Job Coach's Guide to Problem Solving

Central to effective workplace support is the ability to do effective problem solving.
Achieving creative thinking requires careful attention to the following rules:

1. There is No Right Answer to A Problem
We need to consider as wide a range of alternative solutions as possible, and then choose the best of those.

2. There is No Wrong Answer to A Problem
Every idea is important and, in fact, the wildest ideas often serve as catalysts that lead to the best alternatives.

3. Search For Different Questions
The question we ask to solve a problem colors the range of options we consider in searching for a solution.
Consider the following alternative questions:

- "How can John retrieve the mail bin from the counter?"
- "How can the room be rearranged so that John can retrieve the mail bin?"

Each of these questions leads down a very different path to alternatives. In John's case, his co-workers rearranged the rooms where he picked up mail bins so that they were all at a height he could reach, and on a table that his wheelchair could fit under. In other locations where this was not possible, a co-worker helped him with the bins. The same issue is true when we are working with someone who has challenging behaviors at the work site. Again, consider:

- "How can we stop Judy from hitting herself?"
- "How can we keep Judy on task at work?"
- "How can we teach Judy to tell us if she is unhappy?"
- "How can we provide Judy with a job that she enjoys?"

The first and second questions emphasize external controls for the behaviors of hitting and attending to work. The third and fourth questions open up the alternatives to considering why Judy hits, and allows for alternatives like looking for a job she likes better and teaching her more effective ways to communicate her feelings.

4. Involve Anyone Who Will Need To Implement the Action Plan
Who should be involved in the problem solving process? Too often, we restrict participation to agency staff. Frequently others, including family, friends, and co-workers of the person with a disability, are able to bring a unique perspective to the process. These people may also be critical to *implementing* the solution, and therefore, need to participate in developing it.

Steps in a Problem Solving Process

Step 1 - Decide Who Should Be Involved
Choosing a problem solving group that includes all the people who understand the problem well and/or will need to help to implement the changes is an essential first step.

Fred worked as a customer service representative for a cable television company. His job was to call new customers to remind them when the installer was coming. Fred uses a wheelchair, and has limited mobility. The problem was how could Fred increase his work rate to approximate the expectations for the job. Fred participated in the planning, as did his supervisor.

Step 2 - Fact Finding About The Problem

Use this step to collect as much information about the problem as possible. Ask a lot of questions, without considering the importance of the information you are collecting.

In Fred's case, fact-finding included information about his need for extra time at breaks due to the time it took him to reach the break room and to use the bathroom. It also became clear that an opportunity to socialize while at work was critical to Fred. He has little contact with others at home, and the need to stay focused in an open work area was difficult for him.

Step 3 - Defining The Problem

During this step you consider different ways of looking at the problem by considering alternative *questions* or alternative *statements of the problem.* You should end this step with a clear consensus on the questions or problems you want to resolve. Many times your resolution will include considering several questions that you address through this process.

Consider Fred's situation. The obvious question is, "How do we increase Fred's work rate on this job?" Alternative questions that helped reframe the discussion included:
- *"How do we make sure that this job is fun for Fred?"*
- *"What is preventing Fred from spending as much time as possible on his work?"*

Step 4 - Generating Alternative Solutions

Assign a specific time block to generating as many solutions as possible. You should have a **minimum** of 30 alternatives before leaving this step and evaluating your options. Make this step as relaxed and as much fun as possible to encourage open-ended thinking and new ideas.
During this step all ideas are "in bounds", and none are critiqued. Keeping to this rule is often the most difficult part for planning groups. It is hard not to react to ideas. The facilitator or the rule keeper needs to be comfortable with redirecting evaluative comments.

Possible solutions for Fred covered a broad range including:
- *Changing his work schedule to allow time before work to socialize*
- *Increasing break time*
- *Asking his co-workers not to talk to him during work*
- *Reducing the amount he drinks before and during work to reduce his need to use the bathroom while at work*
- *Asking a co-worker to assist him to the break room to decrease time needed to get there*
- *Increasing the feedback on his productivity from his supervisor from monthly to daily*
- *Adding a rocker switch, headset, and large keyboard to the telephone*
- *Providing a jig to hold the printout securely, and a template to highlight the person he is calling*

Step 5 - Choosing A Solution

Most of us are best at this step. Now we can evaluate the alternatives, and make decisions about which to choose. The challenge for individuals involved in planning is to effectively use all of the available resources to make the most creative, effective, and above all, simple solution possible. Alternatives always exist. It is our responsibility as employment consultants to ensure that a range of alternatives is considered, and that employers and the person with a disability are empowered to develop solutions.

In Fred's case several solutions were implemented including daily feedback from his supervisor, schedule changes, and changing his fluid intake. The solutions involved commitment from a variety of people (i.e., his supervisor, Fred, the employment specialist), and addressed the range of issues, including Fred's need for time to socialize that did not interfere with his and his co-workers' jobs.