
FOUR-MINUTE INTERVALS

THE ART OF PROBLEM SOLVING

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INTRODUCTION

This approach to problem-solving is derived from the recent practice in coaching when a sports team is behind in points—particularly basketball. That is, to close the deficit by using four-minute intervals of stepwise success. The process requires refocusing from solving a “whole problem” to breaking down the process into four-minute intervals. These intervals include:

1. Defining a problem
2. Defining the source of a problem
3. Defining your role in the problem
4. Defining if the problem is cognitive, behavioral, or procedural
5. Defining a solution or resolution
6. Testing the permanency of the solution
7. Adoption of a personal methodology

When you master this process, any problem you have can be solved in less than a half hour

1. DEFINING A PROBLEM—THE FIRST FOUR MINUTES

A problem is an ongoing emotionally stressful pattern of incidents that is unfulfilling to an individual’s stated intention. For example, if you are evaluated as an “average performer” by your manager, and you feel you are outstanding, this disconnect is a problem. If you experience ongoing conflict in a relationship that is of value to you, the ongoing conflict is a problem. If an organization experiences a high level of turnover of

its valued employees, relative to its industry standard, then the excessive loss of employees is a problem.

The first observation we make is that a problem is ongoing with a variety of ways and reasons for its occurrence. In the case of the “average performer,” the evaluation represents a *series* of missed performance expectations, or at least a disconnect, between employee and manager. In the case of a conflicting valued relationship, we anticipate again a *series* of mutual missed expectations, emotional disappointment, or even conflicting verbal exchanges. And in the final example, a high level of turnover not only creates severe financial loss, but consequences that negatively impact internal morale, recruitment, and customer service. This *series* of events are indicators that a problem exists. We want to emphasize that the objective of this publication is not about value judgments such as “good or bad,” “right or wrong,” or even “fair or unfair.” It is simply to address an unfulfilling result with respect to an individual’s or an organization’s stated intention.

In essence, a problem is present when you identify a series of unfulfilling incidents with respect to your physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual well-being. From an organizational perspective, typical *indicators* of a problem are difficulty in hiring the best people, retaining the best people, poor individual and collective performance, average management and leadership, and lack of sufficient creativity and innovation to remain competitive or sustainable. The most obvious indicator of an organizational problem is loss of profitability. The consequences of the latter are obvious. The flipside of this situation is the assumption that if an organization is profitable, it does not have any significant problems. This is not necessarily accurate, but is the subject of another discussion.

Action: List the series of indicators of the problem. *“Where, there’s smoke; there’s fire.”*

2. DEFINING THE SOURCE OF A PROBLEM—THE SECOND FOUR MINUTES

The *source* of an ongoing problem is usually not readily recognized. It is usually subliminal, not something of which we are consciously aware. *This is the most challenging four-minute interval of them all.* Most of all, we commonly assume the source of a problem we are experiencing is external to us—even though our bodies are experiencing the physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual distress. For example, I used to be Chairman of a Chemistry Department. In the initial stages of being chairman, I experienced a series of “conflicts” with a variety of faculty members. Then an advisor asked me a very simple question: “Bill, what do all of your conflicts have in common?” I thought for a minute and then came up with a brilliant response, “They are all faculty members!” “No,” he said, “You!” “What?” I replied. “You,” he repeated. It took three “Yous” for me to get it! However, that “aha” moment has always stayed with me. That’s

an example of a transformational experience. The result is a realization. An awareness. A learning. An expansion of one's consciousness or reality.

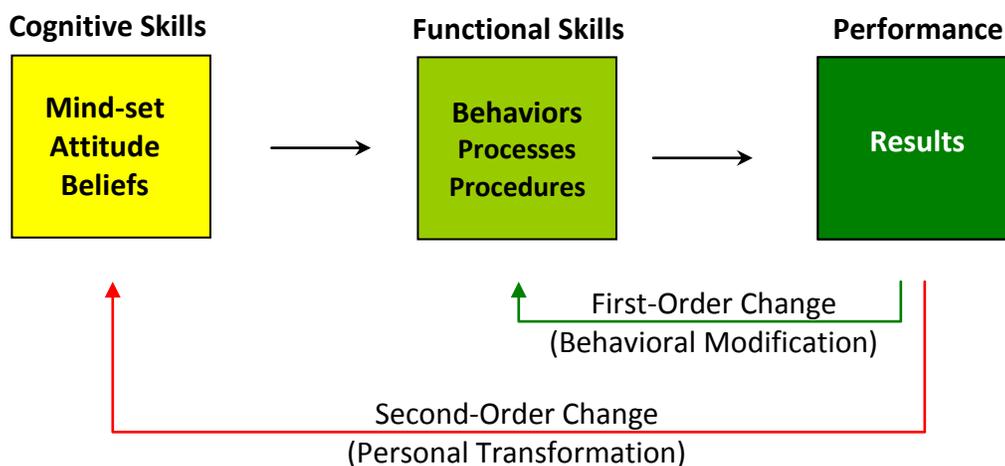
More often than not, the *source* of a problem is a belief, perception, or even a value that is reflected as an expectation of others. For example, if we believe someone is inherently inferior by "group identification" with another culture, then our assignments, support, and evaluation of that individual will mimic our expectations. And the evaluation will be "average performance."

If we experience an occasional, but repeated conflict in a valued relationship, an unacknowledged disconnect involving a belief or perception is probably the *source* of the problem. Examples of such disconnects may include beliefs about control, trust, jealousy, money, religion, honesty, or commitment. It should be recognized that the lack of awareness that such a disconnect exists limits the level of honesty, trust, or intimacy available in a personal relationship.

Most organizations have a history of beliefs and values that span many years. These beliefs and values are so inculcated into the culture that they are practically invisible. But they are reflected in the overall results the organization produces. The most common examples in Western-oriented organizations are the *dominance* of Eurocentric values—such as individualism, competition, task-orientation, and systems-thinking—in preference to non-Eurocentric values that represent the value, functioning, and well-being of people—such as inclusion, collaboration, empowerment, and work-life balance. The predictable results of using a one-dimensional system of operation with a multidimensional workforce are preferential advancement, limited engagement and performance, and systemic exclusion.

A model that explains the source of a problem is the State of Mind diagram shown below:

STATE OF MIND DIAGRAM



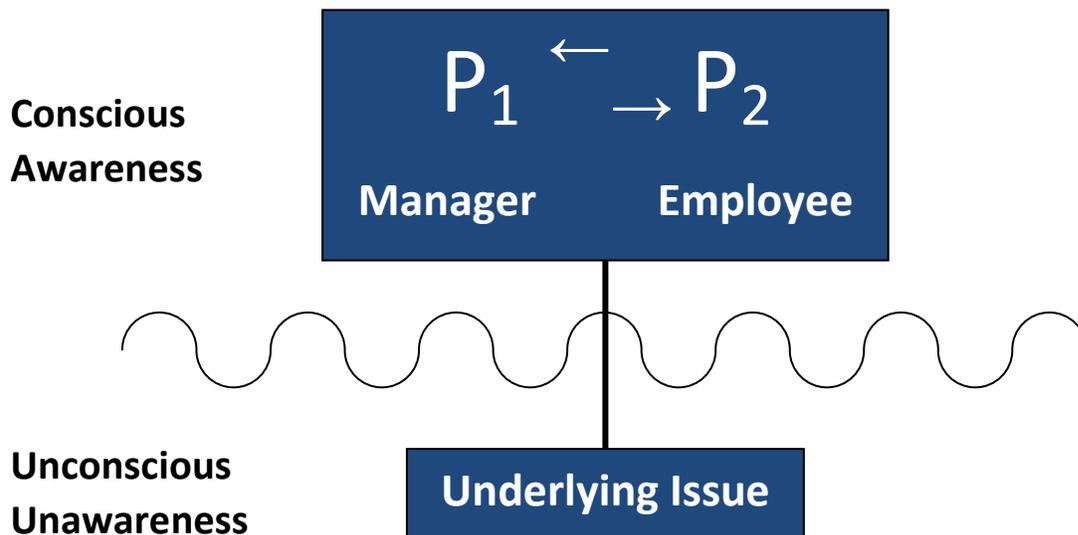
The *source* of most problems is programmed in an individual's or an organization's mind-set. This belief, perception, or value drives one's behavior—overt or implicit—to produce the counterproductive results we observe.

Action: Identify the source of a problem by reflecting on counterproductive perceptions and perceptions you may have of others, such as unconscious biases or characteristics that upset you most about others: ***“That which I dislike in others is a mirror-reflection of myself.”***

3. DEFINING YOUR ROLE IN THE PROBLEM—THE THIRD FOUR MINUTES

A basic assumption of *this* four-minute interval is that if your body or mind *tells* you it is experiencing discomfort or challenge, then the source of the problem you are experiencing is programmed within you! Sorry to be so direct, but we only have four minutes! This assumption is reflected by the **Dynamic Relationship Model** shown below for Person 1 and Person 2.

DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP MODEL



If the underlying belief, perception, or value is programmed in your mind-set that and is both unconscious and unaware, then this “driving force” dictates your behavioral role in a problem. If we truly intend to *solve* a problem, this is where we need to focus our attention.

In some cases Person 2 may have an underlying belief that is held in common by a number of employees. Such a belief is described as institutionalized. Examples include, teamwork is valued, but individual performance is rewarded; being aggressive is a good sign of leadership, for men, not women; information is power, reveal only what is necessary to others.

Action: In this four-minute period, the critical decision that needs to be made is to take 100% responsibility for P₁ or P₂ and begin to explore, what “unreasonable” steps you need to take to ensure your performance is unquestionably outstanding—whether fair or unfair. In essence, what behaviors would have the power to invalidate your self-limiting belief? A similar approach would also be used for the other two situations of a personal relationship and organizational performance. The emphasis of this approach is a focus on problem resolution rather than the unfairness of the other person’s (or persons’) belief, perception, or values. In other words, “What actions must be taken, in spite of an unfair situation?”

In essence, simply examine your repeated behavioral pattern (fight or flight) to a recurring incident. That behavior defines your role in maintaining the problem.

Action: Focus on your counterproductive behaviors that sabotage your success: that defines your role in maintaining the problem. Then design a positive, proactive behavioral pattern that ensures your success.

4. DEFINING IF THE PROBLEM IS COGNITIVE, BEHAVIORAL, OR PROCEDURAL—THE FOURTH FOUR MINUTES

If we make reference to the State of Mind Diagram above in Section 2, we notice above the Mind-Set box is Cognitive Skills and above Behaviors is Functional Skills. These classifications allow us to determine if we are dealing with beliefs, attitudes, or values (**cognitive**) or a behavior, process, or procedure (**functional**) in solving a problem. Obviously, functional skills are easier to “fix.” We simply need to deploy a new or improved behavior, process, or procedure. Examples include, mentoring, learning new ISO quality procedures, or conducting a meeting online.

Identifying a cognitive perception that is counterproductive involves self-reflection, self-introspection, and self-exploration. It involves making a connection between undesirable results that are produced and the type of thinking that would produce that result. If I manage someone who I think is capable and yet his or her performance level is continually average. I might begin by asking myself, “How am I unsupportive of that individual’s growth and development?” “What project can I assign that would ‘push’ that individual to the next level of performance?” and finally, “How can I hold the individual responsible and accountable for producing at an outstanding level of performance?” When we take responsibility for assigning roles at an exceptional level for ourselves and others, it creates behaviors that transform our way of thinking—or more precisely, they

invalidate, by experience, self-limitations. The real highly functioning individual who was “always” there begins to emerge.

Action: First try a behavioral or procedural approach. If the problem sequence disappears, then there is no cognitive actin necessary. I the problem sequence persists, then use the next section for in-depth problem solving. We must honest with you, most persistent problems are cognitive. "***Become an astronaut of inner space.***"

5. DEFINING A SOLUTION OR RESOLUTION—THE FIFTH FOUR MINUTES

The ending of the previous section initiated the discussion of problem solution or resolution. The distinction we make between a *solution* and a *resolution* is that a solution is a situation where we have 100% control of the outcome. Resolution refers to a situation where we experience personal transformation (detachment from a reactive, emotional response) and the situation outcome is not 100% in our control.

For example, if I transform my potential for performance by adopting a mind-set of 100% responsibility and 100% accountability as ways of operating, then I have 100% control of my level of performance. If, on the other hand, I transform and dissociate myself from a conflicting pattern with someone in my life, I cannot control what the other person might decide to do, as a result of my change. However, whatever the ultimate resolution is, you will be able to handle or adapt to it with the least amount of emotional upheaval.

The direct solution of personal transformation involves a three-step process:

1. Be willing to *tell the truth* about my own counterproductive belief, perception, or value. (This is the most difficult step.)
2. Create *non-comfort zone behaviors* that have the power to invalidate the counterproductive belief, perception, or value.
3. Put the behaviors into practice for four to five weeks until they become a "*natural behavioral pattern.*" The result is the acquisition of new skill.

An example of a series of behaviors that have the potential to create personal transformation for the individual discussed in Section 1, in a managerial or supervisory role, is the following:

- i. **Focus** on the individual's contribution, rather than your perception, and acknowledge the source where incorporated.
- ii. **Commit** to assigning the individual challenging, visible projects with coaching and mentoring by you.

- iii. **Ensure** the individual is part of succession planning and include them in leadership roles.
- iv. **Ensure** the individual has an approved career plan, the required skills for success, and a mentor/coach to support his or her success.

In a like manner, according to the $P_1 \leftrightarrow P_2$ diagram on page 4, the series of transformational behaviors for the underperforming individual includes the following:

- i. **Adopt** an empowered mind-set (100% responsibility and 100% accountability)
- ii. **Ensure** your performance is exceptional by going the extra mile on assigned projects; get feedback from your harshest critic.
- iii. **Volunteer** for visible opportunities and/or leadership roles; be insistent.
- iv. **Create** a career plan and acquire a mentor to oversee your progress.
- v. **Document** your career successes.

Action: The key element solving or resolving a problem is to first take the appropriate action to transformation your own counterproductive pattern of thinking and behaving. Second is to deal with the other individual's willingness to change, adapt to your change, adapt to his or her unwillingness to change, or sever your working relationship for resolution. The most powerful aspect of your transformation is that *you are free* to make choices in your best interest; where choice did not previously *appear* to exist.

When resolving a situation involving an institutional belief held by the organization, create a challenging objective in the Results box of the model on page 3. Examples include an ambitious goal in terms of workforce representation in leadership, creation of an inclusive culture within an ambitious timeframe, or the creation of a transparent culture or professional relationship. Such goals will require new, ambitious, and personally-confronting behaviors that challenge the presently existing status quo. When implemented, with conviction and commitment, the mind-set of the organization transforms! The commitment of the CEO/President and leadership is critical for success.

6. TESTING THE PERMANENCY OF THE SOLUTION—THE SIXTH FOUR MINUTES

The question in this four-minute interval is “Did the behaviors implemented in the previous discussion result in the permanent invalidation of the underlying issue in the model on page 3? Or did the culture transform by a comprehensive measurement instrument comprised of “significant” questions? (All survey questions are not created equal in terms of the conceptual **and** behavioral framework necessary for high

performance) If so, then personal transformation and organizational transformation occurred. If you are still “triggered” by the same issue in challenging situations, then more work needs to be done—preferable with facilitative coaching. *Facilitative coaching* is the process of having someone assist you through an “irreversible change” in mind-set with respect to a self-limiting belief. Fortunately for sports teams, they get to practice new challenging behaviors every day with coaching provided.

In the case of cultural transformation, most measurement instruments will reveal whether transformation occurred or not. In spite of the fact that instruments are only semi-quantitative, those of excellent design do a remarkable job of tracking an organization’s culture.

If the issue has been resolved, a significantly expanded level of performance occurs as a result of a mind-set of success. It is also important to recognize that a *series* of stressful incidents have been eliminated, all resulting from the same underlying issue in different interactions or situations.

Action: Use observations of behaviors, desired organizational outcomes, and organizational performance, engagement, and inclusion survey measurements to indicate the permanency of a solution.

7. ADOPTION OF A PERSONAL METHODOLOGY—THE SEVENTH FOUR MINUTES

After practicing this sequence for problem solving, you will note that two or three steps might be skipped. Or, you may have friends or co-workers who can coach you through some of these questions. Whatever works best is the key. These steps should primarily be used as a guideline for the important checkpoints you want to make sure you cover.

For example, we believe that defining the problem and accepting full responsibility are the two key elements in the entire process. It is not unusual to seek informal coaching until these two are mastered. We have also found that “direct confrontation” with a skillful coach commonly leads to a direct transformational experience—cognitive transformation. The most satisfying aspect of the process is that it can be applied to *any* problem you might want to solve or resolve in the future.

Action: Design your personal process for problem solving, ensuring that you have included all six of the previous steps.

SUMMARY

This Four-Minute Intervals problem-solving method can be used for the majority of conflict situations you deal with—both in the workplace and in your personal lives. After mastering this technique, most of those situations can be handled in less than a half-hour. We highly recommend using this method for any undesirable situation you are presently dealing with and discover how effectively the Four-Minute Intervals works!