Handout 12: Problem Solving in Groups

While Problem Solving is only one of a number of possible formats to use it a common and useful one as it leads to tangible outcomes and the feeling that the group has achieve something. If you have looked at problem solving in interviewing you may recognise some of the steps. The same dangers exist too...

Some groups, like the individuals within them, have a tendency to 'jump into problem solving' as if there exists a quick-fix solution just waiting to be discovered. One member will confidently volunteer an 'obvious' solution, and another will just as quickly counter the suggestion with a 'better' one. The climate quickly becomes competitive, and some members disengage from the whole process.

Other groups get bogged down in exploring the issues, with numerous references to examples from the past and analysis of what went wrong and whose fault it was. They tend to go around in circles without ever being able to make a decision.

Both types would benefit from a structured approach to problem solving. Here is one presented as a linear series of steps. Be aware that in reality the sequence would tend to loop back upon itself at times, as issues arise that require further exploration. By the way, there's nothing wrong with 'jumping into problem solving' if you start at step one. It's jumping to solutions that causes the problems.

1. Explore the situation

It is good idea to pose a question rather than a statement of what needs to be done. Thus 'What problems do we see with our communication systems?' is preferable to 'Our communication systems need to be fixed'. It may be that people see nothing wrong, and could benefit from hearing why others do see problems. It may be that people know there are problems, but for some other reason - lack of time, lack of priority, some underlying resentment - they have not being motivated to do anything about it. Before moving on, get some agreement that there is some sort of problem to be discussed, if only because a few people are frustrated with the current state of affairs.

2. Discuss and map the issues

A whiteboard would be useful here. This stage involves free discussion, covering as many relevant issues and examples as can be done in the time allotted for it. If people are making generalisations, encourage them be specific. If they are only giving examples, get them to make a general statement. Watch the emotional temperature and for more quiet members getting sidelined by the talkative ones. Steer the group away from blaming or getting bogged down in who did what and when. Group the issues into categories. For the communication systems example these
could be along the lines of documentation, recording decisions, listening, consistency, friendliness/rudeness, email etiquette, appropriate language.

3. Establish facts, make value judgments

'Barry should stop emailing offensive cartoons'. Before we find a solution to this, we first need to define just what an 'offensive cartoon' is (value judgment), and then establish whether Barry is really emailing them (establish the fact). 'There's too much verbal abuse of clients' is a statement that should get the same treatment. If the statement still stands then we can get on with deciding what to do about it.

Tip: If you can bet on it - it's a question of fact. If you can't (because it can't be proven right or wrong) - it's an opinion.

4. Prioritise the issues

You might decide that verbal abuse is a behaviour you defiantly want to eliminate from your workplace, but refusing to make small-talk in the mornings (prior to coffee at least) is seen as an acceptable discourtesy. Rank the issues in order of importance. If you can't get agreement on this get group members to give each issue an 'importance value' from (say) 1 to 5. Add up the scores for each issue and rank them that way.

The remaining steps can applied to EACH of the issues identified in step 4 as being important enough to do something about.

5. Define the problem

Now you may be ready to say: 'Barry is emailing offensive cartoons', or 'Clients are being verbally abused'. At last. As the astronaut said: "Houston, we have a problem."

6. Brainstorm possible solutions

Don't pause to evaluate ideas, you can do that next. Turn taking may be necessary to ensure everyone contributes. Although brainstorming is often fast and furious, it is useful to build in some periods of silence so people have time to formulate their ideas.

7. Evaluate possible solutions

Factors taken into account may include cost, practicality, privacy, normal practice in similar services, acceptability to those affected...that should rule out the surveillance camera option! Rank the solutions, using the method in step 4 if necessary.
8. Set SMART goals

Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced, time-framed goals should flow on from above. You may have generated a satisfactory solutions in 7. For example, to stop offensive emails you might 1) Install a content filtering program 2) Prohibit emailing of graphic material 3) Require that copies of any cartoons are also mailed to the coordinator. SMART goals such as 'The content filtering program NetNazi will be installed by Suzy before May 25th on all computers' can now be set.

9. Develop an action plan

Put all the SMART goals on a timeline so their progress can be checked at a later date. If you have not already done so measure NOW any variable (such as numbers of nasty cartoons) that you might want to measure again later.

10. Follow up and evaluate

Later, perhaps next meeting, check on how the plan is going. Check both the implementation (has Suzy installed that program?) and the results (have the offensive cartoons stopped?).