



Solving Problems in Groups

- Parents as Collaborative Leaders
Module 9
- A collaborative research project hosted by the University of Vermont and the PACER Center

Objectives



- Identify the steps needed to engage in effective group problem-solving
- Participate in a group problem-solving activity related to participants' issues

Essential Questions



- *What are the steps to effective problem-solving?*
- *How can a group problem-solving process be used to address real-life issues among parent leaders?*

Agenda



- Discussion: *Introduction to problem-solving processes* (15 minutes)
- Case study presentations (2): *Using the group problem-solving format for two case study presentations* (20 minutes each)
- Discussion and Reflections: *How can problem-solving be improved in real-life situations?* (5 minutes)

Overview of the Problem-Solving Process



- Discussion: As a whole group, identify your experiences with problem-solving processes you have used in group settings. Think about:
 - Effective approaches to problem-solving
 - Ineffective approaches to problem-solving
 - Rationale for understanding and using more effective approaches to problem-solving

Seven Steps to Effective Problem Solving



- Step 1: Decide whether or not there is a problem to solve.
- Step 2: Identify and clarify the problem.
- Step 3: Generate potential solutions.
- Step 4: Evaluate potential solutions.
- Step 5: Select a solution.
- Step 6: Implement the solution.
- Step 7: Evaluate the outcomes.

Step 1: Decide whether or not there is a problem to solve



- The first step in problem-solving is to consider the degree to which the individual or group has “ownership” of the problem, and whether or not the problem has the potential to be solved (e.g., is it worth the time and effort needed to solve it?).
- It may be helpful to ask the question: *What might happen if the problem were not addressed by this group?*

Step 2: Identify and clarify the problem



- If the problem is worth solving, the next step is for the group to develop an understanding of the “big idea” or “mess” to the larger group.
- Before attempting to solve the problem, take time to explore group members’ perspectives on the issue. The group should ask: *What is the problem? “How does the problem reveal itself to this group?”*
- If possible, collect additional data from multiple sources that will help to further clarify the problem. These data may shed light on the causes of the problem, the magnitude of the problem, and solutions that have been tried in the past.
- Don’t rush to solution-finding: If groups don’t spend time identifying the real problem, they often come up with superficial or ineffective solutions.
- Following initial discussions of the problem, the group should pause to re-state the problem, in a way that does not imply a solution.

Step 3: Generate potential solutions



- This step involves brainstorming many potential solutions to the problem. The following “ground rules” of brainstorming will help to ensure that this step involves all group members.
 - Generate as many ideas as possible without judging others’ ideas or identifying details of implementation.
 - Record potential ideas, either individually (e.g., post-it notes) or publicly (e.g., flip chart paper).
 - Make sure that every group member has the opportunity to provide a solution and that all ideas are recorded and respected.
 - Be creative, have fun, and come up with as many solutions as possible!

Step 4: Evaluate potential solutions



- The next step is for group members to spend time evaluating potential solutions. The following suggestions may help to make this process simple and effective:
 - Generate a list of 5 -7 criteria that group members can use to determine whether or not a potential solution will be effective (e.g., time required, likely outcome, resources required, including human resources and cost).
 - Use the criteria to rate individual potential solutions.
 - Avoid getting bogged down in discussing the details at this time.

Step 5: Select a solution



- Based on the criteria identified in the previous step, the group should choose the solution that seem most likely to solve the problem.
- Often, groups will find that the best solutions involve a combination of more than one potential solution.

Step 6: Implement the solution(s)



- In the final steps of problem-solving, the group develops an action plan outlining how to implement the solution.
- The plan should include action steps for implementation, responsibilities for specific steps, target completion dates, and an evaluation plan, including timelines.

Sample Implementation Plan



Action Step	Activity to be completed	Person(s) Responsible	Likely Outcomes	Evaluation Criteria	Timeline for Completion

Step 7: Evaluate the Outcomes of Implementation



- In the evaluation phase, groups apply the evaluation criteria specified in the action plan to determine the degree to which the solution worked.
- Look back at the criteria developed to select the solution (see Step 4). Some of these criteria may be re-worded as evaluation criteria for the implementation plan.
- If it works: Celebrate successes! If it doesn't: Try again!



Activity: Two Case Studies

- Now it's your turn!
- It's now time for 1 -2 of you to present an issue that you would like the group to use to illustrate the problem-solving process.
- The slides that follow show each of the steps, with timelines and tips for both “presenters” and “participants.”
- The goal of this activity is to practice with steps 1 – 5 of the problem-solving process.

Step 1: Decide whether or not there is a problem to solve



- **Timeline:** None: You've already decided to present this problem!
- **Tips for Presenter:** Choose a problem that you are willing to share with the group and is important to you yet simple enough for participants to understand.
- **Tips for Participants:** Get ready to listen.

Step 2: Identify and clarify the problem



- **Timeline:** 10 minutes
- **Tips for presenter:** Present your issue (a.k.a. problem) in 5 minutes or less, with enough detail so that participants can understand the problem. When you are done presenting your problem, ask participants for clarifying questions. Following clarification, re-state your problem.
- **Tips for participants:** Listen to the original problem. Ask clarifying questions that help the group to understand the problem and help the presenter to re-state the problem.

Step 3: Generate potential solutions



- **Timeline:** 5 minutes
- **Tips for presenters:** Listen and try to remain open to potential solutions. Avoid statements such as “I tried that before and it didn’t work.”
- **Tips for participants:** Remember the ground rules for brainstorming. If possible, one of you can record the group’s suggestions. Make sure everyone who wants to participate has the opportunity to do so.

Step 4: Evaluate potential solutions



- **Timeline:** 5 minutes
- **Tips for presenters:** While you may be in the best position to identify the criteria to be used in selecting one or more solutions to your problem, be sure to listen to others' suggested criteria.
- **Tips for participants:** Try to put yourselves in the presenter's shoes as you identify potential support that person in identifying potential selection criteria.

Step 5: Select a solution



- **Timeline:** 2 minutes
- **Tips for presenters:** Look at the criteria that have been generated to choose among the potential solutions to your problem. Explain your thinking to the group and let them know in what ways their input helped you to think differently about your problem and/or to choose a solution.
- **Tips for participants:** Give the presenter some feedback for their willingness to share a problem and to receive input regarding potential solutions.

Final Discussion and Reflections



- As a group, discuss the parts of today's presentation that were most interesting and helpful to you. What were your "aha" moments?
- Finally, think about ways that problem-solving can be improved in your own work situations.