

Practicing Preventive Management

From the American Management Association's January 2010 LEADER'S EDGE newsletter:

Problem solving can take up a lot of managerial time. So it makes sense for you to resolve problems before they develop, let alone grow to impact the bottom line. As a manager, you practice preventive management for just this reason. You understand how problems often can be identified in their early stages, even avoided. You know how important it is to analyze an operation or practice to determine where weaknesses can occur and then shore up these weaknesses or, better yet, develop procedures without such flaws.

In short, as a savvy leader, you recognize that the best approach to problem solving is to avoid a serious problem in the first place. This isn't easy but it is possible. Early problem detection and better problem solving demand that you:

- Create an environment in which employees are encouraged to use their initiative to remedy problems when they occur. Risk is allowed. Savvy managers aren't risk adverse.
- Undertake problem sensing. The smart manager leads staff members in using a variety of techniques to locate problems and then determine the root cause, not just a symptom of the problem. Too often, as I demonstrated in my book *The High-Value Manager*, a problem reappears because its symptoms, not the reason for them, have been the focus of attention.
- View problems as opportunities and mistakes as progress. This involves turning traditional thinking about problems upside down; but with some creativity, problems can lead to opportunities. Mistakes in problem solving can be progress toward achieving these opportunities. A talented leader recognizes this and teaches creative thinking techniques to staff to stimulate their thinking outside the box, skills, abilities and knowledge that AMA covers in its project management programs...
- Practice techniques that enable you to choose the best solution from several good ones.
- Communicate solutions to the rest of the organization. The best managers share what their group has discovered to save other groups within the company from having to reinvent the wheel. Such trailblazing makes these managers heroes, but they communicate their discoveries because they are good corporate citizens and because they know everyone benefits from working in a secure work environment, no time better than now.

Encourage Initiative

The manager gives truth to his or her talk of shared goals and leadership by allowing staff members to step out of their boxes and demonstrate in a supportive environment their personal creativity. After all, encouraging employee initiative makes sense. By allowing employees a more active role in problem solving, managers increase staff feelings of satisfaction with their jobs while freeing themselves to devote attention to planning or other leadership tasks.

The foundations are laid for employees to resolve problems on their own—and regain employee engagement—when their manager includes staff in goal setting and development of action plans. If staff members are to address on their own problems they find as they do their work, they need that information. It helps them to make the right decisions and focus their energies where it will have the greatest return for the organization. But tapping into mission or goals isn't always sufficient. Nor do bromides about the value of employee initiative constitute a supportive environment for out-of-the-box thinking for staff members.

How does a manager create the kind of culture that encourages employees to use their initiative? They do this by:

- Keeping all lines of communication open. The more employees know about deadlines, difficulties with supplies, and the like, the better equipped they are to make intelligent decisions when problems arise.
- Listen to staff ideas. Make clear that you are interested in their suggestions.
- Give frequent, objective, and initiative-encouraging feedback. Even when a problem arises from their use of their initiative, you don't want to dwell so much on that that you discourage further risk taking by your employee. Your staff need to be counseled on what specifically they did wrong and what specifically they did right, and coached, in general, on solving problems.
- Conducting ongoing training where it is evidently needed. If an employee makes a mistake in solving a problem, and it is likely that that problem might be encountered again, then you might want to have the person undergo training in that part of the solution where he or she is weak. Or perhaps you want to mentor the individual through that point in the problem solving where he or she is weak.

Undertake Problem Sensing

Although problem solving is a six-step process, know that most employees, whether independently or working in teams, want to move immediately to step 3 or identifying solutions, so a key role as a leader of a team will be to hold the person or group back until it has thoroughly studied the problem or situation. Problem sensing begins by defining the nature of the problem (step 1). That entails focusing on the 'what' or cause of the problem, maybe even putting the cause in writing. Once you do that you can move on to resolving the problem or suggest a new product idea that further research can confirm.

Insight from employees may also be worth gathering. Just as in marketing, in which groups of potential customers are brought together to give feedback on a new product idea—focus groups—in problem solving you might want to hold focus groups with employees or those affected by a problem to get their ideas about the cause.

There are a number of other techniques that can also be used. Most problems leave paper trails and careful analysis of printouts, marketing research, findings, and other data can cast a light on a problem or suggest a new product idea that further research can confirm.

Of course, there are more sophisticated problem-sensing tools as well that you may want to bring to bear on the problem, like Pareto analysis, scatter diagrams, workflow diagrams, cause and effect diagrams, and

variance analysis that will help you separate symptoms from causes. Such techniques are covered in AMA seminars on problem solving and project management.

View Problems as Opportunities and Mistakes as Progress

We tend to think of problems as just that—problems. But from another perspective, some could be opportunities. It's how we look at situations. Of course, to see problems as opportunities, one has to be extremely open-minded in examining the problem and identifying a solution, not limited in one's thinking about a situation.

Most actual problem solving (step 3) is done with brainstorming. But there are other, lesser-known techniques that can help you look differently at problems—opportunities—then identify ways to maximize the value of these opportunities. Critical to doing this is how you define the problem. One helpful bit of advice is to write a problem statement down. Begin it with the words 'how to,' then complete it with an appropriate verb. Naturally, the verb you choose will influence how you see the problem, so a statement that begins 'how to minimize' or 'how to cope with' or 'how to eliminate' see the problem just as that, a problem, whereas a statement that begins 'how to restore,' 'how to maximize,' 'how to gain,' 'how to accomplish,' or 'how to enhance' suggests a more positive view of the problem.

Choose the Best Solution

If you can, in any problem-solving effort, pretest your better ideas to identify the best. If you can't run small pilot tests first, then choose the best idea, adjusting it as circumstances require.

With an idea in mind, the next step is to develop a plan of action (step 5). That plan should specify what work still needs to be done and who 'owns' what tasks associated with the mission, thereby improving strategic execution of the action plan. Incidentally, as a team leader, you may want to use the word ownership to put responsibility clearly on the person taking on the task.

Communicate Solutions

Solutions are valuable. Time spent in identifying and successfully implementing them gives them tremendous worth. So share them with colleagues. Good ideas should never be hoarded. Rather, as a savvy leader, you know that they should be shared with other areas of the organization. This sharing can take place at management meetings, through the corporate intranet, or at one-on-one lunch meetings. Where a solution might truly benefit a colleague, you might even send a staff member to the peer's operation to work with that group to see that the idea is successfully implemented.

Clearly, companies need to put a major effort on innovation to help them compete effectively. But think, too, of the opportunities that come from improved procedures and systems, and use these guidelines to make use of the creativity of your talented workforce to save money, improve productivity, and increase profits by addressing current shortcomings in operations. They are the low-hanging fruit. Grab it..