

# ■ The Problem with Problem-Solving ...and What to Do About It

by Tom Terez

At the assisted-living residence where my father lives, a taped sign at the main entrance greets visitors: “Welcome to a defect-free facility!” It’s a printed tribute to the recent perfect score on a state inspection.

The first time I saw that sign, it gave me a lift. My dad is a great guy, and at 83 years old, he definitely deserves a living space without defects.

But the more I passed that sign, the more it gave me pause and got me thinking. Is “defect-free” good enough for my dad? Is it good enough for anyone? Is high quality merely about preventing problems – and solving them when they’re not prevented?

We live in a world that’s obsessed with finding problems, analyzing problems, and solving problems. In medicine, engineering, and so many other fields, problem-solving rules. It’s the hammer that makes everything look like a nail.

Run a Google search on the term “problem-solving” and you’ll turn up 4,170,000 hits – compared to 172,000 hits for “positive thinking” and 112,000 hits for “find happiness.” In the ultimate Google test, “problem-solving” even beats “J.Lo” by a stunning 4-to-1 margin. (There are no hits for the provocative phrase “problem-solving J.Lo,” but this article may change that.)

What’s the problem with problem-solving? For starters, it often creates an endless cycle of canceling out the negative, which typically perpetuates the status quo. This can keep people so busy and preoccupied that they fail to envision and pur-

sue a significantly better alternative. And it can fill attention and conversation with so much negativity that positive experiences and aspirations never see the light of day.

Who’s perpetuating this fixation on the negative? Most of us, including yours truly. Ready for a true confession?

Many years ago, I was assigned to facilitate an improvement team for a government agency. The five team members had worked together for close

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to a decade, processing requests for unclaimed funds, and now they were being told to reduce errors and end delays.

We studied the problem and sifted for root causes. In fact, we so thoroughly focused on the negative that our team meetings soon felt like a never-ending convention of the Pessimists Society. And even though the team improved the mechanics of their work process, I left with the sick feeling that our accentuate-the-negative approach had demoralized those five wonderful people.

Fortunately, I had opportunities to redeem myself with subsequent problem-solving teams. I took a different tack and encouraged team mem-

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To contact the author, write to [Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com](mailto:Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com), or call 614-571-9529.

Tom Terez  
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## ■ The Problem with Problem-Solving *continued*

bers to accentuate the positive. The following prompts always opened the way to a positive conversation: Think back to a time when you and your colleagues were enthusiastically working as a force of one. What factors came together to make it happen? Reflect on your involvement in the process you're working to improve. What do you do that makes a big difference? When are you most effective? What part of the process holds positive lessons for the rest of the organization?

When people answer questions like these, they're not just blowing sunshine around the meeting room. They're uncovering critically important information that just so happens to be positive. You've heard of best practices, right? They're in your midst, waiting to be discovered. Well-placed questions will help you find them.

The best kind of workplace improvement doesn't wait for a problem to be solved – which takes us to the see-for-yourself segment of this article. At your next staff meeting or informal get-together with colleagues, pose a few of the following conversation-starters:

- ▶ Describe a particular workday or a work situation that truly engaged your heart and mind. How did you feel? What made it possible?
- ▶ What is the greatest strength you bring to the workplace? Which of your strengths is the least known by colleagues? Share an example or two showing how you've put these great strengths to work.
- ▶ If you could share just one story from the past year describing the very best of your workplace, what would it be? Tell it in detail.
- ▶ Imagine that you can wave a magic wand and

make an instant change for the good of your workplace, its employees, and your customers. What change do you bring about?

As you can see, the first three sets of questions call on people to look back and retrieve some of their best experiences. By describing these high points, colleagues identify what has worked in the workplace – and reveal what can bring out the best in people in the present and future. The last question on the above list is all about the future. It lets people voice their hopes and aspirations.

There are many variations to these questions and countless other queries you can pose. Don't be surprised if people are initially slow to respond. Be persistent, and answer the first question yourself to get things going. If you have any "problem," it will be the challenge of getting people to wrap up the conversation. Don't try to. Make this an ongoing dialogue, then stand back and watch as it takes on a mind of its own – and people begin to take action based on the emerging discoveries.

Speaking of taking action, my father is in the process of packing his belongings. He always liked his defect-free assisted-living residence, but he never loved it. It felt like a facility and not a home. So when we found another nearby residence – one where staff seem to understand that creating positives goes far beyond canceling out negatives – he made a quick decision. He moves in one week.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tom Terez is a speaker, workshop leader, and author of *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*. His Web site, [BetterWorkplaceNow.com](http://BetterWorkplaceNow.com), is filled with tools for building a great work environment. Write to [Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com](mailto:Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com) or call 614-571-9529.

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