# MORE INFORMATION ON STAGES 1 AND 4 OF PROBLEM SOLVING

## Stage 1: Defining the Problem

Therefore, the more ways we frame a problem, the more likely we are to come to a good solution. We might think about considering the following:

* **Writing the problem down** – seeing something written down can help to identify where any ambiguity may be. Writing an objective down gives time for people to think about it, and sometimes they can find it easier to question something which they see in front of them rather than something they hear.
* **Watch for the nouns and verbs being used** – the phrasing of a problem may include words which will limit flexibility or creativity later on. For example, it is tempting to argue that a particular problem ‘is occurring throughout the organisation’ when in reality there is little evidence to support such a view – and there may be evidence to indicate that this is not the case.
* **Phrase the problem as a question –** this ensures that we don’t fall into the trap of jumping to conclusions by claiming that a problem is ‘clearly caused by Y, so we need to stop Y immediately!’ Using others’ creativity and ‘framing’ (i.e. stating a problem as being caused by ‘X’) a problem *in as many ways as possible* means that it is more likely to be solved. Wherever possible, the question needs to allow individuals to focus on what the processes causing the problem might be, rather than the goal itself: focusing on the goal is likely to restrict thinking to a less creative approach.

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| **BOX 13.XXX THE UNFORESEEN PROBLEM**  Being a good business leader is not only about being able to solve problems that you have now – it is also about being able to solve problems which are not problems now, but which will become problems if no action is taken.  We could look at the example of Kodak. Kodak was hugely successful for a very long time as a producer of photographic equipment – camera film, photographic paper, high street photographic services, etc. – but it failed to react to the advent of digital photography. It was satisfied with its performance and believed that whilst there were small issues which arose from time to time, there were no major issues which needed to be addressed.  What Kodak didn’t see coming was the popularity with which digital photography would be received and adopted – and that really affected its success. The business model – previously based upon the production of professional photographic products – started to fail. Kodak is still a viable company, but has had to focus on a much smaller market.  The same is true of a number of shops we might expect to find on the high street. Bookstores in particular have seen their share of the market shrink considerably as (1) Amazon.com and other online book stores have become successful, (2) reading books on devices such as Amazon’s own ‘Kindle’ have become important, and (3) agreements between book publishers and retailers have broken down.  A manager’s skill is needed not only to address the problems which are currently being faced, but also to imagine and understand trends so that they can take advantage of forthcoming situations.  *For you to consider:*  What careers do you imagine might be open to you in a few years’ time?  What can you do now to prepare for those new careers? |

## STAGE 4: Make a Balanced Choice

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| **BOX 13.XXX FOR YOU TO DO**  In implementing solutions, managers often need to make some important decisions – in fact, the authority to make decisions is one issue that separates the from others working in the organisation. These might be decisions about people, about the use of resources, about personal issues in life or about their career, and there are certain decisions which are hard for most people. Think about the following questions and identify the implications for any decisions you might wish to implement later on.   1. To what extent do you actively avoid making decisions that will hurt other people? 2. If you are chairing a discussion, are you more likely to give your views first and then allow others to disagree with you, or to ask for others’ views and then build on those? 3. Would you prefer to delegate a difficult decision to someone else, or to make it yourself? 4. Would you be likely to blame the need for a particular decision on others if you know that those people might disagree with you? 5. If you have two ideas which seem equally good, how easy do you find it to decide which option to take? 6. To what extent are others’ probable reactions likely to influence the decisions that you make? 7. Under what circumstances are you likely to be able to admit that you made a wrong decision? 8. Which do you find more difficult – admitting that a decision was wrong or admitting that it was implemented poorly? 9. If you are presented with information that contradicts your experience, are you likely to question the information, or question the general validity of your experience? 10. If a decision needs to be made quickly but the relevant information takes a long time to collect, what are you likely to do? 11. Would you prefer to make decisions on your own, or with others’ advice? 12. To what extent would you be able to delegate a simple decision to someone else to make?   The answers that you give to questions such as these – and the reasons you give those particular answers – will have an impact on the kind of leader you become. Some leaders can seem hard and emotionless, but making tough decisions which affect others is a key part of being an adept leader – and in reality, whilst many make such decisions as a part of daily life, few actually get a sense of happiness from doing so.  The ability to delegate and involve others is important, especially if they are going to be involved in implementing the decisions. It is not always possible however (e.g. where an important decision is likely to directly impact on those same people, or where there are a number of political or selfish motives), and so a leader needs to understand when to involve others, and when that involvement is unwise. |

Depending on the scale and nature of the problem(s), a leader may need simply to introduce a new process, or to engage a part or all of the organisation in some kind of change management process – perhaps even suggesting that some structural or cultural elements of the organisation might need to be altered.