A Resource for College and High School Teachers.

Making Team Projects Work

Team Interventions: The Problem-Solving Process

In this series of blog posts, we describe structured team interventions and other tools that educators and managers can use to make their team projects work better. Last week my colleague Tim Franz examined tools to improve **decision-making**. This week, we introduce you to the tools that help teams work more effectively through a **problem-solving** process. Decision-making and problem-solving share some approaches, but also exhibit some different ones as well.

Step #1: Define the problem. This is often very clear at the outset of a team task. For example, if we have our students do a "Lost in the Wilderness" survival simulation, it's clear that they need to choose and rank the items they will need for survival. For other tasks, such as helping a local non-profit improve their social media, the problem definition could be more obscure. Regardless of how easy it is to define the problem, this step is first (can often be overlooked).

Step #2: Specify your criteria for the solution. This is the most often missed step in team problem-solving. Members begin to generate solutions without specifying how they will judge those proposals. The hiring committee needs to decide how they will evaluate each applicant before indicating their reaction to each application. When working through the Wilderness Survival task, students must decide if they will travel for help or stay in one place and wait for rescue. That decision will impact their choices about which items are essential for survival.

Step #3: Generate solutions. Sometimes teams will start with this step, which may be okay if it's just a brainstorming exercise (e.g., "How can we solve the parking problem on campus?"). However,

the best solution generation comes after defining the problem and specifying criteria. At this point, the team can start listing ideas that may work as they move through the task. They can do this in a variety of ways, including using some of the tools that we suggested last week in the blog post on decision-making.

Step #4: Select the Best Solution. If the team has defined its problem and specified its criteria, at this point it should be able to use those factors to select the best solution from the list that they generated in Step #3. It's possible, however, that the team has difficulty selecting a good solution from the list. This is where the team might return to an earlier stage of the process, often refining their criteria (#2).

Once the team has selected the best solution, the decision-making process ends. The team will pass on its decision to the professor or manager for them to implement, such as making the offer to the new hire.

Problem-Solving Process

1. Define the problem
2. specify criteria
3. generate solutions
4. select the best solution
5. implement the solution
6. group process assessment

When the team is involved in a problem-solving process, there are two additional steps:

#5: Implement the Solution. Here the team must find a way to make their decision in Step #4 actually happen. If a class project is to analyze the social media of a local nonprofit organization, the team must put the data together, study the trends, and provide recommendations in the form of a social media plan. At times, class project teams actually work with an organization to help implement their recommendations.

#6. Team Process Assessment. Once the team has completed its project and found an answer to its problem, the final step should be to go back and review their process and outcome, so that they can learn for next time. In a class, this might take the form of an assessment rubric from the instructor, along with self and peer evaluations. Many teams are so glad to be done with a project, especially a class project, that they skip this step. But teams that will be continuing to work together can take valuable lessons on both task outcomes and person outcomes to their next project. (In our group dynamics class we actually take the final exam block to do this critical step with the entire class involved.)

Now that we have examined a basic problem-solving process for the team, next week's post will feature some very specific problem-solving tools that you can use with your teams. These tools help teams improve their work on the steps in the basic problem-solving process.

If you have suggestions for posts you would like to see in this column, contact us at MakingTeamProjectsWork@gmail.com or visit our website https://teambuildingprocess.com/making-team-projects-work/ where you can also find a link to the wilderness survival task referenced above.

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Read more about their work and see additional resources at
https://teambuildingprocess.com/making-team-projects-work/

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