

Got a Problem?

by: Paula K. Martin, CEO, Martin Training Associates
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Finished planning? Into execution? Things are moving along smoothly until, whoops, there's a problem. What do you do now? Panic? Take over the problem and fix it yourself? Scramble to begin implementing a solution? How about none of the above? Here are some helpful hints for dealing with problems:

1. Take a deep breath. Don't panic. Unless the building is on fire, it probably isn't an emergency. We tend to respond to every problem as if it's a life or death situation. Ask yourself, what's the worst that could happen if I did nothing? Unless it's loss of life, it's not an emergency. Take the time to stay calm and help everyone else stay calm.
2. Don't automatically assume responsibility for the problem, unless it's in fact your problem. Just because you're the project manager doesn't mean you own all the problems. Your job is to provide support and facilitation so the person with the problem can devise and implement an appropriate solution.
3. Don't witch hunt. Most problems arise because stuff happens. Avoid looking to place blame. It's unproductive, ineffective and tends to destroy morale. Assume that the problem is a problem of the system and not a flaw of some individual. Look for system solutions.
4. Scope out the problem. A problem is nothing more than a deviation from an expected outcome or goal. What was the expected outcome? What did you get instead? Is this really a problem? If not, move on. Ask yourself, is there an opportunity here? Is this a twist in the road that might lead us to a new goal? If so, define the new goal state and devise a plan for getting there.
5. If you still have a problem, work through the MTA method for solving any problem. Step 1) Make sure the problem is clearly defined. What exactly is the problem? When did it occur? How often? How big? In clarifying what the problem is and what it's not, be careful not to ask why or who. Define a deadline for the problem resolution and the person accountable for the solution. Step 2) Determine if identifying the causes of the problem is needed in order to solve it. Some problems require the identification of causes and some don't. If identification of causes is relevant, then begin by asking why? Record each cause idea without judgment. Avoid pointing the finger at people and stay focused on what and not who. Continue to record whys until you've exhausted all cause ideas. Then come back and identify what evidence, if any, exists for each of the cause ideas. Select the most significant causes. Step 3) Brainstorm possible solutions. Again, no judgment, just ideas. After you've exhausted all ideas, rate each solution for 'ease of implementation' and 'impact of solution'. If one solution is a hands down winner, you're ready for implementation. If not, evaluate the pros and cons of each candidate solution. For each con, identify countermeasures to turn the con into a pro. Pick the solution that has the most upsides and fewest downsides. Step 4) Implement. If it's a large implementation, you will need a project plan for implementation. If not, make sure you know what (the scope of the solution), who (who's accountable for what), when (the milestones) and how (the steps). Also make sure you identify any

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- customers/stakeholders of the implementation and identify any requirements they might have. Every implementation is a mini-project.
6. Monitor the progress of the solution implementation.
 7. After the implementation is complete, explore lessons learned.

Facilitating effective problem solving is a core skill that every project manager should possess. A person skilled at problem solving not only helps the team member find an effective solution, but also builds a stronger team in the process. Don't disempower your people by owning their problems and don't destroy morale by pointing fingers. Involve the team in the problem solving process so accountability stays where it belongs, with the team member whose problem it is, and involve the team in helping him to find a solution that works. And, don't forget that proper planning prevents avoids problem management in the first place.

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