control. And many managers equate having control with how valuable they are to their organizations.

This is bad thinking.

Often, keeping control limits productivity. If you're a person who micromanages, you'll naturally limit your productivity. There aren't enough hours in the day for you to be involved in every decision your people have to make.

Control is a paradoxical, often illusional thing. Often when you think you have it, you don't. Often when you think having it is important to keep your job, you lose your position by hanging on to it. Control may give people a sense of power, but the more they rely on it, the more their chances of losing power increase.

The person who has real power is the one who can select good people, train them, and give them the latitude to work and get results.

Decision Making:

Decision-making is what course of action to take after a problem has been solved. Highly effective people can size up situations, facts, and data, then decide. Mistakes will be made, but they are more than offset by the benefits of conscientiousness, decisiveness, and action.

There are many decision-making models. For 90 percent of decisions, the old Ben Franklin Model can prove very helpful:

1. At the top of a page define the course of action that you think would be the best decision.
2. Draw a vertical line dividing the sheet in half.
3. On one side list all the reasons for taking the action; and on the other side list all the dangers or reasons not to take the action.
4. Compare the pros and cons, choose one, and move on or initiate the course of action.

Give this simple decision-making model to your people. Obviously, for complicated, high-risk decisions, more thought and analysis needs to be given to it. But for 90 percent of their decisions, this method will work.

Summing Up:

One way to get more done through people is to empower them to solve problems and make decisions.

Probably a great deal of your time is consumed by people who want you to solve their problems and make their decisions for them.

It all begins with people who will take initiative and responsibility and then setting the boundaries and parameters in which they can make decisions. Then

they need to be trained in problem solving and decision-making. Once trained they need to be empowered to take action, use their best judgment, and move through the problems and decisions they encounter.

I have given you two problem-solving models. You have my permission to duplicate these models, give them to your people, and teach them how to use them.

You'll find that through practice and reinforcement they'll gradually grow in their ability to solve problems and make decisions. You'll discover that your people can use these simple models for around 90 percent of their decisions and problems.

Training and empowering your people to use these models will not only save your valuable time and energy, but it will help you get more done through your people, which will greatly increase your value to your organization.