





Empowerment through Independent Problem Solving

An invaluable skill as one travels through life

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

When the holidays came to close in 2022, I carefully packed my Christmas tree ornaments away, as I do each year, and came across one that represents far more than merely a whimsical or elegant embellishment for my tree. My black Converse high-top athletic shoe ornament reminded me of an extremely valuable lesson I learned decades ago about effective problem solving.

In the mid-1970s, I was in eighth grade and attended a parochial school in Indiana. While green-and-gray plaid skirts and white blouses were mandatory uniforms for girls in the seventh and eighth grades, the dress code was far more flexible for our footwear. But this flexibility created a hierarchy in the students' popularity. All the cool kids wore Converse high tops, which were extremely expensive at that time. It is serendipitous that this same brand of shoes has recently enjoyed a resurgence in fashion popularity.



The problem for me was that my financially strict parents were adamant they would not spend money on what they considered a frivolous fad. Looking back, now that I am older and more objective, I agree that costly gym shoes were not a wise investment, not to mention a less than flattering accessory with my school's eighth-grade uniform and knee socks. At that time though, my parents' practical position did little to console a young teenager who was trying to fit in with her classmates, particularly since any gym shoes other than Converse were labeled as "buddies," and their wearers were often the subjects of painful ridicule.

Being a strong-willed youngster, I would not allow myself to be dissuaded by my parents' refusal to buy a pair of Converse for me. I was steadfast in my determination to obtain a pair, even if I had to purchase them myself, which is exactly what I did. First, I searched and found a pair on sale, albeit the shoe color was limited to a single color — black. Second, I used the money I saved from babysitting to purchase them. Not only was I able to attain my goal, but I did so cost effectively, undoubtedly influenced by my parents' thriftiness. I can remember the elation I felt the first time I wore the shoes and walked across the school playground that crisp autumn morning. The other students were abuzz with talk about my new footwear. Although the object of my goal may have been superficial and materialistic, my feeling of jubilation was due to something more meaningful than possessing an in-style item or that my new shoes were the subject of conversation during morning recess. I was thrilled I figured out a way to attain a goal by devising and carrying out a plan. From that point forward, I knew that I would be able to independently confront any challenge.

Problem-Solving Skills are Crucial

This lesson I learned at the tender age of 13 about effective problem solving has been one of the most powerful in my life. While the skill to problem solve is invaluable in an individual's professional and personal lives, managers do not always find it well practiced. Business and organizational leaders routinely encounter individuals who, although they have other impressive qualities and skills, are woefully inadequate in effective problem solving. Team members often bombard leaders with questions about what to do next about the challenges they confront. Some employees seem incapable of identifying an issue, much less crafting a workable solution. Others have admirable goals but have no idea of how to attain them, and there are those who seem to meander through their professional lives with absolutely no direction whatsoever. If one has a goal but no plan about how to attain it, it's like getting in a car and knowing what your destination is but not the route on how to get there. If one has no defined goals, then it is like driving around aimlessly.





Can Problem-Solving Skills be Taught?

Is effective problem solving only an innate trait, a skill attained through years of advanced education and training, or can it be taught in the workplace? Clearly, some are endowed naturally with strong problem-solving skills, and others have been educated in subjects in which such skills are taught, honed and critical to success. Law students are taught to employ the method with the acronym “IRAC” (Issue, Rule of law, Application and Conclusion) when they read and evaluate cases found in their voluminous law school textbooks. Similarly, in preparation for working in the corporate world or becoming entrepreneurs, business students are taught about various company models with issues that students must identify and appropriately resolve.

While some people may have the innate ability to problem solve, and others may have gained the skills through years of post-secondary education, like other skills, problem solving can be taught on the job. In a November 20, 2013 blog post by Sabrina Baker on the Society for Human Resource Management website, she noted that this question about problem-solving skills is like the age-old question about leadership skills and assured readers that such skills can indeed be taught.

At a time in history when fierce competition exists to hire and retain talented professionals in the right of way industry, one of the most valuable gifts a leader can give team members is to teach them the skill to effectively solve problems on their own. In her article, “Leadership Tips to Help Your Employees Solve Their Own Problems,” on Rhythm Systems’ website, business growth consultant Cathy McCullough explained, “Change is coming at us with little remorse. It’s fast and furious and in all honesty, you don’t have the time to solve every single problem all day long for every employee.” Teaching your employees to effectively solve problems not only frees up time and boosts efficiency for managers but also increases team members’ confidence and significantly bolsters their professional development.

Creating a Culture that Promotes Effective Problem Solving

Leaders can teach problem-solving skills, but to do so successfully, an appropriate culture needs to be created. McCullough explained, “often leaders fail to create environments where this kind of behavior can flourish.” She recommended that to do so, managers be

approachable. In my firm, approachability is fostered through an open-door policy. Younger team members are encouraged to consult with those more experienced to discuss issues and potential resolutions.

Additionally, leaders can assist with developing problem-solving skills by listening carefully to their team members when they present a challenge and vet a solution. While a manager may be tempted to merely tell an employee what to do in such a situation, problem-solving skills are developed by asking them questions. For instance, they can be asked to identify an issue, what their optimal outcome or expectation is, the various resolutions for resolving the issue and the one that they would recommend or pursue.

Team members should be encouraged to expand beyond their comfort zone and think independently, rather than consistently relying upon others for direction. In my firm, independent thinking is advocated by the principle of never asking a question to which you can find the answer on your own. Although it may take longer initially for employees to find an answer, the process of searching for and obtaining the answer will allow them to retain that answer and boost their self-confidence by doing so.

A culture that promotes effective problem solving also includes a tranquil environment. The first reaction of an employee who has a thorny issue may be to panic, jump to incorrect conclusions or create drama. As the Business Partner Magazine blog “How to Train Employees on Problem Solving Skills” (“BPM blog”) recommended, “Remind them to stay calm when a problem arises.” They can be asked to sit down, take a few deep breaths and suspend reaction to the situation until they have obtained all pertinent information. The need to remain serene is critical because judgment is marred by emotional reaction. The ability to remain calm in a crisis starts at the top. Managers need to lead by example and exhibit composure when they confront obstacles.

Set Healthy Boundaries

A culture that promotes problem solving includes establishing boundaries for both managers and employees. To encourage independent problem solving, leaders need to avoid being micromanagers, and, as stated in the BPM blog, “[they need to stop looking over their employees’ shoulders] to ensure that they are doing everything right.” Likewise, team members also need to understand boundaries with their supervisors for problem solving. They need to appropriately inform their supervisors about the status of their assignments, and a process needs to be developed and followed so that the leader is adequately informed.

A Skill for Life

Teaching effective problem-solving skills is precious to team members beyond the workplace. According to the BPM blog, “Problem-solving skills can be useful in all areas of life. Your employees will become more well-rounded individuals with their problem-solving skills.” Ultimately, team members who become more well-rounded in all areas of their lives will be happier and more committed to their work. The time devoted to developing these skills will not only be a wise investment for your organization but appreciated by your team. ✪



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