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School leaders, here are the keys to executive problem-solving

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore August 12, 2024



Have you ever put together a piece of Swedish furniture from a box? It's amazing how beautiful it looks online and even more surprising that there is always one piece—a washer, a nut—left over after assembly. You could live with it, but it could also be a sign of a larger problem.

The school year is underway. District improvement plans, initiatives, pilots and cohorts are all in full swing. Reverberations of what is working well and what isn't are starting to hit your inbox. In the complex world of public education, effective problem-solving is crucial for leaders who aim to navigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in school systems.

The use of rigorous logic and disciplined methods to apply effective solutions to difficult problems is an essential skill of public education leadership. The higher up you go in the org chart, the more people you need to involve in the problem-solving process.

Yet undisciplined problem solvers often rely on positional power or past successes, leading to impatience and premature conclusions. Skilled leaders look beyond the old and obvious to employ innovative, collaborative and consensus-driven problem-solving strategies by being disciplined.

Look around the room



Just like in the furniture example, you've already decided you need a chair in the corner of the room. That may or may not be true. Does the chair really solve the need or does it just fill up space?

The first step in effective problem-solving is defining the problem accurately by asking, "What is the specific problem we are trying to solve?" and "What are the conditions contributing to the problem?" Hasty conclusions and suggestions based on past experiences can hinder this process. Research shows that defining the problem and taking action often occurs almost simultaneously for most people ([Harvard Business Review, 2006](#)).

Therefore, significant effort should be invested in the initial stages to ensure that the right problem is being addressed. Conducting a root cause analysis such as '[5 Whys](#)' or [Fishbone Diagram](#) is essential to identify the underlying issues.

Like interior designers who recognize thousands of options and patterns to a room, school leaders must look for patterns in data rather than merely collecting information. Working the "problem space" hard, before moving into solution generation, always pay off.

Assemble architects, builders and firefighters

A small coalition of people with varying perspectives will help you build the solution. Collaboration is a cornerstone of effective problem-solving.

Many leaders struggle with delegating, listening and seeking input from others. However, most educators are inherently collaborative and involving others can lead to more comprehensive solutions. Asking for input from those closest to the problem can provide valuable insights and help overcome biases that may cloud judgment.

Ask yourself, "Who knows the most about this issue? How can I empower them to offer insight to my team?" Studies have shown that diverse perspectives can significantly enhance the problem-solving process by providing fresh ideas and alternative viewpoints ([Heifetz, 1994](#)).

Styles must change

Innovation in problem-solving requires leaders to move beyond traditional methods and embrace new approaches. To address our most complex challenges, we all need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable—we need to scrutinize potential solutions while still avoiding the pitfalls of analysis paralysis.

Research suggests that the best solutions often emerge between the second and third possibility considered ([Cambridge University Press, 2003](#)). Leaders should slow down and discipline themselves to thoroughly analyze patterns and causes before deciding on a course of action. A question to ask your team is, "What is the range of options?? How can we test our options before committing?"

Building by committee is still off the table

Consensus building is a critical component of problem-solving in educational settings. Yet, that doesn't mean the leader has to yield the ultimate decision to the group. It does mean



that effective leaders involve others, engage stakeholders, collect different perspectives and guide collaborators toward a shared vision.

Consider strong visual models or anchors to facilitate the group and provide for group memory. This function is essential for school leaders as they navigate multifaceted problems, enabling them to juggle multiple variables, consider various perspectives and integrate new information with existing knowledge.

By leveraging group memory, leaders can maintain a clear focus on the problem at hand, avoid cognitive overload and enhance their ability to devise innovative and effective solutions. One effective technique is to create a problem storyboard, where the problem is broken into component pieces and illustrated visually.

Ask your team, "Does this tell the story of our work?" This approach helps in visualizing complex problems, making them easier to tackle collectively. Remember, you're still the decider, it's important to make that clear right up front and at each decision-making step.

Write the assembly instructions down

There's a reason mail-order furniture comes with assembly instructions. These instructions help reduce errors.

In the busy pace of educational leadership, we tend to let our calendars dictate our days. This keeps us from simply writing stuff down. That's a mistake. In problem-solving, rigorous methods involve using checklists, action planning, probing and focusing on mission-critical solutions.

Complex problems can be challenging to visualize and often lead to oversimplification or excessive complexity. By breaking the problem into smaller components and viewing it as a journey, leaders can invite others to examine and contribute to the solution. This collaborative visualization helps in building a comprehensive and effective solution.

Form and function

Effective problem solving in school systems requires a combination of rigorous logic, innovative thinking, collaboration and consensus building. Leaders must define problems accurately, seek diverse perspectives and be open to new approaches.

By embracing these strategies, educational leaders can navigate the complexities of their roles and drive meaningful improvements in their organizations. Leadership is about "mobilizing people to tackle tough problems." It doesn't hurt to bring a trusty Allen wrench along the way.

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