**Problem Solving and Planning Template**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this tool is to provide a structured process for identifying a problem, understanding the root causes, ascertaining solution steps, and progress monitoring. The tool is designed to consider all angles of the problem while reducing the tendency to jump to an inappropriate or incorrect solution.

This problem-solving and action planning tool in conjunction with the Cycle of Improvement tools could diminish biases, mitigate disparities, and provide meaningful dialogue when the team is faced with a problem or challenge and is not sure how to address it and/ or previous efforts to address the problem have not been effective. This tool provides a step-by-step approach to critically examining a problem and potential solutions. It is important that the action plan from this tool be folded into the larger implementation plan that the team builds in the Cycle of Improvement.

**Details**

Depending on the capacity of the team, it is important that there be clearly defined roles for the meeting, so members of the team understand the levels of decision-making prior to the problem solving and action planning process. Specifically, as solutions and next steps are identified, it’s important to be clear on what decisions can be made by the team and what decisions are reserved for the Team Leader to make.

The time needed to complete this protocol depends upon the scope of the problem and the capacity of the leadership team. Leadership teams that are tightly aligned in vision and mission and have clear decision-making processes will be able to complete this protocol in a high quality way in a shorter amount of time that a leadership team that is still forming.

**Steps**

1. Identify the problem: what do we want to change?
2. Analyze the problem: what’s preventing us from reaching the *desired state*?
3. Force Field Analysis: what could help or hinder our efforts?
4. Brainstorm Solutions: how can we make the change?
5. Select and plan the solution: what is the best way to do it?
6. Action Plan:who, what, where, when, and how to evaluate? Who to involve, enroll, get input?

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|  | **Steps** | **Questions** |  | **Responses** |
| 1 | State the problem. | What is the problem you want to solve? |  |  |
| 2 | Set conditions for a solution. | If this problem were solved, how would you feel? |  |  |
| What are the top three to five criteria for an appropriate solution? |  |  |
| 3 | Propose solutions. | What solutions might meet the interests of all parties? |  |  |
| 4 | Check proposed solutions against criteria. | How does each of these proposed solutions meet your established criteria? |  |  |
| 5 | Select solution. | Which solution seems to meet the most criteria? |  |  |
| How will others respond to this solution? |  |  |
| What will you do to make this work? |  |  |
| 6 | Act. | How will you let others know what you are doing, if necessary? |  |  |
| 7 | Revisit. | How it is going? |  |  |
| What adjustments have you had to make along the way? |  |  |

# Planning Template

* What issue or problem do you wish to solve?
* Why is this issue important to solve now?
* What benefits do you anticipate from solving the problem (e.g., quality, timeliness, cost, customer/employee satisfaction, economic development, mitigation of inequities)?
1. **Issue of Concern:**
2. **Identify the Problem—**What do we want to change?

 Current State: Desired State:

* What do you know?
* What don’t you know and need to find out (Who? What? When?)?
* What specific performance measure needs to improve?
1. **Analyze the Problem—**What’s preventing us from reaching the “desired state”?

 Causes: Effects:

* Why does this issue exist? (Consider using a root cause analysis tool.
* What data are you using to determine problem?
* Does our data verify the root causes?
* What data sources might you be missing/overlooking?
* Through what biases are we examining the data?
1. **Clear, Concise Problem Statement** (identify sub-problems where applicable):

**Before we go any further, consider:**

1. **Control** – Are we the right people to tackle this problem? Who are other stakeholders.
* Who are internal and external customers?
* Whose perspectives do you need to complete this problem-solving template (e.g., customers, external partners, subject matter experts)?
1. **Importance and difficulty** – How much does it matter whether this problem is solved? Is it possible? Do we have the will?
2. **Time and resources** – How long will it take to resolve this problem? Have we got what it will take to do this job?
3. **Return on Investment** – What is the payoff? Does it justify the investment of resources?
4. **Force-field Analysis—**What could help or hinder our efforts?

 Helping Forces: Hindering Forces:

1. **Brainstorm Solutions—**How can we make the change?
* What solutions will solve the root cause(s)?
* What solutions are best?
* What impacts (positive and negative) may result from implementing the solutions?
* *How can problem causes be eliminated?*
* *How can barriers be minimized?*
* *What positive forces can be maximized?*
1. **Select and Plan the Solution—**What’s the best way to do it?

Criteria for Evaluating Solutions

* + Resources (budget, people, materials, etc., available to group)
	+ Time (length of time it takes to solve problem)
	+ Acceptability (stakeholders and organization will accept solution–and changes involved)
	+ Return on Investment (expected pay-off from solution)
	+ Control (implementation is within control of group)
	+ Appropriateness (solution solves problem)

 Solution(s) Chosen:

* What tasks do you need to complete? Include tasks to: a) mitigate risks, b) identify and solve issues, c) measure progress and results, d) communicate changes, status, results.
* Who will be responsible for each task?
* When will the task be done?
* What resources are needed for each task?
1. **Action Plan—**Who, What, Where, When, and How to Evaluate? Who to involve, enroll, get input from?

 Who? What? By When?

 How Monitored?

Adapted from *Continuous Improvement: Problem Solving Manual*, Montgomery County Public Schools Summer Leadership Conference, 1997.