

LESSON

1



Recognizing a Problem

LESSON SUMMARY

This lesson teaches you how to recognize a problem and to determine its importance or severity, so that you can begin to think critically and begin problem solving.

WE ALL FACE problems every day. Some are simple, requiring a short period of time to solve, such as running low on gas in your car. Others are complex, and demand much of your time and thought. For instance, you might be asked by your boss to determine why the latest sales pitch for your largest client failed, and then come up with a new one.

You cannot solve a problem without first determining that you have one. Once you recognize the problem, you will want to prioritize—does your problem demand immediate attention, or can it wait until you are finished working on something else? If you have more than one situation to resolve, you must rank them in order of importance, tackling the most important first. This lesson will help you to do just that.

► What Is a Problem?

In terms of critical thinking skills, a problem is defined as a question or situation that calls for a solution. That means when you are faced with a problem, you must take action or make decisions that will lead to resolution of that problem.

Using this definition, problems that occur in the form of a question are typically those that do not have one straightforward answer. You might be asked, “Why are you voting for candidate X instead of candidate Y?” or “why do you deserve a raise more than Tannie?” Situational problems require you to think critically and make decisions about the best course of action. For example, you learn that a coworker has been exaggerating the profits of your company—and she has done so on orders from the president. Do you blow the whistle, jeopardizing your career? And, if so, to whom?

► Road Block to Recognizing a Problem

One of the most common reasons for not recognizing a problem is the desire to avoid taking action or respon-

sibility. The thinking goes that no recognition means no responsibility. This can mean simply “not noticing” that you have five checks left in your checkbook (if you noticed, you would need to take action and order more checks). Or, you look the other way as faulty items come off the conveyor belt and are packaged for distribution (if you reported it to management, you might be asked to determine the manufacturing problem).

Realize that by not recognizing the problem, you make the solution more difficult. The initial problem could grow larger and more complex with time, or by waiting you could create multiple problems that need solutions. If you do not determine that you need more checks and place an order, you will run out. Then, not only will you have to order more, but you will have to visit the bank to be issued temporary checks. In other words, the failure to recognize a problem almost always creates more work for you.

► Types of Problems

Once you recognize that a problem exists, but before you begin to solve it, you should determine the type of problem as it relates to a timeframe and your personal

But Is It Really? Determining the Existence of a Problem

Once a problem has been identified, you must take one more step before you begin to think about solving it. Some situations look like problems when, in fact, they are not. If you believe you are faced with a problem, ask yourself, is it an inevitable part of a process, or does it actually call for a solution? For example, you have spent the past two weeks training a new employee at the bank in which you work. He makes a couple of errors during his first day out of training. Do you ask your boss if you can spend more time with him? Or, should you find out what the expectations are for new employees? You may discover that your boss expects a few errors during a teller’s first week on the job. Keep in mind that something can look like a problem when it is not. It is important that you recognize when your problem solving skills are needed, and when they are not.

priorities. There are two criteria to use in your determination: **severity** and **importance**.

Severe Problems

These problems may be identified by the following characteristics:

- require immediate solutions
- may call for the involvement of others who have more expertise than you
- result in increasingly drastic consequences the longer they remain unsolved

For example, a break in your house’s plumbing is a severe problem. Water will continue to leak, or perhaps, gush out until the break is fixed. The water can damage everything it comes in contact with, including hardwood floors, carpeting, furniture, and walls. Unless you are a plumber, you will need to call a professional to solve the problem immediately. Delays can result in a more difficult plumbing issue and also costly water damage repairs. You might even need to replace flooring or other items if the break is not fixed quickly.

Some minor problems can become severe if not solved immediately. For example, a campfire in the woods that is difficult to put out may take a great deal of time and effort to extinguish. But if it is not put out, it could start a major forest fire (severe problem).

Practice

Three problems arise at work simultaneously. In what order do you solve the following?

- a. The printer in your office is down.
- b. You need to finish writing a report to meet a 3:00 P.M. deadline.
- c. Documents must be dropped off at FedEx by 5:00 P.M.

Answer

The order that makes the most sense is **a, b, c**. You cannot print your report if the printer is down, so the printer should be fixed first (it could take the longest amount of time if a repair person must be called). Then, write the report. When you are finished, gather the necessary documents and prepare them for FedEx.

Following is another practice. In this practice, you will see that time is a factor, but it is not the deciding factor, in your critical thinking process.

Practice

You invited friends over for pizza and a movie. Before they arrive, you preheat your oven to keep the pizzas warm and put the tape in the VCR to fast forward through all of the coming attractions and advertisements. However, the tape is damaged and will not play. As you head out to exchange the tape, you smell gas coming from the kitchen. What should you do?

Answer

A natural gas leak is a severe problem, and must be dealt with first. You must turn off the oven, air out the room, and take great care not to light any matches for any reason until the oven can be looked at by a professional. The problem with the rented movie is not severe. Once the apartment is safely ventilated, go get another movie and call your friends if you are running late.

Practice

Which, if any, of these problems is severe?

- a. You realize you are out of shampoo on the morning of an important job interview.
- b. You find a tick on your dog which has probably been in place for a day or two, and suspect Lyme disease.
- c. You find a nail in your tire; there is little air loss, but you are ten miles from the closest gas station.
- d. You lose your job when your boss suspects you have been stealing from your company.

Answer

Choice **d** is the most severe problem. Not only are you out of work, but you may need to hire a lawyer to fight criminal charges. You must immediately seek legal advice, and gather evidence to prove that you were not involved with the theft.

Choice **b** could be considered severe, but treatment for Lyme disease does not need to start immediately, and the situation will not deteriorate drastically if you wait a day or two after removing the tick.

Choices **a** and **c** are not severe problems. While it is always important to make a good impression during an interview, this problem ranks the lowest of the four in terms of severity. You can always use soap to wash your hair if you rinse it thoroughly. As for the problem, with the nail still in place you should have no trouble driving ten miles to a service station to repair the puncture.

Important Problems

Problems are viewed as important or unimportant in relation to one another, and according to personal priorities. When you are faced with a number of problems, you must evaluate them in terms of priority so that you are not dealing with minor issues first, and leaving the more important ones to go unattended until the last minute. Prioritizing means looking at each problem or

issue, and ranking it in terms of importance. What is most important to you as you begin the critical thinking process.

Practice

Rank these local issues in the order that is most important (1) to least important (5) in your life: healthcare, safety, education, pollution/environment, and the economy.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____

Answer

The answer depends on your personal situation. If you have children and a job that provides you with a decent salary and quality health coverage, you would probably rank education and safety highest. If the discovery of radon gas in many areas of your town weakened the local economy and forced your business to lay off half its staff, including you, you would probably rank economy and pollution/environment as most important.

Practice

You are planning a family vacation to a resort 800 miles from your home. Here are some of the details you will need to take care of:

- purchase plane tickets
- research restaurants in the area around the resort
- reserve accommodations
- suspend delivery of mail and newspaper for duration of trip
- hire a pet sitter for your cats

In what order should you complete these tasks?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Which is most important? _____

Least important? _____

Answer

While there is room for various answers based on personal preference (for example, a food-lover might rank restaurant research higher on the list), the following represents a ranking in order of importance:

1. purchase plane tickets—there is no vacation unless you can reach your destination
2. reserve accommodations—many resorts are crowded and you run the risk of having no place to stay if you do not take care of this detail ahead of time
3. hire a pet sitter for your cats—while this should not be a difficult detail to take care of, you can't go on vacation without securing care for your pets
4. suspend mail and newspaper delivery—a stuffed mailbox and pile of newspapers at your door tells potential thieves that you are not home; however, you could always call a neighbor from the resort to help you out if you realize you have forgotten to take care of this detail
5. research restaurants—once you get to your destination, you should have plenty of time to read local publications and ask around for recommendations; the advice you get when you are there could be superior to what you can find out from home

► **The Cost of Problem Solving**

When you are on a budget, money is an issue when determining the importance of problems. If there are two or more problems that require a payment to solve and you do not have the money available to take care of everything at once, you will need to determine what needs attention first and what can wait.

Practice

Perhaps you find that your car needs a new muffler the day before you were going to take your air conditioner in to be repaired. You do not have the money to do both right now. Make a list of the reasons each repair is necessary, and decide which should be done first.

Car Repair: _____

Air Conditioner Repair: _____

Conclusion: _____

Answer

Your lists will probably include many of the following:

Car Repair

- car will be too noisy without a muffler
- could be stopped by law enforcement and fined without muffler
- can't drive car without muffler
- need car to drive to work

Air Conditioner Repair

- wasting electricity—AC running inefficiently
- heat wave predicted for later in the week
- have trouble sleeping without AC
- live on fourth floor—too hot without AC

Conclusion: you should probably get your car repaired first. While it may be uncomfortable without

an air conditioner, you need your car to get to work and that is your top priority.

► **In Short**

When you recognize that you are faced with a problem, you also recognize the need for action on your part. But

that action depends on the type of issue you are facing. Is the problem severe? If there is more than one problem, which should be tackled first? Use your critical thinking skills to pinpoint any problem or problems before you begin to anticipate a solution.

Skill Building Until Next Time

- The next time you need to make a TO DO list, try ranking the items on your list. You might list them in order of what takes the most or least time. Or perhaps list them in order of when they have to be done. You might have your own order of importance in which to list items. For practice, try ordering them in each of the different methods listed above.
- Test your skill of problem recognition when watching the evening news. After you hear a story, list three problems that will probably occur as a result.