



THE ROLE OF PROBLEM SOLVING ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVING SPEAKING

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ANNOTATION

Language is the chief means by which the human personality exercises itself and fulfills its basic need for social interaction with other persons. Robert Lado wrote that language functions owing to the language skills. A person who knows a language perfectly uses a thousand and one grammar lexical, phonetic rules when he is speaking. Language skills help us to choose different words and models in our speech.

Before generating ideas, it is important to understand more about problems. It is not essential, but the material that follows could provide better insight into the types of situations in which idea generation activities are applied. You also might want to use it for general problem-solving training or as background information for training in idea generation activities.

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Defining Problems

There are a number of different perspectives on the definition and nature of problems, as well as different types of problems. Here is a brief overview of some of the classic ones.

Problems as Goals

One general definition describes a problem in terms of some difficult obstacle or goal. According to this definition, anything difficult to overcome is a problem. Although this definition is descriptive, it is not precise enough for most purposes. Most challenging situations present more than a goal to overcome and, instead, involve a series of processes to apply and evaluate.

Kepner and Tregoe's (1981) classic definition of a problem is "a deviation from an expected standard of performance." This definition is more descriptive for general use. If you need to determine the cause of a problem, then this is an excellent definition. Day-to-day idea generation, however, is not especially concerned with problem causes. Although determining causes may be important as part of the overall creative problem-solving process, such determinations are not useful for pure idea generation.

Kepner and Tregoe's definition is essentially convergent in that problem solvers attempt to converge on a cause by eliminating various alternative explanations. Idea generation, in contrast, is more divergent—problem solvers attempt to generate many different alternatives. In the case of idea generation, however, alternatives are solutions and not explanations. Because the idea generation activities in this book are divergent, Kepner and Tregoe's definition doesn't fit.

A Gap Between the Real and the Ideal

MacCrimmon and Taylor (1976) propose another definition that is more appropriate for our purposes and has remained a standard over the years. They define a problem as a gap between a current and a desired state of affairs—that is, a gap between where you are and where you would like to be. An example might be when you are dissatisfied with the brand position of one of your products and wish



the product were more competitive. If you perceive things that way, you have a problem. If you are unaware of your competitive position or there is nothing you can do about it, however, then perhaps you don't have a problem. The same would apply to any other type of organization as well. It's all relative.

Tackling the Challenge

Most problems also involve some uncertainty and present a challenge. They can be trouble, right here in River City. You want to do something about them, but you don't know exactly what. The type of problem you face will determine how to resolve it. For instance, if your car runs out of gas, you have a problem. The solution in this case is relatively simple: put in more gas. Any other solution would be a waste of time (unless gas was not available).

You don't need to spend a lot of energy and effort being creative unnecessarily. Organizations continually are faced with similar challenges at all levels involving perceptions of gaps between current and desired situations. Upper management typically must provide leadership on how to move the organization to achieve its vision and negotiate relationships with external constituencies; middle management must continually help allocate desired resources efficiently and effectively (desired goals); and lower management must help employees understand why they are being asked to close gaps (that is, help other organizational members deal with their seemingly unending challenges). However, as shown by the gasoline example, not all organizational challenges require creativity. There are and always will be routine procedures designed to tackle the majority of problems. The secret is to know when you need to be creative and when to fall back on routine procedures. To do this, it is important to figure out what type of problem or challenge faces you.

What Type of Problem Do You Have?

Most problems can be categorized according to how much structure they possess. For instance, if your problem is well-structured, you would have a clear idea of how to solve it. You would know your current state, the desired state, and how to close the gap. The previous problem, running out of gas, is clearly a well-structured problem. In a manufacturing organization, the work days lost to injuries would be another example IF you know how many days are lost for a time period, how many days should be lost (a realistic goal), and how to reduce that gap. If you don't know with certainty how to reduce this gap, then the problem would be more "fuzzy" or ill-structured.

Ill-structured problems provide relatively little guidance or structure on how to solve them. An example would be a problem of generating new product ideas. In this case, there are many possible options but no clear-cut way to proceed (that is, no way that will guarantee a new product home run). Or a nonprofit organization might have an ill-structured problem of how to recruit more volunteers.

The type of problem will determine the approach to use. In general, you should hope that all of your problems are well-structured. According to Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon, the goal of all problem solving is to make problems well-structured. Such problems are the easiest to solve, because you can use a routine response. Fuzzy problems with less structure require creative responses. For these



problems, you must devise custom-made responses that require more time and effort. This book provides activities to help with problems that aren't well-structured.

Problem Solving

If you accept a problem as a gap between a current and a desired state, then problem solving can be defined as the process of making something into what you want it to be. That is, when you solve a problem, you transform "what is" into "what should be." This means you have to figure out how to do something different. You have to change the status quo into another status. How you do this is the trick. The more ideas you generate, the closer you will come to transforming an existing problem state into a desired one. For instance, suppose you currently possess a 12 percent market share of a product line and your objective is to capture a 15 percent share. If so, you will need options to reduce the 3 percent gap. Every idea you generate increases the overall probability of reducing this gap and achieving your goal. The more ideas you can spew out, the easier it will be to resolve your problem. Thus, the more activities you have at your disposal, the easier it will be to do problem solving.

Creativity and Serendipity

There is only one way in which a person acquires a new idea: by the combination or association of two or more ideas he already has into a new juxtaposition in such a manner as to discover a relationship among them of which he was not previously aware. Many people don't understand the importance of having a variety of activities in their "problem solving kits." It is true, as Francis Cartier notes, that new ideas result from combining previous ideas. However, the process involved in producing new insights is not so simple. New ideas can be generated by combining ideas discovered by chance or by searching more systematically.

Serendipitous Discoveries

There is nothing wrong with serendipity, of course. The world today would not be the same without it. The history of science, for example, is full of stories about how new ideas came about through chance. Take rooster sperm . . . please. It may seem odd, but rooster sperm illustrates the importance of the ability to recognize a creative idea when it presents itself. Rooster sperm has been responsible indirectly for providing sight to many people, but the creative "insight" involved might never have been discovered had it not been for a series of accidental happenings.

It all started in a laboratory outside London, England, right after World War II. Scientists were experimenting with fructose as a fowl sperm preservative. Their supply of fructose was kept in a cold room the scientists shared with another laboratory located about five miles away. One day, one of the scientists entered the supply room to retrieve a bottle of fructose, picked up a bottle without a label, and used the contents inside. Eureka! The contents of the bottle successfully preserved the sperm. It turned out that the bottle with no label actually belonged to the other lab, and the bottle contained glycerin, not fructose. Thus, serendipity played a role in solving a scientific problem. But wait. There's more! The sequel to this story is that, years later, a scientist working on organ transplants remembered the rooster experiments and the preservative powers of glycerin. His problem involved preserving human corneas for transplantation.



Glycerin provided just what he needed. As a result, more people can see, thanks to that bottle with the missing label. The fowl sperm story illustrates more than the need for patience to allow creative solutions to emerge. Patience is important, as is the need to capitalize on chance events. A trained, knowledgeable mind is required to recognize when combinations of events or elements suggest something new. However, today's fast-changing, environment doesn't provide the luxury of waiting for serendipity, even for the most skilled minds. Rather, organizations need a way to search systematically for solutions. That's where this book can help in training minds to think more creatively and to generate ideas as well. If you and the people you train or work with become familiar with the activities in this book, you'll always have a powerful resource at your disposal. With the variety of activities described, you should never run out of ideas. And, most importantly, you should never have to rely on serendipity for all of your best ideas.

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