

Using Problem Analysis Under Time Pressure

Purpose

To apply the concepts of Problem Analysis to situations where quick action is required.

Introduction

Frequently, situations come up where quick action is required to take care of sudden trouble. There simply is not enough time to do a complete formal analysis before deciding what to do. However, before intelligent action can be taken, the problem needs to be understood and some idea of the cause is needed. Here are typical examples of this kind of situation:

- Telephone calls from the field reporting customer complaints.
- A report that the reject rate on Line #1 has just jumped 50%.
- Costs have been reported to be up 10%.

The temptation to jump to action and make assumptions about the cause is strong. Quick action is needed. While there may not be enough time to complete a full Problem Analysis, a few well-chosen questions can help you handle a tough situation. For example:

- Provide a reasonable link between problem-cause-action by asking, “Do you know cause?” and “How have you verified the cause?”
- Quickly specify the problem to help you test possible causes. Be particularly alert for a contrasting IS NOT that may change your first notion of cause and suggest a better possibility.
- Be alert to the need for separation. Factual information on the nature and location of the deviation and when it was observed is particularly useful in indicating whether you are dealing with one problem or several.
- Test the effectiveness of interim action by asking, “Does the success of this action depend upon my *knowing* the cause?” and “What will this action accomplish?”

The key to getting payoff from quick use of Problem Analysis when panic hits is to gather available information and to think about the situation. This “pause before action,” while difficult when people are losing their heads, saves time, money, and embarrassment.

To get a feel for using Problem Analysis in time pressure situations, write down two or three questions you would ask of a person making the following statements:

“XYZ Company says to cancel their current order if we can’t get it to them right this time.”

“Quality Control says the rejects are an operator problem, but Manufacturing believes it is a materials foul-up.”

Review your questions. What was the logical purpose of each question (i.e., to specify the problem, to verify a possible cause, etc.)?

Instructions

1. List the time pressure situations you face on the job where quick action is required to handle a deviation.

2. Select one of these. What two or three specific Problem Analysis questions would best test whether you know cause?

3. What can you do to make sure you will use these questions?
