


Problem Solving Made Easy:

Structuring the Process

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As payroll professionals, you are faced with a plethora of challenges every day, from tracking down missing hours to implementing a new employment requirement. Whether the problem is simple or complex, there's a three-step process you can follow to find a solution: define, brainstorm and choose.

Step 1 Define the Real Problem

Albert Einstein said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.” He knew the importance of understanding the nuances of a problem *before* you start brainstorming solutions. You also must be careful you are diagnosing the real problem before you waste time creating band-aid solutions that only treat the symptoms and not the root cause.

To get to the heart of a problem, start with the symptoms you see and ask “Why?” until the root is found. This process gives your team a shared understanding of the problem, its impact on the organization and the resources required to resolve it. It also keeps the focus off of looking for someone to blame.

Step 2 Brainstorm Possible Solutions

There are three questions you must answer to start the brainstorming process:

1. Who should participate?

The answer may seem simple: the people who know the most about the topic, right? Possibly but you can also benefit more from including more than just subject matter experts.

Consider the following:

- ▶ Are there others who have a hidden talent or interest in the subject?
- ▶ Are there others who offer transferable skills and a fresh perspective?
- ▶ Are there others who have “been there, done that” with your organization?
- ▶ Do you have a balance of blue-sky thinkers and naysayers? (Spoiler alert: you need both!)
- ▶ Do you have at least one cheerleader who will help the group push forward when all seems lost?

2. Can we brainstorm virtually?

A tougher question — and perhaps one that is still in beta-testing — is whether effective and creative brainstorming works in an online meeting room. While we have seen many positives come from a transition to virtual work, there have been some challenges too, such as technical difficulties and distracted participants.

However, if you follow best practices, you can be successful in an online setting. For instance, be sure to use the tools within your platform, such as polls and pulse checks, whiteboards, and other integrated apps that allow for engagement and interaction. To further help engagement, ensure everyone has cameras and microphones on; assign one person as the fact checker and one as the note taker; and set clear ground rules, such as creative and wild ideas are encouraged, build on others' ideas, and no criticizing ideas.

Start general, end specific — start with every possible solution without evaluating; then narrow down using comparative techniques. Only then, can you truly understand the viability of each option.

3. Is everyone getting the opportunity to share?

Once you have the right people in the right place, how do you make sure everyone gets a chance to provide input? Whether online or in person, some people tend to do all the talking while others tend to listen. This is where Dr. de Bono's "Six Thinking Hats" theory comes in handy.¹

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This theory allows us to separate facts from assumptions, and consider both logic and emotion in a constructive and organized way. It helps ensure groups capture everyone's perspective without conflict, and identifies a path forward with increased confidence.

As a brainstorming session progresses, the group cycles through wearing these hats and the associated role:

a. Blue Hat (Facilitator): Focuses on the agenda and summarizing; usually worn by one assigned person but everyone can and should display this hat throughout the session.

b. White Hat (Information):

Usually used at the beginning of the session; helps everyone focus on the facts; identifies the information we have and the information we need.

c. Red Hat (Emotions):

Focuses on legitimizing feelings without judgment, allowing the exploration of internal states and apprehensions.

d. Black Hat (Survival): Focuses on what might go wrong, surfacing what should be avoided and the dangers of pursuing a course of action.

e. Yellow Hat (Sunshine): Focuses on the positive, looking for the beneficial side of all options; constructive in nature.

f. Green Hat (Energy): Focuses on new, modified and improved ideas, going beyond the known to tap into new solutions that challenge the status quo.

¹Learn more about Dr. de Bono's theory on [The de Bono Group's website](#).

Step 3 Choose the Right Solution

Now it is time to use sound reasoning to hone in on the options that make up the best path forward. This begins with establishing the right criteria to fit the situation. Some example criteria to consider include practicality, policy and values alignment, legal compliance, and ease of implementation. These criteria should then be separated into “nice to haves” and “must haves”.

Now you can assess solutions against the criteria, compare the options against each other, and ultimately identify the most practical option.

With this solution, devise an action plan to implement it. Specify the activities required, the parties responsible, and the short- and

long-term markers of success. Remember to also monitor the implementation so you can course correct if needed.

Creative problem solving is not an exact science. However, if you use these tips and tools while following the three-step process, you will be better equipped to find the best solution to the payroll problems that keep you up at night. ■

If you or your organization would like further advice from a MaxPeople Human Resources expert, find our archived and upcoming webinars designed specifically for the National Payroll Institute at payroll.ca or contact us at chat@maxpeoplehr.com.

