THE COMPLETE LEADER

COACHING GUIDE

PROBLEM-SOLVING

The ability to analyze, diagnose, and deal with problems effectively.



LEADERS ARE CLEAR THINKERS

One of the 25 leadership competencies

SECTION 01

WHY PROBLEM-SOLVING MATTERS

Problem-Solving is one of the 25 core competencies that define a complete leader. As you grow this capability, you'll notice real shifts in how you lead yourself and influence others.

This guide is built for a 90-day journey. You'll explore the foundations, assess where you stand today, practice new behaviors, sidestep common traps, and track your progress, at your own pace or alongside a coach.

WHAT STRONG PROBLEM-SOLVING LOOKS LIKE

- You define the causes, effects, impact, and scope of a problem accurately
- You identify the multiple components of a problem and how they relate
- You evaluate the potential impact of solutions and select the best one

> **REFLECT**
>
> *Why does Problem-Solving matter to you personally? How might developing it change your effectiveness as a leader?*

SECTION 02

FOUNDATIONS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING

THE DEFINITION

The ability to analyze, diagnose, and deal with problems effectively.

Like any skill worth mastering, Problem-Solving rests on a few core building blocks. Understanding them gives you a vocabulary for your own growth.

THE CORE ELEMENTS

1 **Seeing the system**

Treating each problem as an interrelated series of events: a system in which one or more components has negatively affected the whole, and isolating the component causing the error.

2 **Manifest and latent causes**

Recognizing that problems have obvious, on-the-surface causes and latent ones. What is underneath the surface, in the background, or part of the past history?

3 **Defining before solving**

Clearly defining the problem, then isolating what part of it needs to be solved. If you're unsure what the root really is, you'll struggle to plan effective action steps.

REFLECT

Which element feels most familiar? Which one feels like a stretch right now?

SECTION 03

YOUR STARTING POINT

Before you move forward, take an honest look at where you are today. Read each statement and mark how often it's true of your leadership.

I define a problem clearly before I begin planning action steps to resolve it.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I list all possible solutions before choosing the best alternative, rather than jumping to a conclusion.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I look for the latent causes beneath a problem, not just the obvious surface ones.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I recognize that solving a problem happens within an organizational system, and I consider the effects across it.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I treat a problem as a series of related events, and isolate the component causing the error.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

I check whether a problem I solved has stayed solved, or returned in another form.

☐ Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

> **REFLECT**
>
> *Looking at your answers, where is your greatest opportunity for growth? What patterns do you notice?*

SECTION 04

PROBLEM-SOLVING IN PRACTICE

Competencies grow through deliberate practice. Work through the activities below in order, or choose the ones most relevant to your context.

ACTIVITY 01 60 min

Problem-Solving on the Job

Take a problem you currently face and work it all the way through, in writing.

TRY IT

1. Write what the problem is, whose opinion or knowledge matters to it, and three potential solutions.
2. Name the information you need to evaluate those solutions, research it, then write what it taught you that you didn't know.
3. List the pros and cons of your best option, who it affects, whose cooperation you need, and the steps assigned to each person.

ACTIVITY 02 40 min

Manifest and Latent Causes

Take apart a recent problem to find what was really underneath it.

TRY IT

1. Describe a recent problem situation and its manifest causes: what it seemed to be about on the surface.
2. Write the latent causes: what was underneath, what past history led to it, and whether communication was part of the problem.

3. Decide what you would do now to solve it, addressing both the manifest and latent causes.

ACTIVITY 03 40 min

Gather From Every Source

Information you don't have is usually the reason a problem looks unsolvable.

TRY IT

1. Re-read the relevant memos and documents on a current problem.
2. Ask your managers and co-workers for their perception of it.
3. Where useful, get expert information from people outside your organization.

ACTIVITY 04 25 min

Change the Angle

A problem viewed from one perspective often isn't the problem you think it is.

TRY IT

1. Take a problem you're working on and deliberately describe it from two other people's perspectives.
2. Ask whether it's as bad as you feared, or requires a different solution than you assumed.
3. Note what changed in your understanding.

ACTIVITY 05 20 min

Test Your Conclusion

A conclusion that fits the facts isn't always the only one that does.

TRY IT

1. Once you've gathered the information, write the conclusion you've drawn from it.
2. Ask what other conclusions would fit the same facts just as well.
3. Work out how each alternate conclusion would change the solution you'd choose.

ACTIVITY 06 30 min

Prioritize the Action Steps

A solution nobody has broken into tasks rarely gets implemented.

TRY IT

1. Break your chosen solution into manageable tasks.
2. Prioritize them in the order they must happen.
3. Delegate each to the relevant individual, or complete them in order yourself.

SECTION 05

COMMON PROBLEM-SOLVING TRAPS

As you practice, watch for these common pitfalls. Naming them now makes them easier to catch in the moment.

01 **Jumping to a conclusion**

Deciding the best solution early forecloses the alternatives you never listed. Slow down long enough to generate options.

02 **Forcing the problem into a familiar structure**

Too much focus on one method means trying to fit every problem into a predefined shape. When the components don't classify correctly, no effective solution appears.

03 **Solving the surface problem**

Manifest causes are easier to see and cheaper to fix, and leave the latent cause to produce the problem again.

04 **Ignoring the system**

A fix that works in your area can create effects felt across the department or the whole organization. Trace them before you act.

REFLECT

Which trap feels most familiar? How will you stay aware of it as you practice?

SECTION 06

YOUR 90-DAY PRACTICE

Lasting change comes from a few focused habits, practiced consistently and tracked honestly. Build your plan below, on your own or with your coach.

CHOOSE YOUR THREE HABITS

Based on everything above, which three habits will make the biggest difference in growing your Problem-Solving over the next 90 days?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

BUILD IN WEEKLY ACCOUNTABILITY

Write questions you can answer each week to measure progress and surface obstacles. The best ones are answered with “yes,” “no,” or a number.

Q1 _____

Q2 _____

Q3 _____

Accountability partner: who will you share these with?

_____

Completion date: when will you evaluate & celebrate?

_____

Measurements of success

How will you celebrate?

SECTION 07

GO DEEPER

Keep building your Problem-Solving with these resources. Explore them, then capture what stands out to you.

BOOK

The Complete Leader, Ch. 1.6: Problem-Solving

The full framework and examples behind problem-solving.

PODCAST

The Complete Leader Podcast

Episodes 95, 96 & 97 explore problem-solving in practice.

ONLINE

Problem-Solving competency library

Videos, articles, and podcasts at TheCompleteLeader.org.

CAPTURE YOUR INSIGHTS

As you work through these resources, which ideas most apply to your own growth in Problem-Solving?

KEEP GOING

YOU'VE GOT THIS

Developing Problem-Solving is an investment in yourself and everyone you lead. Return to this guide often: revisit the activities, reread the traps, and celebrate small wins along the way.

Every complete leader started exactly where you are now.