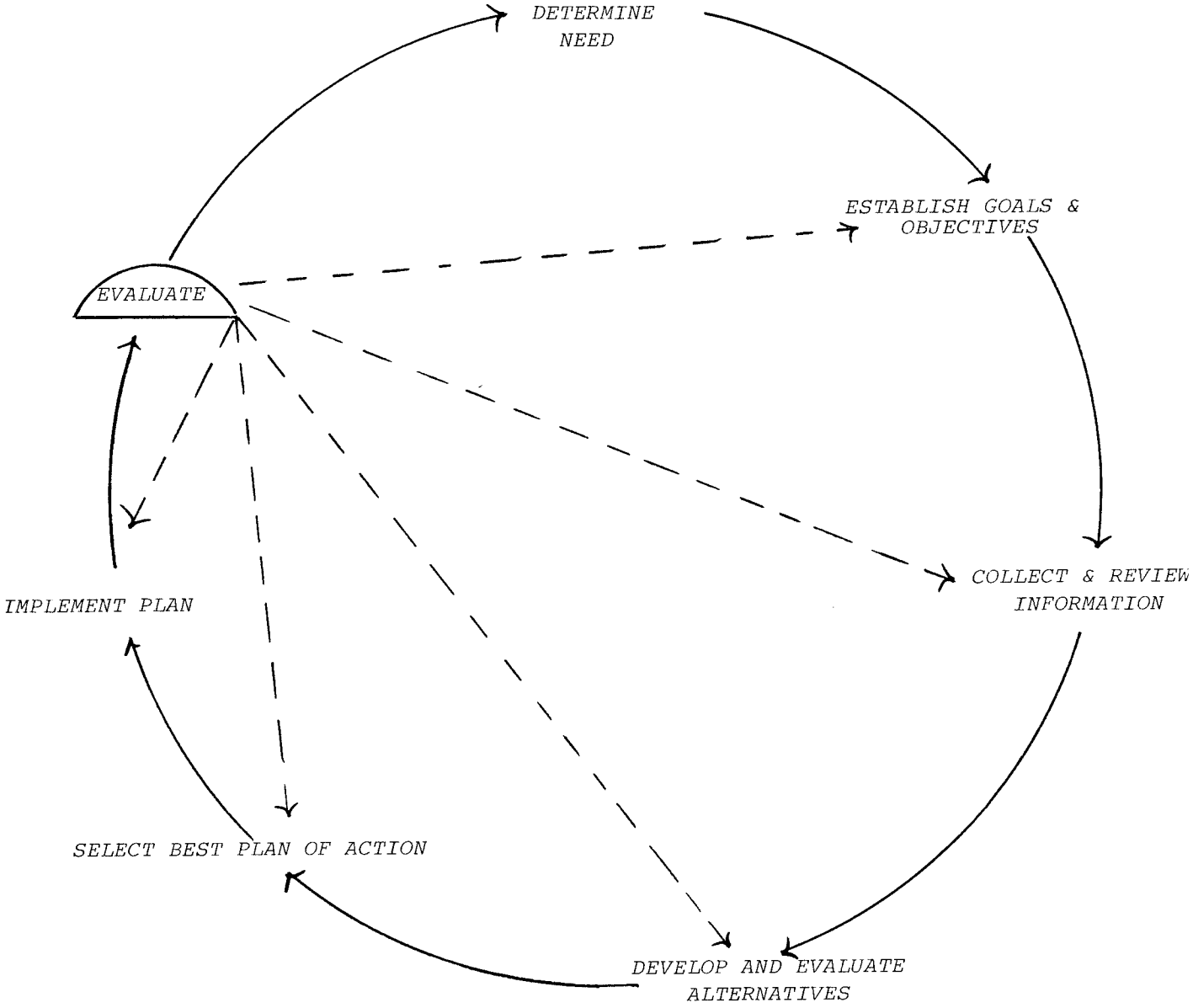
THE SEVEN-STEP PLANNING CYCLE



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STEPS IN PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

Problem Identification and Analysis

1. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM - A problem is a deviation from what you think should be or what you want to be. State the problem in these terms. "Own" the problem and tell how it affects you. Cite specific examples.

2. CLARIFY THE PROBLEM - Ask someone to paraphrase the problem as it has been stated to see if there is some mutual agreement as to what the problem actually is. Communicate to someone else how you understand the problem. It helps to write the problem statement on a chalkboard or flip chart so that everyone can clearly see the statement. Check to see who is affected by the problem and who might need to be included in the problem solving process. Get them involved as early as possible or when appropriate.

3. IDENTIFY THE CAUSE - Clearly isolate the cause(s) of the problem. This cause will be the target toward which solutions must be directed.

Generating Solutions

4. SOLICIT ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM - Look for logical and creative solutions to the cause. Have members of the group "brainstorm" their ideas for alternative solutions to the problem without stopping to evaluate each idea.

Solution Selection and Action Planning

5. SELECTING ONE ALTERNATIVE FOR ACTION - Evaluate the proposed alternatives and come to a selection of one or more to be implemented.

6. PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION - Plan how to put the alternatives selected into action. Get some understanding as to who will do what and by when. This constitutes the "Contract".

7. CLARIFY THE CONTRACT - Have someone paraphrase the contract to make sure everyone understands the agreement and expectations.

8. IMPLEMENTATION - This involves the action by people that is required to carry out the solution that has been chosen. The best of plans are of little value unless they are put into action. To try them out is the only way that the selected solutions can be effectively evaluated.

Evaluation

9. PROVIDE FOR EVALUATION - After a reasonable length of time plan for some way of evaluating as to whether people have carried out their assigned responsibilities and to see if the problem was solved. If not, a determination can be made as to whether this was due to a failure on someone's part in carrying out an assignment, or due to an ineffective decision.

1. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

- A problem is a deviation from what is wanted or what should be. It helps in stating a problem to put it into these terms, e.g., "My car was designed to get 25 miles per gallon but it is only getting 16 miles per gallon."

  Tell specifically what the problem is and how you experience it. Cite specific examples while stating the proble, use the Communication Skills of 1) Specifically Describing the data, 2) Reporting Interpretations, and 3) Reporting Your Feelings to tell how you are affected by the problem.

- "Own" the problem as yours and solicit the help of others in solving it rather than implying that it's someone else's problem which they ought to solve. Keep in mind that if it were someone else's problem, they would be bringing it up for discussion.

- In the identification phase of problem solving, avoid references to solutions. This can trigger disagreement too early in the process and prevent ever making meaningful progress.

- The goals of problem identification are 1) to bring everyone to a clear understanding of the problem, 2) to get others to agree that the problem does exist, and 3) to get others to offer their help in solving it. Until these goals are fully reached, there is no reason to proceed to other phases of the problem solving process.

- Once there seems to be fairly clear understanding of what the problem is, this definition should be written in very precise language and if a group is involved, it should be displayed on a flip chart or chalkboard.

  People tend to want to deal rather superficially with this most critical step of problem identification in problem solving, and jump directly to the fifth step, that of selecting solutions. This is probably due to habit as well as an eagerness for people to move away from the anxiety that is produced by an awareness of a problem. The natural bent of man seems to be when confronted with a problem, to find a solution and remove the tension, and while this may work well for clearly simple problems, it can produce negative results when dealing with more complex issues.

  Proper problem identification requires a willingness to tolerate anxiety for a chosen period of time. It epitomizes the concept: Don't just do something! Think first!

2. CLARIFY THE PROBLEM

This step is most important when working with a group of people. If the problem is not adequately clarified so that everyone views it the same, the result will be that people will offer solutions to different problems. To clarify the problem, ask someone in the group to paraphrase the problem as they understand it. Then ask the group members if they see it essentially the same. Any differences must be resolved before going any further.

It is also important prior to proceeding to other steps in problem solving to ask the questions:

Who is involved with the problem?
Who is likely to be affected?
Can we get them involved in solving the problem?
Who legitimately or logically should be included as a decision is made?
Are there others who need to be consulted prior to a decision?

These questions assume that commitment of those involved and affected by the problem is desirable in implementing any changes or solutions, and the best way to get this commitment is to include those involved and affected by the problem in determining solutions if this is at all possible.

3. ANALYZE THE CAUSE

Any deviation from what should be is produced by a cause or interaction of causes. In order to change "what is" to "what is wanted" it is usually necessary to remove or neutralize the cause in some way. To do this calls for precise isolation of the most central or basic cause(s) of the problem. This requires close analysis of the problem and its cause to clearly separate out the influencing from the non-influencing factors.

In analyzing for the cause it is helpful to look for factors involved in the problem that are "distinctive" to the problem and the cause; that is, they are characteristics that can be identified as the most undesirable parts of the problem which can be uniquely traced to the cause and not to other factors that may seem to be causes.

This is probably an easier process to follow when dealing with problems involving physical things than with interpersonal or social issues. Interpersonal and social problems are more likely to spring from a dynamic constellation of causes which will be more difficult to solve if the causes are only tackled one at a time. Still - whether dealing with physical or social problems, it is important to seek those causes that are most fundamental in producing the problem rather than spend energy on causes that have only tangential effect.

4. SOLICIT ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

This step calls for identifying as many possible solutions to the problem as possible before discussing the various advantages and disadvantages of any. What happens frequently in problem solving is that the first two or three suggested solutions are debated and discussed for the time provided for the entire problem solving session. The result of this is that many worthwhile ideas are never identified or considered. Oftentimes, by identifying many solutions, a superior idea surfaces itself and reduces and/or eliminates the need for discussing details of more debatable issues which can consume a great deal of time. These solutions may be logical attacks at the cause or they may be creative solutions that need not be rational.

The basic tool used in generating many possible solutions to a problem is Brainstorming. To use the brainstorming process effectively requires following a prescribed set of rules very closely. These rules are:

1. No positive or negative comments are allowed during the brainstorming phase. This means that all ideas are encouraged and they will be placed on the list for consideration without immediate evaluation in any form.

2. Positive or negative non-verbal evaluations are discouraged as well.

3. A group member may ask for clarification if he does not understand a given suggestion, but it is important to avoid any questions that are directed to "how" or "why" of the idea. In other words, the person suggesting a solution is not to be asked to defend his idea!

4. "Far out" or amusing suggestions are encouraged. Laughter can serve as a good release and help people relax. A seemingly wild or amusing suggestion is listed with the more serious ideas for group consideration, unless the "author" of the idea specifically asks that it be withheld. Sometimes a wild idea can be changed or built upon for creative practical solutions. The idea here is to relax and let the ideas flow.

5. Encourage group members to generate solutions that are based upon changing ideas already presented, (e.g., reversing, expanding, limiting).

6. Encouraging combining ideas that seem to compliment each other.

5. SELECTING ONE OR MORE ALTERNATIVES FOR ACTION

Before actually selecting alternatives for action, it is advisable to identify criteria that the desired solutions must meet. This can eliminate unnecessary discussion and help focus the gorup toward the solution(s) that will most likely work.

This step involves selecting from the brainstorming list those item(s) that appear, once the criteria are identified, to be most workable. At this point it becomes necessary to look for and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of those that appear viable. The task is for the group members to come to mutual agreement as to which solutions to actually put into action, that is, to be activated or implemented.

6. PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION

This requires looking at the details that must be done by someone if a solution is to be effectively activated. Once the required steps are identified, it means assigning these to someone for action. It also means setting a time for completion.

To put this step in problem solving into a few words, it means:

a) Deciding everything that must be done in order to activate a solution and,

b) Deciding who does what by when, and where.

This constitutes the "contract" which must be completed in order to give the solution a fair trial.

Not to be forgotten when developing the implementation plan is: Who needs to be informed of this action? See that the plan calls for their being informed through an appropriate media.

7. CLARIFY THE CONTRACT

This is to insure that everyone clearly understands precisely what the agreement is that people will do to implement a solution. It is a summation and restatement of what people have agreed to do and when it is expected they will have it done. It rules out possible misinterpretation of expectations.

8. THE ACTION PLAN

The best of plans are only intellectual exercises unless they are transformed into action. This calls for people assigned responsibility for any part of the plans to carry out their assignments according to the agreed upon contract. It is the phase of problem solving that calls for people to do what they have said they would do.

9. PROVIDE FOR EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This is the time for follow-up, evaluation and accountability. Questions that must be answered before it is fair to evaluate the effectiveness of a given solution are: Have the agreed upon actions been carried out? Have people done what they said they would do?

If they have not accomplished their assignments, it is possible that they ran into trouble that must be considered or it may be that they simply need to be reminded or held accountable for not having lived up to their end of the contract.

Once the actions have been completed, it is then necessary to assess their effectiveness. Is the solution working? If not, can a revision make it work? What actions are necessary to implement changes?

Another possibility is that the solution will not solve the problem for which it was designed. If this appears to be the case, it will then be necessary to find the solution that will work. This may mean reviewing the original brainstorming ideas or repeating the problem solving process, beginning with Step 3, Soliciting Solutions. Evaluation often calls for a return to one of the earlier steps in the process.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The keeping of adequate records of all steps completed (and especially brainstorming), can allow energy expended to be "recycled" as it becomes apparent that a selected solution is not working. To fall back on thinking what was previously done makes it unnecessary to "plough the same ground twice."

It is recommended that newsprint or flip chart paper be used in problem solving sessions rather than having any one person keep notes. The intent is to publicly display the work of the group so that any differences of understanding are more likely to be spotted early. The notes of a recorder or secretary are not subject to this public review.

The use of the flip chart paper is especially important in problem identification, brainstorming and in recording who is to do what, where and when. This greatly minimizes the possibility of misunderstanding about the agreed upon action and who has what responsibilities. If they are clearly written on paper for everyone to see, it is not likely that people will be confused about the problem or the agreement.

The advantage of flip chart paper over a chalkboard is that the paper can be given to a secretary for verbatim typing and distribution to those involved. The more similarity between the finished, typed copy and the flip chart copy, the better the link will be to the problem solving session and the better the commitment to it.

When entering into problem solving it is well to remember that it is not likely the best solution will be found on the first attempt. Good problem solving can be viewed as working like a guidance system. The awareness of the problem is an indication of being "off course", requiring a correction in direction. The exact form the correction is to take is what problem solving is aimed at deciding. But once the correction is made (the implemented solution) it is possible that, after evaluation, it will prove to be erroneous and actually be throwing you even more off course than in the beginning.

If this happens, the task then becomes to immediately compute what new course will be effective. Several course corrections may be necessary before getting back on track to where you want to go. Still, once the desired course is attained, it requires careful monitoring or it will be possible to drift again unknowingly.

To view problem solving in this realistic manner can save a lot of frustration that comes from expecting it to always produce the right answers.