



FOR OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE, CHANGE
HOW YOU SOLVE PROBLEMS

Karen Martin

Ask any business leader if he or she is good at solving problems and the likely response is, “Of course!”

After all, business leaders spend a lot of their time navigating problems. If they weren't good at it, those leaders would lose their jobs, wouldn't they?

Not if the organization doesn't know what robust problem solving looks like. Most organizations don't, and as a result they perform below their potential. A lack of problem solving proficiency is why between 200,000 and 400,000 people die in the U.S. every year from medical errors—a number that has remained unchanged for two decades despite repeated studies shining a light on the problem. It's the reason why investing in costly ERP systems doesn't fundamentally improve the financial performance of most companies. It's the reason why many public service agencies struggle to fulfill the needs of constituents. It's why employee engagement scores haven't improved in the 17 years since Gallup launched its Q12 study.



Organizations lack the necessary proficiency in problem solving if:

- Business problems get leaders' attention only after they've become crises, while early warning signs go unheeded.
- Problems recur despite repeated attempts to address them.
- Problems never seem to go away completely.
- Customers, employees, and other stakeholders aren't happy with "solutions."
- Functional areas are in conflict over how problems are being addressed.

Problems are endemic in business, but addressing them effectively is possible for companies that embrace clarity as a core requirement. Doing so changes the trajectory—for the better—of organizational performance.

If Problem Solving Is So Important, Why Aren't We Better at It?

Problem solving as a discipline isn't new. Yet few organizations pursue problem solving with the degree of clarity necessary to produce the level of results they are capable of. Instead, problem-solving efforts succumb to three common points of failure.

The first is fear. Few organizations encourage leaders to actively bring problems into the open so that people can systematically solve them. Toyota, Ford, Danaher, United Technologies, and ThedaCare are among the short list of organizations famous for their problem-solving cultures, but such emphasis is rare. Instead, organizations tend to treat problems as if they are the personal failure of the leader in charge. In these environments, it's no wonder that leaders choose to ignore problems, downplay their severity, or find ways to hide them. Team members who surface problems are often silenced, whereas team members who find quick fixes or ways to push a problem down the value chain get rewarded.

Fear even makes the word problem unsayable in some organizations. Instead, people refer to issues or challenges or opportunities for improvement. Such avoidance reduces the sense of urgency and seriousness: you can walk away from an opportunity.

Problems are simply gaps between how an organization is performing now and how it wants to or needs to perform. Gaps carry less emotional weight than problems, and are subject to less judgement and avoidance. It's just a gap, and clarity-driven problem solving is the best tool for closing it.

Problems are endemic in business,
but addressing them effectively is possible
for companies that embrace clarity as
a core requirement.

The second point of failure is superficial problem solving due to lack of skill. This happens both in organizations that ignore the need for development, and in those who invest in building problem-solving capabilities by providing classroom “training” for a select group of people. In the latter case, the results are disappointing because people don’t develop problem-solving proficiency in a classroom. Skill development occurs while working with an experienced coach and solving real-world problems.

Developing organizational proficiency requires everyone from the CEO to frontline workers to become proficient problem solvers so they can close those gaps relevant to their scope of authority. Otherwise problem solving remains inconsistent and superficial, creating organizational drag that increases expenses, inserts risk into every decision, and robs employees of their creativity.

The third cause of failure to achieve significant results from problem solving is a tolerance for ambiguity in the methodology itself. A veritable alphabet soup of approaches is available for people to choose from: OODA, ODCA, PDCA, PDSA, SDCA, DMAIC, 8D, TBP, and, most recently Kata. At their core these methods are remarkably similar, and yet many organizations don’t achieve outstanding results because the methods lack clarity. They give people a set of high-level steps to follow, but the labels for the stages do a poor job of reflecting the details. Does the “Plan” phase of PDSA mean that we should create a plan for implementing a solution? And does “Do” mean we implement the solution? (No. “Plan” centers on gaining a deep understanding of the problem and “Do” is experimentation based on a hypothesis, such as, if we do this, then that will happen). Does the C, or Control in DMAIC mean the organization needs to hold to the achieved standard? (No. As soon as a countermeasure is implemented and the organization has stabilized at the new level of performance, a new problem-solving cycle should begin.)

The following pages present the approach we use to prevent these points of failure and give organizations the tools needed for outstanding problem solving.

The Solution Is C.L.E.A.R.

We have found that robust problem solving occurs more easily through a method grounded in asking questions, rather than by following pat steps. Answering questions encourages critical thinking and highlights when assumptions, biases, and fear drive the process instead of facts. It also requires people to confront what they don't know about a situation. By starting with questions, problem solvers approach problems with a mindset of humility and curiosity that leads to better solutions. It puts the need for clarity front and center of every step in the journey to close performance gaps.

The questions we ask align around five phases of problem resolution:

- **Clarify** and break down the problem
- **Learn** about the problem and the reasons for it
- **Experiment** with countermeasures
- **Assess** the results of the experiment and adjust as needed
- **Roll** out the new way of operating

CLEAR questions, described in more detail below, ensure that problem solvers follow an established process without jumping ahead prematurely or making assumptions for which they have no evidence. Answering the questions spurs deep thought and gives the problem solver the context he or she needs to play the role of advocate—selling why a particular performance gap needs attention, and what should be done to close it.

Organizations that have adopted one of the problem-solving approaches mentioned earlier (e.g., PDSA, DMAIC, etc.) can overlay CLEAR questions onto their established methodology to make explicit what is implied in the acronyms. Organizations that haven't adopted a formal problem-solving approach may find using CLEAR by itself provides sufficient structure.

Clarify the Problem

The C phase of CLEAR problem solving is dedicated to clarifying the gap an organization wants to or needs to close. During the C phase problem solvers answer the questions:

- What's the problem?
- How do you know it's a problem?
- For whom is it a problem?
- How significant is it?
- What are the problem components?
- Which parts will you focus on?

Problem solvers frequently rush through this phase because they believe they already know what they need to about the problem. After all, didn't they choose to focus on it in the first place? But knowing there's a problem isn't the same as clearly defining what the problem is.

As mentioned earlier, problems are gaps the organization wants to close or needs to close. The gaps should be defined in measurable from-to terms, where “from” represents the current situation and “to” represents a desired target: for example, reduce customer returns from 25 per week to 15 per month or reduce emergency room arrive-to-depart time from 4 hours to 90 minutes. Many problems are sufficiently complex that they need to be broken down and each component put through an independent problem-solving cycle.

Taking the time to clarify the problem prevents the common mistake of “premature solutioning,” which occurs before the problem and the reasons for it are well understood. For example, people often define problems as a “lack” of something—we need more people, we need new software, etc—instead of focusing on outcomes (the gap). Taking the time to clarify the problem prevents the mistake of defining it through the lens of a solution that’s based on assumptions.

Taking the time to clarify the problem prevents the common mistake of “premature solutioning,” which occurs before the problem and the reasons for it are well understood.

Learn about the Problem

The goal of the Learn phase is to understand the problem more deeply by answering two important questions:

- What's the reality of the situation?
- What is/are the most significant root cause(s)?

Understanding reality requires problem solvers to gather relevant data and information about the problem, casting a wide net when needed. Many problem solvers look in only one or two areas for evidence of problems and miss important elements, or rely on opinion versus facts. Information gathering of this nature goes well beyond looking at numbers, though data often is vitally important. True clarity is often achieved by real-world observation, referred to as going to the gemba (the real place) and talking with the people who do the work relevant to the problem and the people who are recipients of that work, whether internal or external to the organization. Problem solving solely from offices and conference rooms is doomed for failure.

Gain deep understanding about a problem takes time; problem solvers should avoid the impulse to rush. Admittedly, that can be difficult—it's common for problem solvers to believe they know more than they do, and therefore to skip over necessary information. I saw this recently, when a hospital CEO approached me for help solving the problem of slow admitting procedures from the emergency department to the hospital. When I suggested he spend two hours in the emergency room to observe how the work was done, he responded, "Two hours? I don't have two hours to spend on one problem."

He eventually did what I suggested, and discovered the problem wasn't at all what he thought. Without such observation, he might have spent a lot of time and money mandating faulty

solutions, but he didn't because he took the time to understand reality, or the "current state" by gathering data and information about the situation. He transformed his "I know" mindset to an "I want to learn" mindset and approached the problem with humility and curiosity.

Learning about the problem also includes uncovering the reasons—the root causes—for it. Every person in the organization—from the frontlines to the CEO—should be proficient in using basic root cause analysis techniques; some in the organization need proficiency in more complex analysis tools.

Experiment with Countermeasures

During the Experiment phase the problem solver identifies countermeasures he or she believes will eliminate the root causes of the gap, and runs an experiment or series of experiments to test them. We refer to "countermeasures" and not "solutions" to reflect the iterative nature of problem solving. Solutions imply permanence, whereas problem solving is designed to be done continuously: a new cycle of improvement begins once the organization is consistently meeting a new performance target or when conditions change.

Solutions imply permanence,
whereas problem solving is designed
to be done continuously.

In the Experiment phase problem solver answers the following questions:

- Which potential countermeasure(s) might eliminate the root cause(s) of the problem?
- Which potential countermeasure(s) should we try first? Why?
- How should you run the experiment?
- What do you expect will happen?

Many problem solvers are relieved to reach the Experiment phase—they finally get to do something! However, experimentation is more successful when problem solvers have taken the time needed in the previous phases to deeply Clarify and Learn. When the C and L phases are rushed, it's far more difficult to identify the proper countermeasure to close the gap. With sufficient clarity, the countermeasure(s) that will address the problem most effectively often become obvious.

Operating with a “go slow to go fast”
mindset generally produces better results.

While there's a fine line between being deliberate and responsible in learning about a problem and analysis paralysis, leaders need to avoid pressuring problem solvers to produce faster results than is reasonable, given a problem's complexity or the environment within which the problem resides. Operating with a "go slow to go fast" mindset generally produces better results. Opt for rapid cycles of prudent experimentation and adopt the attitude that success in experimentation means learning something, even if the learning shows that the most popular or promising idea won't solve the problem.

Assess Results and Adopt, Adapt, or Abandon the Countermeasure

In this phase, problem solvers assess whether the tested countermeasure closes the performance gap to the desired degree, and decide whether to adopt it as is, adapt it, or abandon it as unsuccessful. The questions problem solvers ask at this phase include:

- What happened (during the experiment)?
- Will the organization adopt, adapt, or abandon the countermeasure?

If problem solvers find that the hypothesis set at the beginning of the Experiment phase was proven, they move to the next phase of roll out. If the hypothesis wasn't proven, problem solvers consider whether to adjust the countermeasure and try again or abandon it altogether. If the countermeasure worked but didn't fully resolve the problem, problem solvers can try to simplify it for greater effect, or adapt it to address flaws.

If results show that the countermeasure didn't resolve the problem at all and should be abandoned, problem solvers should go back to the Clarify phase of CLEAR and make sure they

have defined the problem properly. (This is an example of the iterative nature of problem solving.) Problem solvers should also review what they discovered during the Learn phase and make sure they know enough about the current state, and the root causes that prevent the process, equipment, or people from performing at the “to” level today. Once that review is complete, problem solvers can choose another countermeasure and run another experiment.

Roll Out and Reflect

Execution matters—it makes the difference between a resolved problem and one that recurs because the people who do the work don’t understand the new way of operating and why it’s needed. During the roll out phase, problem solvers answer the questions:

- What’s the best way for people to learn and adhere to the new way of operating?
- Who will monitor performance?
- Has the new way resolved the problem?
- What did you learn about methodical problem solving?

A successful rollout requires a detailed rollout plan that answers a lot of questions: Who will oversee the new way of operating? How will the problem resolution be communicated? Is training needed? If so, what type? Who will conduct it? Will the improvement be implemented all at once or in waves? Is there a “cut-over” date when the old way of operating becomes obsolete? Who will monitor performance to ensure the gap stays closed and identify when conditions change, triggering a new round of problem solving?

While problem solvers reflect and learn at each phase of CLEAR problem solving, the Roll out and Reflect phase should include a period of deep reflection about the problem-solving cycle, during which the problem solver and key stakeholders discuss what they learned about the problem-solving process, the organization—and most importantly, themselves.

Change Problem Solving

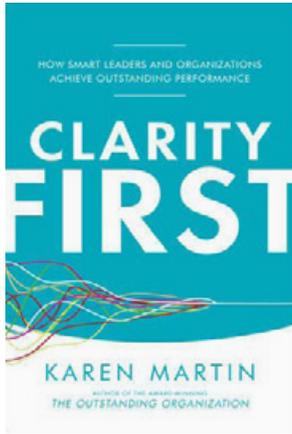
Robust problem solving allows organizations to reach outstanding levels of performance. Those results are evident in organizations like Toyota, Danaher, and ThedaCare, which are as famous for their emphasis on problem solving as they are for sustained, long-term growth.

The importance these organizations place on problem solving applies to everyone from the senior-most executive to the frontlines. At Toyota, the organization builds organization-wide capabilities by making it the job of each leader to become a proficient problem solver, so he or she can then coach his or her direct reports as they develop proficiency. Providing hands-on, one-on-one coaching ensures that problem solvers use critical thinking to answer the questions and avoid drawing erroneous conclusions based on bias, assumptions, or incomplete information.

The results from adopting a disciplined method for problem solving are outstanding—for the organization and for individual problem solvers. Everyone understands that it is his or her job to identify and close the gaps between where the organization is and where it wants or needs to go. As people gain more experience, they begin to reap the benefits—both professionally and personally—from questioning more and assuming less. **Leaders cannot unlearn how to effectively problem solve once they've experienced the benefits of putting clarity first.** 📌



Info



Ready to dig deeper into this idea? Buy a copy of *Clarity First*.

Want copies for your organization or for an event?

We can help: customerservice@800ceoread.com 800-236-7323

About the author

Karen Martin, president of the global consulting firm The Karen Martin Group, Inc., is a leading authority on Lean management and business performance improvement. Her clients have included Fortune 500 companies in nearly every industry and government agencies at local, state, and federal levels. Her latest book, *Clarity First: How Smart Leaders and Organizations Achieve Outstanding Performance*, has just been released by McGraw-Hill.

For more information, please visit www.ksmartin.com.



Powered by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ, ChangeThis is a

vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest developments in business books and ideas at 800ceoread.com

This document was created on March 7, 2018 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover image from Adobe Stock.

Share this

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.



Subscribe

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

