



spare change

My two-cents toward sparking transformation

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Is it Decision Time? 7 Problem Solving Steps to Help You Pull the Trigger

"Uncertainty can lead to paralysis. And if you become indecisive you're dead."

~ Jim Citrin

My coaching clients are leaders, continually faced with challenging problems that require making tough decisions. Some are skilled in this area. They make decisions based on a disciplined, methodical and rational process that includes a healthy dose of intuition and empathy.

But others are not so skilled. They have trouble identifying and defining problems as well as generating and implementing effective solutions. In the EQ realm, their emotions get the best of them, often causing "analysis paralysis" or knee jerk decisions based on insufficient facts.

According to *The EQ Edge* by Drs. Steven Stein and Howard Book, the most effective problem solvers:

- are methodical and disciplined
- use their intuition to point them to interesting directions to consider
- test their intuition with information
- are creative while accurately assessing the risks for unusual approaches



Could you learn to be a better problem solver?

My client, “Tom” is someone who agonizes over every decision. His role requires him to solve lots of problems and make some tough calls, but sometimes he gets paralyzed in the process. Specifically, Tom struggles with pulling the trigger once potentially acceptable solutions are developed.

Tom can move from “analysis paralysis,” to selecting the best course of action based on the information he’s collected to date, by learning to analyze his problems and guide his decisions based on the following seven step process.

Seven Steps to Effective Problem Solving

Step One: Sense or notice that a problem exists or a decision needs to be made. This sounds simple but requires self-awareness and being “in tune” with what’s going on around you.

Step Two: Examine the problem carefully and define it accurately. Gather as much information as is reasonably possible. Look at the problem from the points of view of others involved as a way of fleshing out your definition of what the problem actually is. What else do you need to learn? Who else do you need to talk to?

Step Three: Begin to generate alternative solutions. Brainstorm and list a variety of solutions without judging them. Some ideas may be silly. Do not automatically discard them. Sometimes a silly idea is the mother of an excellent idea. That’s why you don’t want to be judgmental as you list your alternative ideas. This stage requires discipline and focus and often is where the process breaks down and potentially “knee-jerk” decisions get made.

Step Four: Now evaluate each alternative. You can look at the alternatives from a variety of different perspectives.



Here are some possible coaching questions for Tom from various perspectives:

Impact on Others: How will this decision impact the people around you? Your team? Your customers? Your suppliers? Other stakeholders?

Pro/Com: What are the pros and cons of selecting each option?

Risk/Reward: What is the payoff for making the decision? What is the risk? What is the worst-case outcome?

Priorities: How does this decision fit with your priorities or the principles you live by?

Intuition: What does your gut say? What feels right to you?

Advisors: What do your key advisors believe is the best decision?

Alignment: How do these choices align with your passions, your values or your vision for your future?

Cost: What is the cost of either choice? What is the cost if you don't decide?

What else: What additional information do you need to make your decision?

Step Five: Select the option that, after your careful examination, is the best.

Remember that as a leader, we are paid to make judgment calls. By definition, when we make judgments, we cannot be 100% sure of the outcome. No one gets every judgment call correct. Knowing that Tom approaches the problem carefully and thoroughly will help him manage the anxiety of taking the risk and making the decision.

Step Six: Act. Implement your decision. Because Tom has done his homework, he is likely to feel less pressure to second guess himself.

Step Seven: Assess the outcome. If things are working out the way you anticipated, congratulate yourself on a job well done. If things are not going as you expected, use this as additional data that you can use to adjust your approach.



Solving problems and making decisions are an integral part of the life of a leader. Outstanding leaders solve problems using a combination of facts, intuition, creativity and a disciplined systematic approach. They embrace “not being 100% sure.” Getting comfortable and disciplined about your decision making process will assist you in making quality decisions without the frustration and delay of “analysis paralysis.”

About the Author: **Mary C. Werner, CPA, MOD** is the founder of *Werner Coaching and Consulting, Inc.*, a firm that builds on her more than 25 years of accounting, business and financial consulting experience. Mary is a certified executive coach and provides coaching to individuals and teams as well as organizational development consulting to facilitate individual and organizational change efforts. For more information, visit www.wernercoaching.com or contact Mary directly at Mary@wernercoaching.com