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The Problem With Problem Solving

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Many analysts become extremely concerned when assigned the responsibility for solving a problem they know nothing about. This presents a great challenge to the problem solver. First one must be cognizant of the fact that you don't have to be an expert in the failure in order to analyze the failure. Quite the contrary, being the subject matter expert is often times a detriment to the analyst. The subject matter expert is so close to the problem that their expertise keeps them from exploring all the possible causes of the failure. The tendency is for the expert to push the analysis in the direction of his or her own pre-conceived conclusions. This is not to say that subject matter experts are not required for problem solving or failure analysis, but they may not be the right person to lead the effort. What they need to be is an expert in the science of problem solving, not the failure.

Another great challenge to the problem solver is overcoming the fear of the unknown. The analyst cannot be expected to be the see-all and know-all of everything. Putting it in the proper perspective, problem solving can be thought of as an exercise in continuing education. A good analyst recognizes his or her limitations and is smart enough to both locate the resources necessary to provide the answers and ask the questions that lead to the correct solutions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all to the problem solver is training oneself to deal only with the facts. Often times we see our plants or processes as being overwhelmingly large in size and complexity. This in turn translates into problems and solutions that must also be large and complex. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The facts are the facts no matter the size or complexity of the problem being analyzed. Good problem solvers are not afraid to deal with factual information and will do whatever is necessary to uncover those facts. Dealing strictly with facts not only builds individual confidence but also provides strong documentation to obtain the resources necessary to implement solutions to the identified root causes of analyzed problems.

The best problem solvers are those individuals who are not afraid to take on new challenges no matter how difficult they appear to be. In actuality, they look at these challenges as being the greater the difficulty - the better. I think Buckminster Fuller said it better than I ever could when he said – *“The reward for being a good problem solver is to be heaped with more-and-more difficult problems to solve.”* How true this statement is, after all, nothing breeds success like success. So the question becomes, are you up to the challenge?

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