

Using Short-Form Problem Analysis

Occasionally, when problems crop up whose causes are unknown, you may not always have the time to complete a full Problem Analysis. In these cases, you'll need tools that require a smaller investment of time, yet still provide you with a process for quickly gathering key data on the problem before you take action. Short-form Problem Analysis will provide you with those tools when you're under time pressure, solving a low-priority problem, or dealing with a recurring problem.

Under time pressure

Often you'll encounter a problem that demands quick action. However, before an intelligent response can be implemented, you need to understand the problem and have at least some idea of what's causing it. Here are examples of this type of situation:

- You receive telephone calls reporting a customer complaint that must be solved in an hour.
- You receive a report that the reject rate on Line #1 has just jumped 50%.
- You're asked at a client meeting why your response time has dropped.

In cases like these, the temptation to jump to action and make assumptions about the cause is strong. Quick action is needed. But using several well-chosen elements of the Problem Analysis process can help you avoid a mistake. For example:

- Provide a reasonable link between problem, cause, and action by asking, "Do you know the cause?" and "How have you verified the cause?"
- Establish a clear Should and Actual to be certain that you are, in fact, dealing with a problem.
- Be alert to the need to separate the concern into several problems. A clear Problem Statement will save time by focusing your efforts. Factual information on the nature, location, and timing of the deviation is particularly useful in revealing whether you're dealing with one problem or several problems that have been lumped together.
- Specify the problem in the What, Where, and When categories 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.
- Test the effectiveness of any 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 is to gather available information and then, before acting, to think about the situation. This "pause before action," while difficult when people are losing their composure, saves time, money, and embarrassment.

Other situations where you can use short-form Problem Analysis

- **Recurring problems:** If you face a problem that you believe you've encountered and found cause for in the past, search for the Problem Analysis Excel worksheet or talk to other that have information. Gather specification data for your current problem and compare it to the previous problem. This will tell you whether the problem is identical to the previous one. If it is, check to see what caused the problem, as well as what fix solved the problem. (However, keep in mind that if the same problem recurs involving the same object, the action you took previously may not have addressed the root cause. If this is the case, you'll benefit by conducting a new, complete Problem Analysis or by thinking beyond the fix.)
- **Low-priority problems:** If the consequences for arriving at the wrong cause the first time are minimal, the concern may not be of sufficient priority to warrant a full Problem Analysis. In this case, focus your efforts on stating the problem clearly and then verifying the known possible causes.