

Troubleshooting

A 10-step guide

This presentation is a basic guide on how to troubleshoot a problem project, business, organisation, or process.

Introduction

- External or internal?
- Change is necessary, but...
- Never change without reason
- Clear understanding and articulation
- Process is ten or so steps

While troubleshooting can be done perfectly well internally, it is very difficult for people already involved in a project or process to initiate radical change and to be objective about things in which they have invested time, energy, and emotional capital. An external view, ideally from someone who is articulate and diplomatic, can be a consultant task, or can come from an insider, maybe someone from another department who is demonstrably independent.

The key thing to understand is that things must change in order to change the outcome. There is a tendency for people to 'hope for the best' or to escalate input in the belief that it will change the outcome. This almost never happens. However, change should not be a random knee-jerk thing or you may simply leap from the 'frying pan into the fire', and end up trying random changes. Any change made should be once-and-for-all. It should be well thought through and the result of a clear articulation of the problem: one that is shared by all participants.

It is impossible to give proscriptive advice that covers the myriad of individual situations in which troubleshooting is required, but the process it can be conceptualised in terms of a convenient (I've managed to create ten as it sounds good) discrete steps. This presentation describes those steps.

One: Analyse

- What was the original aim?
- In what aspects has it fallen short?
- What is the analysis of those involved?
- What is the objective of the troubleshooting?

The four questions listed should be asked first. At this stage it is important to document the results and agree them. Such documentation need not be a lengthy affair: a paragraph on each could easily suffice. The purpose is to ensure that there is common understanding on what you are to troubleshoot, and what would constitute success, while at the same time capturing for later analysis the views of those close to the subject you are troubleshooting.

In general terms a failure point can normally be found in a poor plan or in poor implementation. It may be a single factor or it may be a chain of contributory factors that are much more difficult to tease out and which may be systemic. Visiting people in their workplaces and chatting about the four questions while they work can be a better way to get a feel for any problems and issues than formal meetings. It can also give you several perspectives on problems as it is surprising how often one person in an organisation may not talk with another even though their work depends on their cooperation and coordination.

Two: Test assumptions

- Original plan assumptions
- Analysis assumptions

Assumptions lie behind everything from our daily actions to our political and religious views. For example, if we didn't assume that the ground ahead was solid, we would develop a very slow and peculiar gait. So we assume that ground is solid unless we have contradictory information, and this makes walking efficient and keeps us upright almost all the time. However, when assumptions turn out to be wrong, then they lead to failures and even to serious accidents in professions such as aviation and medicine. Spotting key assumptions that have been made and finding if they are false or flawed is this a solid foundation for our troubleshooting.

Even the problem analysis of participants can be based on assumptions that are not correct, so these should be tested too. When people make any kind of assertion then you need to check on what that assertion is based. Views like 'this would be too expensive' or 'this is too small' or 'we targeted the wrong market' should immediately lead to the question 'How do we know?'.

Testing and either proving or disproving assumptions as far as you are able, is like removing the blinkers from people's eyes. Often the troubleshooting process can sprint from here as people begin to see where the problem was and the solution becomes obvious.

Three: Scope actions

- What can we change?
- What do we need to change?

The basic question here is ‘What can we change?’. People will often blame the weather, the government, the financial environment, but these are things that, bar some creative thinking that removes us from their influence, we cannot change and therefore have to live with.

In the other sense, there may be ‘sacred cows’ that go unchallenged and are considered untouchable. Sometimes these are the core problem. It is surprising how many people may disagree the immutability but go along with it because it is the accepted wisdom. Sacred cows may be plans, prices, systems, people, posts, etc. and they are not always obvious.

The ‘What can we change?’ question is also about checking that the scope of the troubleshooting is appropriate. If a small change or one specific change will make a big impact, that may be the way to go. However, if the problems are systemic and multiple then you may need to agree that nothing short of a complete overhaul or a ‘scrap it and start again’ approach is viable.

Four: Create a vision

- Involve as many participants as practicable
- Employ creative thinking (brainstorming)
- Consider using formal methods

Finally the deconstruction and analysis is complete and we can start the reconstruction process. The fewer the people involved the more expeditious the process, but the less effective, while the more that affected people are involved in the solution, the more likely it is to be accepted and to be made to work. If we are dealing with a project affecting a handful of people then clearly they should all be involved. If it is an organisation employing thousands then we have to look for an optimum. It may be best for example to select a smaller number of representatives to be involved.

The nature and skills of the people affected may also determine who is best to involve. People who are never involved in management as part of their jobs may be poor contributors and find the process frustrating, especially if it involves a lot of time spent talking at meetings or writing reports. Exclusion is not to belittle such people, but to make the process practicable and to spare them any discomfort from demanding performance in an unfamiliar environment. It is easy to forget that a lot of our communication skills are developed on the job and may come naturally to some and not at all to others.

Formal methods can overcome the tendency for some to dominate conversations and increase the confidence of those unused to speaking in larger groups. They can also be more fun and more adaptable than the 'meeting with minutes' format. Going under various names such as Topic-Centred Interaction, Knowledge Cafes, and pinboarding, they range from the relatively informal that can be done with a whiteboard to the extremely programmed ones that come as a kit requiring a small van. Such methods encourage every individual to make a contribution and refine an output that is then an agreed summary of the best ideas and thoughts.

Finally, and this is a step that many neglect after the euphoria that normally accompanies a brainstorming event, one person (the troubleshooter) will need to

Five: Sell the vision

- Paint a picture
- Sell it top-down and logically
- Postpone planning decisions
- Go back a step if the vision is not selling

It is vital that the people involved genuinely support the actions to be taken, particularly those that have not been involved in the vision creation process as they may be feeling disenfranchised and fearful. There is thus a distinct step in which you sell it to them before making a formal commitment to the vision, or returning to it if it is not well received. The end result of this step has to be enthusiasm ('buy-in' if you want a management buzz word for it) and a commitment, publicly made by each individual, to realise it.

It is too easy for people to nod something through and then to work against it, and they may do this for a variety of reasons, from deliberate spoiling agendas, to worry that if they don't accept then something dreadful will be forced upon them. This has to clearly be introduced as their chance to raise any concerns or objections and then, like the wedding ceremony, for ever hold their peace. Thus the process has to be open, public, inclusive, and non-confrontational.

Avoid getting drawn into planning detail. There will always be a hundred 'what about...ery' questions that you cannot answer at the beginning. While there should be no clearly unrealistic assumptions or major obstacles that appear insurmountable, the fact that you don't currently know exactly how to do something does not make it unachievable, so keep to the vision and overall strategy for solving the problem.

Six: Make a new plan

- Keep the vision in mind
- Make the plan relate to the vision
- Avoid over-specification

Now the really hard work begins. The accepted vision has to be turned into a detailed plan. This might not be necessary if the changes are small and we are only dealing with a minor project, but in larger situations and where there was a plan that was failing, then a new plan will need to be constructed. I'm not about to get into the whole world of management of a planning process as this is an extensive topic that is adequately covered in lots of management books. The only point I would make is that, given involvement in the process and agreement of the vision, there should be a high degree of understanding and motivation, so planning could be minimal, and may be less of a requirement than previously. Indeed, planning may have been part of the problem.

Seven: Check the skill set

- Objectivity – you have agreed the goal
- Fairness
- Openness

Now the painful part. It may be that the people you have available have the wrong skill set. You have to do something about this. There are a variety of options: training, redundancy, recruitment, secondments, consultants, etc. It goes without saying (sense a sacred cow?) that such people issues are delicate, but without tackling them you may find people resorting to 'old plan' behaviours, or simply unable to implement the new plan. Again, handling personnel is a subject on its own. All I will say is that the objective is king and you must ensure that you have the right type of people with the right skill set in order to see it through.

Eight: Motivate

- Empathise
- New start, new dawn
- Net gain

Working in an atmosphere of failure takes a great toll on any individual and saps their motivation. The process of change and renewal that I have described should have gone some way to giving people new hopes and aspirations, but if you are coming in on a long-term basis it is likely that you will inherit a jaded team. If they have been badly treated by previous management there may also be a systemic scepticism towards management, and a pessimism about personal futures. Any painful personnel changes will likely have added fuel to this view.

The first thing to say, particularly for an external troubleshooter is to recognise and acknowledge the situation and any past suffering and injustice. A ‘truth and reconciliation’ phase might even be an extra parallel step in the 10-step process. However, you must also be firm in that the new vision and plan represent the chance for a new start; a new dawn for those who will grab it. There must be no place for destructive pessimism and scepticism (especially masquerading as realism, since the time for that was at the analysis and vision stages). The general feeling should be one of changing to a better environment and you need to do all you can to make this the accepted ‘group think’. Hopefully this can be done with positive actions, but in extreme cases you may need to discipline or remove elements that have a negative mental attitude. Of course you must not create a climate of fear and blind acceptance, with lip service paid to management. You need to maintain open and healthy criticism of the new plan in order to improve it over time.

Agreeing achievable goals, with the emphasis on agreeing and not on imposing, and providing instant and public praise for achievement are the sort of management handbook traits that need to be instilled in all management levels.

Nine: Manage

- Trust your people
- Monitor what's important
- Improve management continuously

The post troubleshooting new start may also be a last chance, and everyone may feel the burden of the spotlight of management upon them. While evidence of the new plan working will be sought, you should avoid monitoring every move and certainly avoid reacting to first sets of numbers. People need space and confidence to get new things working properly. A steady management hand and a period of consolidation is ideal. Monitoring information should always be shared with the team as this is the best way (some would say the only way) to get them to improve on performance.

Having trouble-shooted (should it be trouble-shot?) the problem, you should also embark on a programme of continuous management improvement. Failure is always the responsibility (if not the fault) of those who manage. Becoming more knowledgeable and more skilled as a management will help to prevent recurrence.

Ten: Reward

- Money is not the motivator
- Life should be fun

Finally, the last step. The exercise has been successful so a big thank you is in order. This need not be expensive. In fact research has shown that money is not a motivator of people. We earn because we have to and we may change jobs or take more responsibility for more money, but what makes us better performers is happiness, personal well-being, and job satisfaction. Thus this has to be ex-gratia and on top of any performance-related bonuses or incentive schemes.

A successful turn-around should result in some gesture of life becoming more fun. It could range from the beer after work in the pub, or a trip on a boat, to a weekend away at a country house, or hiring a theme park for a day. It should be pure leisure (not a disguised management course) and offer all the team something they can relax and enjoy, whether they are sporty, boozy or intellectual in their leisure. To some extent this is management developing its relationship with its team by saying thank you with an unexpected gift. It reinforces the relationship between success and pleasure. And please don't forget the Troubleshooter ;)

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