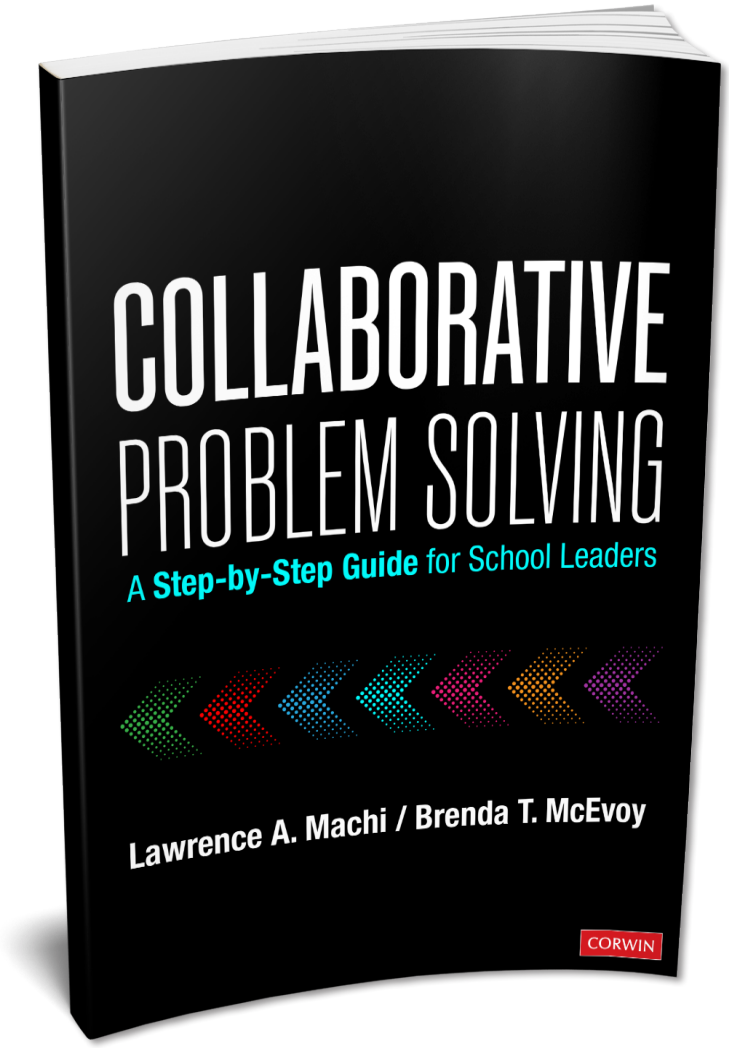

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CHAPTER 1

School Problem Solving in a Nutshell

> A leader is best when people barely know he exists. Not so good when people obey him and acclaim him. Worse when they despise him. But a good leader talks little. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say "We did it ourselves."
>
> —Lao Tzu (565 BC)

It matters. General Colin Powell said, "Leadership is problem solving." That's what leaders do, day in, day out. Becoming a skillful problem solver is a requirement for any leader, but it is an absolute essential for any school leader. Think for minute. School leaders do not solve problems about widgets. They solve problems affecting people. Decisions they make touch the lives of thousands of students. Many of these decisions can change the course of a student's life. How important is it for school leaders to be able to solve problems? Consider how important it is to have the right solution for a child.

Problem Solving in Schools

Schools are complex people places where problems come in all shapes and sizes. Teachers and students are constantly problem solving. Departmental, administrative, faculty, and special issues groups meet regularly to problem solve and decide. Some of the problems facing them are well understood. They are the routine problems and are easily resolved by drawing on prior knowledge and previous experience.

Then there are the others, those problems involving many stakeholders, where the stakes are high and no reasonable solution is in sight. The problems Paul Nutt described as "unruly dilemmas with no apparent way out, as undesirable situations without a solution, questions that cannot apparently be answered." These are the *difficult problems* and are all too plentiful in today's schools. These are the type of problems an untrained leader is ill-equipped to address. Having a working knowledge of group problem-solving strategies and techniques is required for handling the *difficult problems*. Not having this knowledge leaves a leader in a vulnerable position, unarmed and unprepared. This is easily remedied. The practical whats and the hows of collaborative group problem solving can be easily learned, and they are the subject of this book.

Beginning With the Basics: Defining Terms

The concepts of a problem and problem solving are fuzzy terms; everyone knows what they are, but few can accurately describe them. Gaining a clear understanding of these two principal ideas is in order. So what is a problem? What is problem solving? Let's define our terms.

The Problem

The Emotional Problem

Problems seen only through an emotional lens are defined as situations that cause significant stress and disrupt the normal functions of an individual. This disruption is often accompanied by feelings of anger, fatigue, excitement, love, or hate.

The Rational Problem

If the issue is approached from a rational state of mind, then a problem is an issue or situation confronting the individual that requires attention, triggering a rational response.

The Workplace Problem

An issue or situation confronting the organization that requires attention and resolution.

Problem Solving

Emotional Problem Solving

This is an emotional response driven by the feelings generated by the situation. Solutions are sought to alleviate the feelings generated by the emotional reaction, subjugating any rational decision-making. Emotional problem solving is reactionary. Decision-making tends to be biased, often leading to poor judgment, rash decisions, and/or risk-aversion.

Rational Problem Solving

This is a process of inquiry that examines, analyzes, and concludes with a reasoned decision addressing a situation in need of resolution. Rational problem solving is deliberate, unbiased, and based on the facts as logically determined.

Collaborative Problem Solving

A conscious act where the individuals in a group choose to engage in a rational process of inquiry to examine, analyze, deliberate, and consensually make a reasoned decision to address a situation in need of resolution.

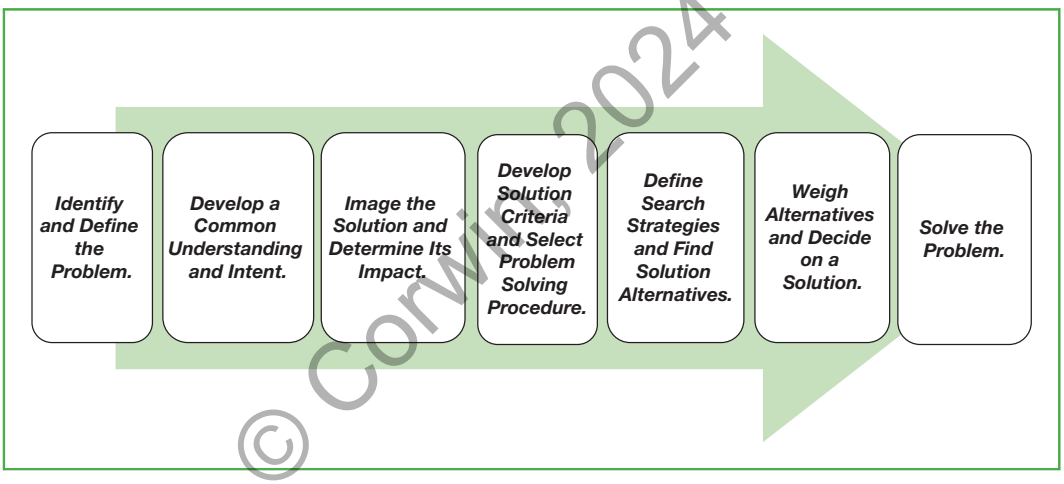
Individuals and groups can respond to problems either rationally, emotionally, or in some combination. Earlier reasoning would have it that emotional responses need to be suppressed when problem solving. The

thought was rational decisions outperform choices made emotionally. However, solution acceptance largely depends on emotional support. While a reasoned decision may warrant the best solution, human emotions fuel the will of the stakeholders to understand and to accept that solution. The head provides the reason; the heart provides the will.

A good collaborative problem-solving process is a hybrid. While rational thinking is its backbone, it incorporates the emotional considerations as well. The following description presents a collaborative group problem-solving process.

A Collaborative Problem-Solving Process

Figure 1.1 The Seven-Step Problem-Solving Process



The preceding figure depicts a collaborative group problem-solving process, which involves seven steps (Figure 1.1).

1. Identify and define the problem.
2. Develop a common understanding about the problem.
3. Image the solution.
4. Develop a problem-solving process.
5. Set solution criteria and find options.
6. Weigh alternatives to decide on the solution.
7. Solve the problem.

Theoretical Connections

The Collaborative Problem-Solving Process defined in the preceding text is founded on the principles of critical thinking described in John Dewey's landmark text, *How We Think*, first published in 1910. The seven-step process is an application of the Kepner-Tregoe (KT Model) employed in government and business since the 1960's and is described in their *text*, *The New Rational Manager* (1997). *See the For Further Readings and Bibliography* to delve further.

N.B. Where foundational concepts are being applied for use in the text, a Theoretical Underpinnings textbox will be used to provide the reader reference to the theory or applied theory on which the concept is based.

Identify and Define the Problem

Accurately identifying and defining the problem is the first step to successful problem solving and is accomplished by completing four tasks. Good problem solving begins by observing and reflecting. *First, leaders search for disconnects, comparing what was observed to what should be and imaging the difference. Once identified, a problem is defined by describing the elements of the problem and the type of problem its presents to the organization. Then, the degree of factual knowledge known about the problem and a potential solution is assessed to determine the difficulty of the problem. The final task measures the urgency to address the problem situation.*

Develop a Common Understanding and Intent

Problem solving in schools does not happen in a vacuum. Schools are people places. When problems arise, people need to solve them. School problems are not "me" problems; they are "we" problems. The next step in the problem-solving process enlists the stakeholders in the conversation. *It involves three tasks. Decide on the people in the room. Gain their commitment to work together to solve the problem. Develop a common understanding of the problem as defined.*

Image the Solution and Determine Its Impact

In the third problem-solving step, the group pictures the resolution to the problem and the potential solution's effect on the organization. *Two tasks make up this step: picturing the problem as solved and determining the*

impact of that solution. What would the situation look like if the problem were resolved? The response to this question provides the frame for developing the elements of an acceptable solution. The first task pictures the desired state, looking at what the situation will look like when the problem is solved. The second task identifies the collateral impact the solution causes outside the problem area. These unintended affects are included as required elements of the solution.

Set Solution Criteria and Find Alternative Solutions

Deciding on the appropriate solution for a problem is not a matter of personal preference or opinion. Rational decision-making is dependent on sound evaluative assessment procedures. In this step, the group creates a yardstick for judging possible solutions and the appropriate procedures for finding the solution. *Finding quality solution alternatives is a two-task process. First, build an assessment to measure possibilities for good solutions, and second, select the appropriate procedure to find these candidates.* Before solutions are entertained, an evaluative yardstick is developed to assess and judge possible acceptable solutions.

Next, adopting solution criteria provides the gateway for searching out possible solutions. Using the criteria guides, solution options can be categorically identified and the appropriate problem-solving procedure is selected to identify solution options.

Weigh Alternatives to Decide on the Solution

Sound group decision-making is intentional. Groups rationally evaluate and choose a solution from the options offered. This step is accomplished in three tasks. *Task 1 clearly defines the decision makers and the role of the problem-solving group in the decision-making process. In Task 2, the decision-making parameters are set, and the problem-solving team determines the problem solution and agrees on a rating process to judge the proposed alternative solutions using the solution criteria. In Task 3, the group uses the selected rating system to evaluate each alternative solution, selects the best alternative, and agrees to implement the solution chosen.*

Solve the Problem

The "what" of the problem solution has been determined, but that is only half of the answer. The proverbial devil is in the details of the "how" of the problem solution. In this last step, problem solving develops the means to a path forward. *This is accomplished by completing four tasks. First, the group develops and adopts a well-defined action plan to implement the solution. Second, there must be an evaluation process to monitor and*

judge the solution's effectiveness. Third, the necessary resources must be provided to implement the solution. Last, an accountability process is created to include follow-up reviews and reports necessary to monitor the solution's effectiveness.

Too often program and policy decisions are determined and then shot into space never to be heard of again. This last step of the problem-solving process is as important as the first. Adaptation of this process should always be considered based on the nature of the individual problem and the capability of the problem-solving group. In some cases, the steps can be accomplished in a matter of minutes or hours, and others might take days or weeks. There is no orthodoxy here. The problem-solving process always needs to be adapted to the situation. How is this process used? It depends.

Why Go to All This Trouble?

Difficult school problems are always people problems. Getting the right people to help greatly improves the quality of the outcome. Including stakeholders in problem solving provides many benefits.

- Stakeholder responses provide bellwethers that forecast the intensity of the problem.
- Stakeholder engagement provides critical feedback for the problem-solving progress and the acceptance of the solution.
- Collaborative processes allow for the "voice and choice" of the stakeholders to be heard.
- Collaborative processes enable transparency.
- The quality of the thought is diversified, allowing for creative and multi-dimensional responses.

Solutions can't succeed when those responsible for them carrying out are opposed. The primary aim should always be to involve those affected by the problem to have a hand in finding the solution. Collaborative problem solving is a must when dealing with the difficult problems. However, integrating collaborative practices into the everyday school processes is strongly advised. Making decision-making collaborative builds teamwork, faculty cohesion, and produces better results.

When Is a Collaborative Process Needed?

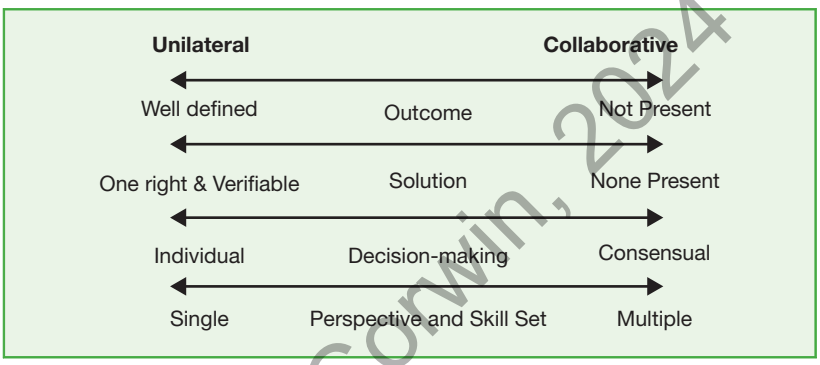
There is no easy, fast rule. Every problem is unique in its setting and context. Generally, routine problems can be handled unilaterally. The collaborative problem-solving process is needed when *difficult problems*

arise and *tough decisions* need to be made. *These problems are conflicted, ambiguous, and their solutions are uncertain. These are problems that require action while still considering various ways to respond.*

Theoretical Connections

The applied theory anchoring the discussions on difficult problems and tough decisions relies principally on Paul Nutt's seminal text *Making Tough Decisions* (1990).

Figure 1.2 Unilateral Versus Collaboration Problem Solving



The scale depicted in Figure 1.2 provides a way of gauging whether a unilateral, an abbreviated, or a collaborative approach is appropriate for the problem at hand.

As depicted, there is no need to collaborate when all the following are true:

- A problem and its outcome are well defined
- The solution is known
- Only a single perspective is needed
- Only one person is required to make the decision

A collaborative problem-solving process is required, when any of the following are true:

- The problem and outcome are ill defined
- No verifiable solution is present
- Problem solving requires multi perspectives and skillsets
- A consensual decision-making process is needed

Most problems will have patterns moving across the range of each category. Some patterns will clearly point to either the unilateral or collaborative sides. Many, however, will fall into the middle range where no clear direction seems evident. When this is the case, study the problem carefully; when in doubt, always err to the collaborative side. A general rule of thumb is if a catastrophe or debacle is possible, use the collaborative process.

The Prerequisites for Successful Collaboration

Successful group problem solving depends on the intent of the participants, their ability to work together, and the leader's ability collaborate with others.

The formula is simple. Tackling the difficult problem requires a leader who can guide a cohesive workgroup in a rational problem-solving process. Four ingredients are necessary to make this happen:

1. Collaborative leadership
2. A cooperative workgroup
3. Sound meeting structures
4. Formal problem-solving processes

It is time to explore each of these crucial prerequisites in turn.

Theoretical Connections

The prerequisites are principally founded on the following seminal works.

Collaborative Leadership: Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, *Theory in Practice* (1974). Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs, *Leadership Agility* (2007). Richard Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator* (2002).

Cooperative Workgroup: W. G. Dyer, *Teambuilding* (1987). Daniel Levi, *Group Dynamics for Teams* (2001). Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams* (1994).

Sound Meeting Structures: James Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting* (2019). Peter Senge et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (1994). David Straus and Micheal Doyle, *How to Make Meetings Work* (1976).

Formal Problem-Solving Processes: Sam Kaner et al., *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2014). Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe, *The New Rational Manager* (1997), James Higgins, *101 Creative Problem-Solving Techniques* (2006).

The Collaborative Leader

School leaders tend to be high achievers. They come to their job having track records for knowing what to do and how to get it done. Leading for them is about their capability and prowess; they are responsible. Here's the first rule to learn about good problem solving and decision-making in schools.

- ***Rule 1.*** *Leader, you are not solving the problem; we are. You are not making the decision; we are.*

This sounds a bit preachy, but understanding the true meaning of the admonition is the foundation for successful problem solving and quality decision-making. Here is an example.

It had always been my dream to transform a high school into a real learning organization. Finally, I had my chance. I had been a high school principal for a scant five months. My mentor, Don Delay, agreed to assist in the venture. I had a clear vision of what that looked like and how to get there. I decided to confront the culture and began to break things. School governance was my first target. It was time to get the faculty to take responsibility for their school. Don took me aside and told me we needed a conversation. Don said, "Larry, if you want this thing to work, you've got to give them ownership. You have to be strong enough, to be weak enough, to be strong." It was time to grow up and put my ego away. It was time to understand that to succeed, **we** needed to do the school transforming, not just **I**.

- ***Rule 2.*** *You have to be strong enough, to be weak enough, to be strong.*

Any leader's success is dependent on others succeeding. An essential element of good problem solving is having a clear vision of reality. This vision doesn't happen unless *we* see the problem, and the problem is not addressed unless *we* own it. So how does the *me* leader get to be the *we* leader? Leaders have to be comfortable enough in their own shoes to allow others to be "in the room." The leader must be open enough to accept other viewpoints. Leaders must be wise enough to allow others to make important decisions. When this happens, the *me* leader can become the *we* leader.

Experienced leaders understand good decisions happen when everyone works together, and collaboration builds shared commitment to address the problem.

- ***Rule 3.*** *Good leaders create the opportunities to develop groups into productive problem-solving teams to facilitate quality decision-making.*

It is not enough for a leader to believe and to behave in a collaborative fashion. Effective leaders are teachers who empower and inspire others to become active participants in the process. They encourage

faculty and staff to be reflective, to assess what went right and wrong in previous decision-making efforts, and to use this knowledge to make better decisions. They provide the necessary space and resources, such as training and work time, to skill up problem-solving groups. These leaders assist workgroups in team development. They train and practice the specifics of meeting management and problem solving. In short, effective leaders build capacity. They know that skilled workgroups are strong problem solvers, and strong problem-solving groups address and manage the emotional side of the problem. Productive "voice and choice" is the path to good solutions and sustained decisions.

The Cooperative Workgroup

Margaret Wheatley identified the real problem solvers in a school, when she said:

> History has brought us to a moment where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done.

Whether it is a school governance team, curriculum committee, or administrative group, this is where the action is and where the real work is done. These are the places where problems are solved and decisions are made. All of our schools have workgroups; that's the way a school functions. However, many workgroups are not teams. They are not cohesive, nor are they collaborative. Many are indeed the opposite—toxic and dysfunctional. They argue about power or status and constantly debate what to do or worse, defer to the leader to tell them what to do. Result? Little gets done well.

If a work group is dysfunctional, team development is the first order of business. Successful problem solving does not happen in a toxic environment. Good problem solving cannot occur without the group working as a cohesive unit. Successful problem-solving workgroups collaborate to develop a shared commitment, a shared understanding, and teamwork when problem solving. Leaders assist them to become teams and mentor them to become problem solvers. This discussion is only the beginning about team development. Several texts addressing this topic can be found in the Further Reading supplement.

Sound Meeting Structures

Where two or more of us come together, we have meetings. Meetings are an essential part of our daily lives, be they informal conversations at the kitchen table or formal hearings by the Congress of the United States. Meetings should have purpose. We meet to plan, coordinate, and

evaluate. We join together to celebrate and grieve. We come together to resolve conflicts, settle our differences, and make decisions. So, if meetings are apparently so essential, why are they so maligned by school communities? The simple answer? We don't know how to meet. School meetings have a bad reputation. Most school meetings are perfunctory affairs, dictated by cultural protocols, and orchestrated by the school's power elites. At best, they are social gatherings, where those who like to meet do so. For many, they are the bane of the school calendar considered as unnecessary evils, events that prevent the real work of the school from being done. Here's the question. Problem solving and decision-making are tasks that groups do in meetings. So how are school meetings transformed into productive proceedings where important work gets done, where real problem solving occurs, and important decisions are made? What do these meetings look like?

The standard school meeting, be it the department meeting, curriculum committee, or faculty meeting, needs to cease to exist in its present form. For meetings to be effective, they need to be restructured. They should do the following:

- Only be held when needed
- Have a specific purpose and intended outcome
- Only include the participants affected by the outcome
- Be preplanned, providing the participants the necessary information and materials to be prepared to participate
- Have an agenda that is pre-published and adhered to
- Be held at a convenient time in a comfortable space
- Have a structure that elicits everyone's participation
- Ensure all participants play an active role in the proceedings
- Have balanced and productive discussions
- Have a published historical record
- Be continually assessed as to their effectiveness
- Have actionable next steps

As Pat Lencioni stated, "The majority of meetings should be discussions that lead to decisions." Sound problem-solving meetings are structured to focus on the problem at hand. Group Organizer activities are completed to enable the group to accomplish their tasks. Each participant has a role in the process, and someone is responsible for guiding an open, balanced, and constructive conversation. Rules and norms are established that dictate how members are treated and how the work is done. These meetings are planned to create a time and

space where leaders collaborate with and become part of work groups intent on solving problems. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Supplement–The Problem-Solver's Toolbox.

Formal Problem-Solving Structures

As mentioned earlier, problem solving is really critical thinking. The cognitive, affective, and metacognitive skillsets owned by every human are used to carry out the process. Individual problem solvers use the mental skills of recall, classification, analysis, and synthesis to work through a problem. While each member of the problem-solving team possesses the skills, each has his or her unique way of applying them. So when a group engages in problem solving, how do they come together as one mind?

Abraham Maslow said, "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." This particular adage holds when workgroups try to think in common. Workgroups tend to rely on brainstorming, debating, voting, or asking for suggestions. There seems to be a general lack of understanding of the small Group Organizers and how they are used to facilitate thinking as a team. Even with the best intentions, groups not using good mental processing skills tend to flounder. They become impatient, seldomly reaching the result they imagined.

A critical prerequisite for a productive problem-solving group is its ability to use "group mental organizers," defined in this text as *Group Organizers*. They are the activities and techniques that organize how people think together and decide about things. Group Organizers are specifically chosen to move a problem-solving group through an agenda. They can be a simple procedure like "thumbs-up, thumbs-down," which gets a quick assessment of the group's understanding of an issue. Group organizers can be applied to address the range of the skillsets for critical thinking. Having access to and understanding of Group Organizers is essential for the problem-solving group. While many of these Group Organizers will be suggested in each succeeding chapter in this text, the glossary provides a collection of the basic ones. Texts specializing in Group Organizers are also cited in the further reading section of this text.

> To this point, the what, how, and why of successful problem solving and decision-making have been described. The Foibles and Fumbles section in each chapter that follows points out **what not to do.** Some say experience is the best teacher. These vignettes are experiences the authors either instigated or have been a party to or they are deeds we are either not proud of or ones that left us scratching our heads asking, "What in the world was that all about?" Learning from mistakes is a hard way to go. We hope the reader will learn from these tales and not suffer similar pain or failures. Here are some of our most memorable Foibles and Fumbles

Common Leadership Foibles and Fumbles

The hows and whys of problem solving are probably the top of the to-do list for too many leaders. New leaders tend to solve problems based on personal knowledge and experience gained as teachers. For the most part, this preparation falls short of what's needed to successfully solve problems at the school level.

I'm the Boss and You're Not

For these people, making decisions is easy; getting others to "see the light" is the difficult part. They may mean well, but their "me/they" attitude seldom produces positive results. Most school leaders are also high achievers. They prefer to manage and orchestrate situations based on their own problem-solving acumen. When trying to solve a problem, they may create interpersonal problems with parents and school staff. They may have the "what" of the problem right, but they have the "how" of the issue wrong.

Successful leaders know they cannot solve problems singlehandedly. The path to successful problem solving includes getting buy-in from those affected by the issue. The best way of accomplishing this is to give stakeholders a say in the decision-making. Veteran leaders know problem solving is a "we thing" not a "me thing," and their job is to facilitate the work of the right people to do it.

The Ghost

A leader who remains out of sight isn't leading anyone. A school principal, for example, needs to be out and about meeting staff and students and attending school events. Not being seen, except to those who enter the person's office, means not being where school problems occur. Problems occur on the "main street" of the school campus. They are understood and solved by those who live on main street. To lead is a verb, not a noun. Leading is acting with others. Problem solving is acting with others. It isn't done well by being confined behind a desk or being at a string of off-campus meetings. Peter Drucker said it best, "The definition of a leader is one who has followers." It is hard to have followers when the leader is not present.

Survey Says

Facts, not opinions, are the building blocks of good problem solving. Taking the polar opposite position of an "I am the boss" leader, some school leaders believe leadership is earned by satisfying members of the community and staff. This means defining themselves based on the good opinion of others. Rather than weighing the various vantage points and perceptions of constituencies to seek a better understanding of the problem, they tally opinions and solve problems based on the view of the

majority. Worse yet, they will do the bidding of the powerful or subscribe to the "last in, first out" rule of problem solving. That is, the position last heard becomes the position taken. Such thinking leads to a skewed and haphazard identification of a problem.

Veteran problem solvers formulate a preliminary understanding of the problem before gathering information from others. Rather than rushing to quick solutions, they seek and weigh the viewpoints of others to build a picture of the existing problem. As leaders, they facilitate and collaborate with those affected to build a common mindset about the situation and a reasoned solution to the problem.

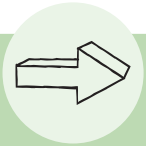
Garbage In, Garbage Out

Some busy school leaders look for the quick fix. Find a problem? Slap a solution on it and move on. Problems poorly attended to have a way of coming back to bite. Good leaders know when problems arise, and don't take shortcuts to solve them.

Wait, there's more. *The righteous ideologues* problem solve by trying to realize their vision of an idyllic situation and settle for nothing less, regardless of the shambles they create in the real world. The *procrastinators* are those who see problems and leave them for another day. Despite the best intentions in the world, these leaders lack understanding of what problem solving in schools really is.

How This Text Is Organized

The remaining chapters of this text will address the steps of the problem-solving processes described earlier. For instance, Chapter 2 will consider how to identify and define the problems in a school setting. The chapters are designed to be used as guides to assist leaders as they conduct each step of the problem-solving process. Each chapter will follow the same format. The chapter begins with a description of the step in the problem-solving process. Foibles and Fumbles follow, providing examples of the common errors made at this step. The next section, Putting It All Together, lays out the tasks and procedure for completing this step of the process. The section presents the group procedures necessary to successfully accomplish that step of the process. Notice within this section callouts are inserted referring to theoretical origins for the practice. Two supplements make up the back matter of the text, a Problem-Solver's Toolbox and section For Further Reading and Bibliography. The Toolbox provides in-depth discussions on meeting designs, meeting roles, communication strategies, strategies for dealing with differing group sizes, arranging meeting space, and a glossary of Group Organizers. The Toolbox is followed by the bibliography, and the annotated guide to further reading completes the text. The For Further Readings supplement includes several texts that support or elaborate on the fundamentals of this book.



Consider This . . .

Did any of the foibles and fumbles produce a squirm of recognition? Nobody's perfect, and we have all made mistakes. The key to success in problem solving is to understand errors and omissions, understand what went wrong, and consider them lessons now learned. What are your best next steps after discovering you are in a hole? First, stop digging. Next, stop and think about how to plan for the future.