

## GROWTH STRATEGIES

# How to Become a Master Problem Solver

Five steps to sharpen your problem-solving skills -- and save time and money, too.

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Your ability to make money is directly proportionate to how well you solve problems for your customers. Problem solving is one of the most highly valued characteristics you can have as an entrepreneur. Hone this skill and you reap the benefits of saving time, making money and finding the next big idea for your business.

There are three myths about problem solving that should be shot before we talk about how to become good at it.

**Myth No. 1:** Problem solving and critical thinking are the same.

**Fact:** Problem solving is a sub-set of its larger cousin, critical thinking. Problem solving deals with the immediate issue, and critical thinking is required for long-term strategic issues.

**Myth No. 2:** Good problem solvers intuitively shoot from the hip.

**Fact:** Intuition is an important part of the process, but research shows that the more systematic problem solver has a better return with accurate and successful solutions.

**Myth No. 3:** If you come up with a good solution, you're a good problem solver.

**Fact:** There are five steps to good problem solving, and you need to follow through on each to be deemed a pro at it.

Following these five steps will help you become a master problem solver.

1. **Identify.** Identifying the correct problem to work on is often where people trip up. It's not as simple as you might think -- breeze over this step at your own peril. Think about a business that has revenue issues. There could be a few hundred reasons for that issue. Asking the right questions and being a smart detective help you zero in on the problem with precision. The good problem solver asks a lot of questions about what the problem really is, instead of guessing and making snap decisions about it.
2. **Ideate.** Now that you have a short list of what the problem might be, brainstorm all the possible solutions. The best brainstorming happens when you have the opportunity to bounce ideas off others. Get the right people in the room and think of as many solutions as you can. This is not the time to evaluate. The physiological brain process of generating ideas is not the same as evaluating them, and they cannot be switched on at the same time. They are both critical processes, but don't turn off the ideation by turning on the evaluation.
3. **Evaluate.** This is when you evaluate the ideas you came up with during the ideation phase. Evaluate ideas first based on their impact on a goal, and secondly, on the complexity of the idea. Complexity is not about difficulty. Instead, it is determined by only two things: time and money. Can the idea bring about successful results in the time constraints you have, and does it fit any known budget constraints you have? Ask yourself how large an impact the idea has. If you're trying to cut \$10,000 out of a budget and you come up with an idea that saves \$100, the

impact is relatively low. One with \$1,000 becomes a higher-impact solution. You are looking for high-impact, low-complexity ideas.

4. **Execute.** This is another step average problem solvers often skip. It does no good to come up with a great idea and then bungle execution on it. We've all been in those meetings where ideas are brainstormed and funneled into a few doable deeds, only to walk out of the meeting and never know when or how the ideas will be executed. Fruitless. Come up with a plan to get your idea done. You don't have to be the executor of the full idea, but as a problem solver, you have some responsibility for implementing the solution.
5. **Re-examine.** The final step is to check in with the solution's progress and determine if it is still the right one. There will be times when the problem still exists because the solution wasn't right. Don't throw in the towel. Go back to step two and get going on the next solution to try.

Problem solving is a skill that pays handsomely. Practice the steps so that you become efficient at them. Require it of others you work with. Then execute. Get them in the habit of always bringing at least one solution idea for every problem you identify. No problem.