

Problem Solving is Not Good Enough: Problem Prevention is the Key to Success

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Problems occur routinely in any system or process. How one reacts to a problem varies greatly. Reaction depends upon several factors:

- The critical nature of the problem.
- What other problems are currently occurring.
- How many other problems are currently occurring?
- The cost to fix the problem.
- The cost to prevent the problem from reoccurring.
- The priority of fixing the problem.

We could likely add a dozen or more factors onto this list.

Having spent many years in operations management positions in manufacturing companies, I have identified four primary reactions when faced with a problem.

Absolve yourself of the problem

"It's not my problem!"

This can be taken two ways. One, denial. One simply wishes it were not there. Two, it's really not your problem. Spending time on this

would take resources away from more deserving activities. However, it's incumbent on us to alert those who ought to be addressing this problem.

Resolve the problem.

"Fix it now!"

This is essentially the quick fix, sometimes called the band-aid approach. Often it consists of applying the same fix that we used the last time this problem occurred. It's common to hear things like, "Call Harry. He fixed it the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that." It's job security for Harry. He gets to play the hero every time this occurs. Do you think Harry has any interest in this problem going away? Not when it gets him special recognition from time to time.

Solve the problem

"Find the best possible solution."

Study and research to find the best possible solution to the problem. This may take some time and money.

Dissolve the problem

“Let’s prevent this problem from occurring again.”

Here we solve the problem by finding and implementing the best possible solution. Then we work on the system or process. We change the system or process so that this problem will not reoccur.

Which do you suppose is the best plan of action from among the four actions described above? If you chose Dissolve the Problem, you’re right. Then why is it often the plan of action least taken?

The Issue

Here’s what happens in some organizations without the instinct or the drive to optimize their systems and processes.

A problem occurs. The immediate action is to fix it now – Resolve the Problem. The intention is present that after we get the problem fixed for the short term, we’ll then seek to actually Solve the Problem, and perhaps even to Dissolve the Problem. This action is put off to the future, to some day.

But some day doesn’t arrive. It’s usually pushed further and further out by having to fix other problems. So much of our resources are used to fix these problems that there’s no time to actually solve them, not to mention

work on changing the system or process that has these problems. You might recognize this behavior as classic “fire-fighting” - putting out fire after fire after fire.

Now fire-fighting is an interesting analogy. Let’s examine fire departments today versus fire departments of the past. Fire departments of the past consisted mostly of fire fighters – those riding through the streets on trucks with lights and sirens to put out the fire, save lives, and become the heroes of the day.

How many children grow up wanting to be fire-fighters? It’s exciting, and gets the adrenaline flowing. Your picture may even be in tomorrow’s newspaper, or on tonight’s newscast on television. WOW! Thrilling!

In today’s fire departments many people are employed as fire inspectors. They don’t ride on trucks with blaring sirens. They drive cars and inspect buildings within their jurisdiction. They look for ways to PREVENT fires from occurring in the first place. They carry clipboards, not hoses and axes.

You never see their picture in the newspaper, or on the nightly news. They plod away day after day working to improve the systems and processes within facilities that could lead to fires. It’s hard to get an adrenaline rush when inspecting a building. It’s almost routine

work. But it's just as important, some may argue more important, as having top notch fire-fighting capability.

So how do we assign people working in our facilities? Do we have people assigned to inspect our facilities, to examine our systems and processes? In the FDA regulated industries the answer should be YES. We call these folks Internal Auditors. They conduct periodic inspections and identify shortcomings in our systems and processes.

Do we have people assigned to address the issues identified by the auditors?

This is often the gap in many organizations. No one is assigned the task as a high enough priority for Dissolving the Problems identified. It's often added to the job jar (list of responsibilities) of those responsible for these systems and processes. These are often first line supervisors and department managers who are already loaded to capacity just maintaining the daily operation.

The Solution

Once a problem occurs and the immediate fix is in place, conduct an **After Action Review**. This session should be attended by those closest to the process, those responsible for the process, and

any subject matter experts with specific knowledge or expertise about that process.

An **After Action Review** can be defined as an assessment conducted after a project or major activity that allows employees and leaders to discover (learn) what happened and why. It may be thought of as a professional discussion of an event that enables employees to understand why things happened during the progression of the process and to learn from that experience.

Conducting an After Action Review

A comprehensive examination of the problem needs to occur. The following questions are designed to help you manage an effective **After Action Review** session.

- What happened?
- Which factors most contributed to the event?
- What was the genesis or root cause of the event?
- Was there a "turning point" in causing this to occur? If so, what was it?
- What did the organization fail to do in picking up any signals that may have alerted us to the problem before it occurred?
- Did our organizational culture lead us in this direction?

- What did the organization do correctly, in terms of responding?
- Can this re-occur?
- What can we do to prevent this from happening again?
- How can we make this prevention action a priority?

It may take several sessions to work your way through these questions. You may even develop additional specific questions to augment those above.

The process of conducting an effective **After Action Review** can be time consuming and may even require a financial investment. However, the payback is in reducing the number of problems that occur on a regular basis.

You may consider recruiting someone from your Accounting Department to participate on an After Action Review team. An accountant can help identify the costs required to implement the changes to the systems and processes. They can also help identify the savings associated with preventing problems from occurring in the future.

Having the financials in hand can only help in convincing management to invest in these **After Action Review** sessions and place high priorities on the projects launched that are aimed at improving and optimizing our

systems and processes. After all, the language of management is often expressed in dollars and cents. Show management how the organization will benefit financially and they will often green-light those projects and ensure that resources are available to accomplish them.

W. Edwards Deming, the quality guru, often challenged people who had ideas for change with the simple question – “By what method?”

Here is a method – **After Action Reviews** – to help you move forward in Problem Prevention.

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He does this by consulting on Business Survival Skills for FDA regulated industries, and by conducting workshops on topics ranging from GMP/QSR to Leading Change and Innovation and Process Optimization.

An award winning speaker and workshop leader, David develops and conducts training sessions that get rave reviews as well as results. He has over twenty-five years of management experience in FDA regulated industry.

David is the author of [Becoming the Best: Making Optimization Happen](#), [GMP Makes Good Business Sense](#), [The Innovation Resource Handbook](#), [The Team Process Improvement Workbook](#), and the [212 Optimization Tips](#) booklet. David can be

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Note: From 1987 to 1993, David was invited by Dr. W. Edwards Deming to assist in his famous four-day seminars. David had the privilege of assisting in over ten seminars and developed and conducted a Deming Roundtable where several companies worked together and embarked on a year-long quest to implement Deming's teachings.