PROBLEM SOLVING

INTRODUCTORY

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

INTERFACE

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SKILL ADDRESSED:
Problem Solving

LEVEL OF CHALLENGE:
Introductory

TITLE OF ACTIVITY:
Defining the problem

INTRODUCTION TO THE SKILL

Defining the problem is the initial step in problem solving as it serves all of the subsequent actions needed for solving problems successfully. The definition of the problem offers the following benefits:

1. Cost efficiency: As the path towards the solution is more precise, fewer resources are wasted towards trying ineffective methods
2. Matching resources: The nature of the problems define the types of recourses needed
3. Task assignment: Some employees are better suited for certain problems
4. Creativity: Defining the problem opens the door for more creativity as it limits mechanical thinking associated with trial and error
5. Decision Making: Defining problems sets a proper framework for making better decisions

It is even more important to define the problem when it is time sensitive or the nature of it is new or unknown. Just because the concept of definition is associated with familiar issues and environments, it does not diminish its importance in unexplored contexts.

THE CHALLENGE

Imagine you are working at a startup company and the CEO instructs you to find out why the profits of the company decreased over the last three months. While the problem itself is clear, the decrease in profit, the company does not know why the profit has decreased. The reason behind the decrease is the essence of the problem. You have relatively little time to act as needed and save your company from bankruptcy, meaning that you cannot afford to try too many things. You know that you must successfully define the problem. By the end of this challenge you should comprehend some effective methods of defining where the problem is which will definitely save your company some expenses. You will be provided with the tools and you will have to combine them in a way which best defines a multifaceted problem.

STRUCTURE

To prepare your assessment keep in mind the following:

1. Understand how to create a mind map. A mind map is a structured way to present ideas, thoughts or data, breaking down a problem to smaller bits. You can read more about what makes a great mind map here.

2. Know how to do a Root Cause Analysis (RCA) using techniques such as "5 Whys". An RCA is about searching for underlying causes of an event or problem and 5 Whys aims to dig into the very core of the issue

3. The SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) is a useful framework to understand the internal factors and the external factors to a problem. Albeit, the S and O in SWOT have a positive attribute. Could this hint that defining the problem also defines the solution?

4. Usually the first steps of the problem's definition are also the hardest ones. Once there are some points of reference, they guide you to define the further details of the problem.

DEMONSTRATION AND EVALUATION
Great job making it this far!

How do you feel about defining problems? Has this activity made you think that you have done something similar before?

This is because the models provided have long been tested in entrepreneurial contexts. At this point, you should be able to delve deep into the nature of the problem and understand its essence in more detail.

By examining the causes with a clear mind you will be able to rationalise it and define the limits of some possible scenarios. In this sense, by defining the problem you also limit some parts of the identity it could have taken. Having done this in-depth analysis, you will notice that some of the negative aspects come from beyond the immediate area of control one has, which can be described as the sum of threats in the SWOT analysis.

While these frameworks view some details in different dimensions, everything can be tied together with a comprehensive mind map. In this regard, a mind map will literally paint a picture in one's head which will provide a visual identity for the definition of the problem.

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