

Information Sheet

How to Solve a Problem

Often in life we are faced with problems that need solving. These can range from small problems such as meeting competing daily demands, to much larger problems such as dealing with an ongoing interpersonal difficulty at work. It can be very helpful to use the following step-by-step process to work through solving problems.

Step 1: Identify the Problem

Example: A colleague at work repeatedly belittles me in front of others.

Step 2: Brainstorm possible solutions

By definition, brainstorming involves coming up with as many possible solutions as you can think of. During this part of the problem-solving process, the emphasis is on *quantity*, not *quality*. Aim for a minimum of five options. For the above problem, examples may be:

1. Quit job
2. Belittle colleague back
3. Yell at colleague
4. Complain about colleague to other colleagues
5. Discuss the problem calmly and privately with colleague
6. Speak to my boss about the problem

Step 3: Evaluate each option in terms of likely outcomes

There may be some options which clearly seem unlikely to be helpful or to improve the situation, so first delete these from the list. Next, work through each of the other options and think about whether they are likely to solve your problem until you come up with your preferred solution.

In the above example, options 2. and 3. are more likely to make the situation worse, not better. Option 1. may be a valid option, but perhaps not as a first attempt to solve the problem. Option 4. may feel good in the short term, but is unlikely to change the situation for the better. That leaves options 5. and 6. As is often the case, there's no "perfect" solution here; either of these may improve your situation. For this exercise, let's choose option 5.

Step 4: Implement the chosen solution

The next step is actually putting into place your chosen solution, so in this case speaking calmly and privately to your colleague about how their behaviour is impacting you.

Step 5: Evaluate the effectiveness of your chosen solution

After implementing your preferred option, evaluate whether or not it has solved your problem. In our example, perhaps despite your best efforts your colleague was unable or unwilling to change their behaviour, and your situation has not improved. If, however, your problem seems to be solved at this stage, that's great! The problem-solving process ends here.

Step 6: If your chosen solution was not effective, implement your next-preferred option

Fortunately, you have back-up option/s from Step 3. that you can try next! In our example, you would now implement your next-preferred option of speaking with your boss about the problem. Then, you would repeat Step 5. (evaluate effectiveness of speaking to your boss in solving the problem) and, if necessary, Step 6 (implement next-preferred option).