

Nine Essential Skills of Problem Solving

from CoachSME™



"The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it is the same problem you had last year"

John Foster Dulles
Former Secretary of State

by

Shirley Mansfield



Problem Solving

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1. What's it All About?

Starting a business is relatively easy, but running and growing a high-performing company is a real challenge and one that only around 6% of companies manage to achieve. Successful businesses grow because they achieve their objective. How? They remove any obstacles that are holding them back and that means solving problems that present themselves as obstacles.

Yes, businesses can grow and they do; but far too many hit the buffers – usually when they least expect it! Some hit the buffers with an almighty and fatal crash, others have a big bump which they may or may not survive. The rest (and I mean everyone else) will be lucky and just give the buffers a nudge. Whatever brush you have with the buffers, it's not fun; it's painful, stressful, demoralising and depressing to name but a few.

We all know of businesses that have ceased trading for whatever reason; some voluntarily, many not so. The statistics speak for themselves; only half of UK SME's survive into year 5 according to the ACCA. The table opposite shows that even in the early years just how many businesses hit the buffers.

We all also know that many companies go bust because they run out of cash, but in most cases that is not the cause. The real problem was something else.

So, what are some of the reasons?

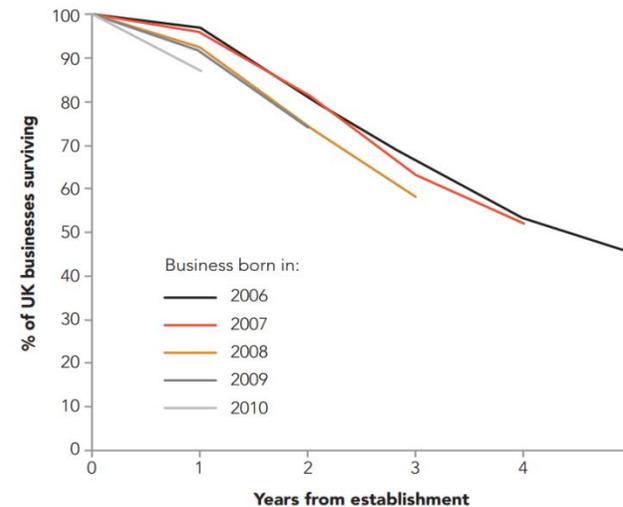
1. It's much too late when they finally become aware of the problem.

2. They might have found the problem but have actively ignored it. The 'it won't happen to me' syndrome.

3. They have failed to address the real problems, perhaps distracted dealing with the symptoms.

4. Lack of skills, commitment and / or leadership to actually solve the problem.

5. They have allowed a problem to escalate out of control.



Source: ACCA via SME-blog.com

All of these actions, or lack of them, can be avoided. You have a choice – to do something or to do nothing, perhaps even doing it in half measures.

If you want to avoid that bump with the buffers then you will need to develop your problem solving skills to be able to avoid that knock.

2. What is a Problem?

Businesses lose money every day because they ignore problems in their business. They let them fester; allow the problem to grow bigger every day so that it eventually poisons the business so much that it dies.

A problem is – anything that stops you achieving your goal.

There is a saying ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’. Whilst a molehill can quickly become a mountain, just by starting to share the problem you’ll be starting to solve it. Problems crop up all over the place – big ones and little niggles. But, they don’t always wave a flag to let you know they are lurking. So put another way:

Objective + Obstacle = Problem

**Solved problem = obstacle removed + objective achieved = more money
time and success**

The majority of business owners start companies because they have a technical skill or a passion that they turn into a business. Some are just great at spotting an opportunity to start a business - the entrepreneur.

However, what the majority of those business owners don't have, or are not even aware that they need, is an extensive toolkit of management skills that has nothing to do with their technical competence or expertise.

One of those key skills is that of problem solving and failure to learn and develop this skill could have serious consequences for a company.

I know, and have seen throughout my business career and my work in a wide range of industries and with diverse companies, the damage that failure to solve problems causes:

- Lost money, and lots of it!
- Wasted time and resources, which in turn loses the business even more money
- High stress levels and that’s not good for anyone in the business
- Ill health
- Divorce
- Loss of the pleasure or fun in running a business which was set up with such huge passion and hope
- Let down customers who are sometimes out of pocket and certainly inconvenienced
- Abandoned staff and the negative impact on families and the local community
- Frustrated suppliers and shareholders, and so on...

I can't promise to help solve everything. Directors and managers have to step up to the plate and be accountable. But then, companies can't expect staff to solve problems if there isn't a framework in place, or if they don't have the skills to be able to solve those problems.

Business owners and companies need help to develop the problem solving skills that are such a critical part of running a growing and successful business. That is why I have developed the Nine Essential Skills of Problem Solving.

3. Nine Essential Skills of Problem Solving.

The following matrix introduces the relationships between the **Nine Essential Skills of Problem Solving**. Each one is covered in more detail later in this paper. The matrix is based on the Sudoku-style 3 x 3 where each of the Nine Essential Skills shares a logical relationship with the cells around it. My thanks to my friends and Thought Leaders Matt Church & Mark Hodgson for the Sudoku style inspiration.

Assess Decide Execute

Analysis Uncover the facts	it	Make a Plan Who does what and when	it	Completion Finish It
Identification What's the real problem?	we	Make a Decision Choose the best one	we	Commitment Tough it out
Awareness Something's wrong	i	Be A Stranger Step back, see more	i	Leadership Its starts with you

To understand, and work the matrix you move around this grid from bottom left up the first column, down to the bottom and then up the middle column and so on up to the box in the top right. The first three boxes; Awareness, Identification and Analysis form the Assess section. The middle column boxes form the 'Decide' section and the last column is the 'Execute'.

We can also split the matrix horizontally. Therefore the bottom skills equate to the 'i', the middle 3 skills to 'we' and the top 3 skills to 'it'. Let's explore each box in order whilst remembering the format of the matrix.

A. Awareness

Something's wrong

Beginning at the bottom left box in the matrix we will move up the first column: 'Assess'. Starting with 'i', this skill is about developing the awareness skill in much that same way as you do when you are driving – anticipating speed, braking and more importantly being 'aware' of what other drivers may or may not do. You have to gain awareness, to become aware that there is a problem.

Problems can be sudden or slow developing, expected or unexpected, hidden or visible, detected or unknown and complex or simple; by nature they are consistent at being inconsistent! This means that your antenna must be working all the time; gathering information; becoming aware.

To sum it up in one sentence; your aim is to avoid fire fighting or as Sam Carpenter from Work The System puts it – “stop whacking moles!”

B. Identification

What's the real problem?

This is where we move into "we" from "i", but still in the 'Assess' column. Just because it's 'we' and not 'i', you can't abdicate the responsibility for moving this forward- there is a way to go yet! Now is the time to get some help so that you can uncover the real problem.

Identifying the problem is a bit like tackling an iceberg – only a small percentage is visible, but there is a lot happening below the surface. It's probably the same in your business and with whatever problem you are trying hard to uncover.

Getting to the heart of the problem is critical – keep digging until you have got to the root of the problem. But it does take some time. Be careful not to have a knee-jerk reaction to the first 'problem' that you find. What you have found might just be the symptom and not the real problem.

C. Analysis

Uncover the facts

Once you think you have found 'it', i.e. the real problem you need to check and then double check that you have found the root cause. Analytical skills are crucial here. You need to pull information from a

variety of sources. The wider you look at the problem the better your analysis will be. Just like peeling an onion you have to get to the centre or the root of the problem to be able to effectively solve it – if not you'll be crying.

What is your thought process when the car won't start? I'm guessing that you go through a checklist in your head; petrol, battery, oil... and so on. Uncovering the real problem in a business is no different. You need a checklist and a process to help you decide what you need to find out. You can't skip this step – you have to gather the data, information, intelligence etc. and analyse it so that you have a better chance at making the very best decision that you can.

Just one word of caution. We have all heard the phrase 'paralysis by analysis'. At some point you have to stop the analysis and do something. You can't afford to get stuck in this column for too long – time is money – just make sure that you are as thorough as you can be.

D. Be a Stranger

Step back, see more

We now move from 'Assess' to 'Decide' mode. Choice is the focus in these central three skills; you have to choose the best option. Of course, you could decide to do nothing!

We need both our logical and creative skills to solve problems so you will need to explore all options. No one has the monopoly on a good idea, so remember that solutions can come from unexpected quarters. All options are valid at the start – what you are trying to do is select the very best

option. Solving the real & identified problem means viewing the business from different perspectives, employing logical and creativity skills and asking the right questions.

Mull over the possible solutions, sleep on them. Mix up facts & feelings and see what develops. Acting like a stranger means that you have to take an 'outside and elevated view'. Ask yourself; 'if I wasn't involved in this business what would I see?'

We all have this skill, we're great at telling everyone what's wrong, or how they could do something better, a bit like the back seat driver does! So, it should be an easy transition to develop this skill so that you can apply it to your own business.

E. Make a Decision

Choose the best one

This is the heart of the matrix for a reason. Make the wrong decision and it could be expensive. Make the right one and you are on the road to success. You have applied the 3 perspectives, 2 skills and 3 questions so you will have already started to choose which option might be the best one

"Erroneous assumptions can be disastrous" Peter Drucker

You know the problem:

- it's clearly and accurately identified and expressed
- you really know the problem through your analysis, and
- you have identified some options by 'being a stranger'.

Now you need to assess the options; scoring or rating them will help you to make the very best decision that you can. You will need to consider cost versus benefits, timescales, resources, impacts on stakeholders etc. Rank the options and make your choice.

By the way, what is your plan B and plan C just in case plan A doesn't come to fruition? Making an isolated decision may not be the best strategy and this is why this skill is on the 'we' axis.

F. Make a Plan

Who does what and when

At the top of the choose column is the plan. Having made your decision you have to choose what the plan is. Rudyard Kipling's six best friends is a good place to start.

- **Who** is going to do what
- **What** has to be done
- **When** does it need to happen and when will it be completed
- **Where** are the changes and corrections that are required
- **Why?** Get everything in the context especially when communicating to staff, customers, suppliers etc.
- **How** are we going to make the changes?

Set a clear vision and objective for the plan, including the timescales, budget and the resources that you will need. Get it down on paper; clear and concise with time deadlines and then implement the plan. Don't forget checkpoints throughout the plan to make sure you are on track – you might need to switch to plan B.

G. Leadership

It starts with you

This skill is all about getting 'it' done and somebody has to lead. Guess what, that's you, you're the boss. Even if you are not directly delivering the plan, the project team will be relying on your leadership to ensure the smooth and successful completion of the plan.

Leadership in its own right is a massive topic, everyone has their favourite leader and whoever yours is make sure you emulate their positive attributes.

The seven personal attributes of problem solving leaders are:

1. **Communication**
2. Generous
3. Authentic
4. Convicted
5. Empowering
6. Adaptable
7. Consistent

Great communication with all of your stakeholders is probably the most important; hence it sits at the top.

H. Commitment

Tough it out

On the face of it, it's easier to ignore the problem today but eventually you will have to deal with it. We go round and round in circles – stalking the problem, but then it just stays on the too difficult to do pile! JUFDI comes to mind here. It's time to stop procrastinating. Even when we actively seek to solve the problem there are times when the solution just doesn't work.

To complete the task and get to a resolution requires commitment and lots of it. There will be barriers, obstacles and seemingly insurmountable challenges along the way. Each one will test your and your teams, commitment. It would be so easy to let the pressure drop, to slack off, to do nothing or to put it on the too difficult pile. If you do, you'll end up just revisiting this same problem sometime soon.

Commitment from everyone, whether or not they are directly involved, must be gained at the start of the project and then continually reinforced throughout the project.

The team will commit to do their best right the way through the project. Your commitment is to support the team in whatever way is necessary.

I. Completion

Finish it

Finally you have to execute the plan and solve the problem. Keep hold of the vision of your end goal and what a positive change its successful conclusion will have on everyone. "Doing" the execution and doing it right is essential. Keep going until the job is done. No half measures are allowed here. Quitting really isn't an option.

But it's not all over when the problem is seemingly solved. You'll need checkpoints to make sure that the changes you have made have really and truly solved the problem.

Conclusion

This might have been a painful process – the whole episode will have cost you lots of money and time not to mention the stress! Having recognised that problems are so damaging to business isn't it time to search out some more problems and solve them – now and forever. Perhaps it really is time to move from being a boss that fire fights all the time to someone who is focussed on fire prevention?

4. About the Author



Shirley Mansfield is a Master Problem Solver. She knows how to help companies and business owners to make more money by solving problems. It's very liberating for managers not to face the same problem over and over again. Shirley works with all sorts of businesses; coaching, mentoring, training and facilitating management teams. Shirley is a regular speaker and blogger on problem solving as well as running her Fix It MasterClass Program.

5. What People say about Shirley Mansfield

"I'm not the best with words but I just wanted to say a very big thank you for your help, guidance and support over the last 6 months or so. Especially during the troubled times when I needed a shoulder to cry on and some sound advice."

NC

"Starting a new business is fun but it's also scary, challenging, stressful and soon highlights where you need some help. I found that help from my business coach. Shirley is a great coach who has kept me sane, focused and on top of things throughout our first, very successful, year. She has been tough – a bit like having a boss, but she has helped us build a business with solid foundations that is fit to grow into a big business. I really enjoy my coaching sessions with Shirley and have now enlisted on her Fix IT MasterClass Program. This has been a great way to meet with like-minded business owners to discuss and mull over our day to day

problems and successes, all with Shirley by our side guiding us to make brilliant business decisions.”

Joanna Wood. Managing Partner A4G Bookkeeping and Payroll

“I really enjoyed the morning, you added a new dimension to all my business thinking that I’m currently doing and it couldn’t have come at a better time. There were several parts of your session that I thought WOW! Why don’t I do that? So thanks, I learnt something about my business and about my trade!”

Trish Stretton People Face 2 Face

“Shirley manages to explain things in a clear and simple way which makes it so much easier to understand and then implement”

Andrew Gentle, Sales Director DK Holdings

“Shirley is, without doubt, the best coach I have worked with over the years. There’s no questioning her ability to understand and identify issues and, to put procedures in place to make sure you are achieving your goals as efficiently as possible. I have no hesitation in recommending Shirley.”

Stuart Coe, MD Tiga Creative Ltd

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