5 Reasons Your Employees
Don't Solve Problems

Many managers are promoted based on the depth of their expertise, or their tenure. They come to the job knowledgeable and experienced.

Which is fantastic, until it is time to coach problem solving. Why? Because as managers we typically know how to solve problems (we've seen them or something similar before) or we think it is simply our jobs to solve them. This. Is. Problematic. If you are solving everyone's problems, you are part of the problem. If you want your employees to demonstrate more ownership, independence and initiative (and frankly, who doesn't?!), then you need to read and execute on the solutions in this resource. This will be hard. Behavior changes are. But trust me, it will be transformative. To you and your team.

Here are 5 reasons that I've uncovered about what gets in the way of employees demonstrating this important competency. And what you can do about it.

Problem 1. YOU SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS

Solution 1: As a manager it may be easy to fix your employees' problems, after all, that is what many of us believe we are being paid to do. We have the skills, knowledge, ability and wisdom. Noooooooooooo! This is the opposite of empowering our employees. Help them to demonstrate ownership and initiative. Rather than solving problems, when possible, go into coaching mode. When your employees come to you with challenges, use the coaching strategy of, "Ask, don't tell".

Ask them questions:
1. What ideas do you have?
2. What have you already tried?
3. What solutions do you recommend to solve the problem? (and really listen)

Get into the habit of enabling them to solve problems. Your immediate response is vital to a behavior change.

Problem 2. UNCLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Solution 2: Set clear expectations around problem solving. I know this sounds silly, you're thinking, "Of course they know that!" But....do they? Be upfront with your employees about your expectations of problem solving. Have a dialogue about ownership and identifying solutions. Let them know you want them to have more autonomy, to master this important competency. Be transparent about the "why" (i.e., they will have more autonomy, build their confidence, increase their credibility, etc.).

Problem 3. LACK OF PROCESS

Solution 3: Establish a clear problem-solving process. Gut based decision making is fraught with biases and assumptions that can derail a quality solution. Problem solving is one of the most challenging cognitive functions. With proper systems and strategies set up, problem solving can be easier, more rewarding and create more sustainable solutions. After all, who has time to solve the same problem again and again?!

When identifying a strategy for your team to follow, think about the following concepts and ensure your process covers each:

1. What is the root cause of the problem?
2. What are all the possible options to solve the problem?
3. What option will create the best outcome and why?

Look for a basic 3-5 step process to consistently follow and encourage your team to do the same. There are tons of helpful resources out there, pick one and use it!

Examples:

- Understand, Strategize, Implement (3)
- Plan, Do, Check, Act (4)
- Define, Measure, Analyze, Implement, Control (5)

Problem 4. ABSENCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Solution 4: Encourage critical thinking. Our ability to problem solve is correlated to the quality of our thinking. Critical thinking is not just thinking harder or thinking more. It requires that we think in a way that is free from assumptions, biases, emotions or even social pressure. Coach your employees to be mindful of the way they think in order to improve their problem-solving abilities. Encourage evidence based, fact-based thinking.

An excellent tool to use is the RED Critical Thinking Model. It identifies three areas to consider and coach to improve the quality of thinking during problem solving and decision making (you can do a quick search for more details in each of these 3 areas):

- **R**ecognize Assumptions
- **E**valuate Arguments
- **D**raw Conclusions

Use it, and you will be wowed.

Problem 5. A DESIRE FOR IMMEDIATE RESULTS

Solution 5: Consider the development of problem solving as an investment and be patient to see the return. We all want to see results fast, and sometimes it is tempting to jump in and help (aka solve the problem) instead of allowing the (sometimes) lengthy process of problem solving to unfold. (Same problem with delegating too, *"It takes too much time!"* but, does it?). Be strategically patient with your employees during the process. If you jump in too quickly you can inadvertently squash the very skill you are trying to instill, while undermining confidence. Some employees will have the natural ability to solve problems fast, while others may need time for theirs to develop.

Key Take Aways:

1. If you want more problem solving, consider your own behaviors first.

2. Be intentional in setting clear expectations about problem solving.

3. Create an environment where the quality of thinking matters, where discipline is valued, and where problem solving can flourish--you can do this with a process and with a focused mindset.