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What Kind of Problem Solver Are You?

Avil Beckford, President

Any successful business or life activity demands the ability to problem solve. Is it not then logical that employees who boldly face daily problems and challenges are worth more to an organization than those who passively rely on their supervisors?

During the long research required for my book *Tales of People Who Get It*, I asked thirty-four highly accomplished individuals from Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Jamaica and South Africa to "Describe a business challenge that you've had and how you resolved it." Analyzing over 60 responses - including responses from other interviews I conducted - I distilled the following core competencies that characterized great problem solvers. They all had the distinct ability to:

- Observe
- Listen and hear
- Get along with others
- Secure reliable information
- Look at what's been done before
- Pay attention to detail
- Take a break
- Reflect on options
- Trust their instincts
- Adapt
- Take decisive actions

These skills set them apart from people who are less gifted at problem solving. Though the challenges described in the interviews varied from leading people to introducing new products and services to managing corporate downsizings to surviving an economic downturn, these basic skills were instrumental in helping these individuals to successfully resolve the challenges they were facing.

Fortunately, through my own consulting work and ongoing research, I have learned that for those not so skilled at problem solving and willing to learn, this is a very a teachable skill.

Four types of problem solvers emerged from the research: *Inspirers*, *Reflectors*, *Innovators* and *Influencers*.

About The Author

Avil Beckford is an accomplished writer, researcher, and analyst with over 15 years experience. Her strong service orientation, dedication to learning and exploring new ways of improving her own life as well as the many she touches, has underpinned her success to date.

A published author, her new book, *Tales of People Who Get It* is a culmination of her life experience. It has often been said of Avil that her life informs her work. She has also created a companion workbook *Journey to Getting It*.

Avil's many readers look forward to Ambeck Edge, her company's regular e-Newsletter that is a rich resource for those interested in self-improvement, as well as those professionals who struggle with life issues.

Inspirers: They nurture people and relationships and have the ability to inspire confidence. Whenever they face a challenge or problem, people rally around them offering their assistance.

Reflectors: These problem solvers do not rush when making decisions, instead they take their time, mull things over for a while, step back from the situation to get a new perspective and then act.

Innovators: These individuals have the unique ability to come up with creative solutions to any challenge or problem that they might encounter. It could be an entirely new solution or the blending of two known solutions into something fresh and exciting.

Influencers: These problem solvers are expert at getting others to support their cause, and they excel at finding solutions to "people" problems that involve change. Influencers are great at getting people to "buy in."

Problem Solving Process

In his 1926 book *The Art of Thought*, Graham Wallas, the English political scientist and psychologist, adopted and expanded Hermann von Helmholtz's process to idea development. Wallas describes a four-stage creativity process for generating great ideas — *preparation, incubation, illumination and implementation* (See Table 1). This process is ideal for problem solving because it taps into the idea of creative solutions rather than a one-size fits all template.

In the Wallas Model preparation stage, a period of study and fact-finding will show how to gather information to resolve any issues, challenges or problems that you may be facing. This phase includes research to identify what's been done before, interviewing subject experts and any other means of collecting opinions or ideas on the subject. Remember, it's time to take a break when you become stressed, bored, overwhelmed, or distracted, or feel that it's futile to gather more information. Stop thinking about the problem and *sleep on it*. Though not consciously working on your issues, challenges or problems, your subconscious or unconscious mind is busy working at connecting the different pieces of information to form ideas, and so creating something different and new.

When you least expect it, a sudden flash of insight, an "aha" moment where the new idea(s) to resolve your issues, challenges or problems will surface to your conscious mind and you bring illumination – you get it – the light-bulb goes on. The great idea(s) or solution that surfaces could be implemented the way you conceived it, or you may have elements of a great idea that you have to refine before you can implement. Though the model was developed to generate ideas, it has many other applications such as inspiring titles, innovation and so on.

The more complex the problem, the more work you have to do to resolve it.

To become a better problem solver, and generate great ideas more frequently, there are specific things that can be done. A review of several books on creativity, great thinkers and scientists who changed the world: Works such as *Discover Your Genius*, *Aha! 10 Ways to Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas*, *The Art of Thought*, *The Art of Thinking*, suggest that great thinkers and problem solvers have common traits. Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Marie Curie and Alexander Fleming, a few of the great thinkers who made discoveries that influenced/changed the world, displayed many of the following traits.

- Ability to reflect
- Observation skills
- Openness to experiment
- Keep record of research
- Impossible was not an answer
- Open minded
- Childlike sense of play
- Curious
- Voracious reader
- Read/study broadly
- Observe and collect facts
- Independent thinking
- Take breaks to reenergize
- Total absorption in subject
- Have imagination
- Have vision
- Didn't reinvent the wheel - built on present knowledge
- Look at the limitations of old inventions and devise a solution
- Modify present technologies for other uses
- Ability to make connections between two different things
- Ability to combine theoretical knowledge with practical skills
- Paid attention to detail
- Give vital ideas the opportunity to take root and grow

From the list, you will be sure to recognize these traits in yourself. All of us are capable of generating our own great ideas. Each day spend some time reflecting on life, travel to places that you have never been before, eat different foods, interact with nature, take time to learn about another culture, read diverse books and other materials. Think about what you've read! Consider problems that you know need solving and work on ways to solve them. These small steps will make your mind a more fertile ground for generating great ideas. The trick is to immerse yourself in many activities and create new experiences for yourself.

How to Apply the Model to Your Unique Situation

Stage I: Preparation (Research/Gather ideas)

1. Describe a challenge or problem that you're having. Writing down the problem makes it more concrete for you. Make sure that your problem statement is not too broadly or narrowly defined
2. Develop a set of decision criteria to judge the quality of the solutions
3. Describe the root causes (not symptoms) of the problem or challenge. Uncover the facts surrounding the problem
4. Who do you know that has experienced a similar problem? If you know someone:
    a. How did they resolve the problem?
    b. Would that solution work for you?
5. Collect all the information that you can find relating to possible solutions
    a. Look for case studies in your industry and unrelated industries
    b. Conduct research on the internet
    c. Interview subject matter experts
    d. Brainstorm with colleagues
    e. Conduct focus group interviews
6. Read all the information gathered and synthesize them
7. Extract all the relevant information by distilling the facts pertinent to your problem
8. Formulate options and test alternatives

This is the most critical stage for Inspirers and Influencers.

Stage II: Incubation (Lay the issue aside for a period of time)

1. Mull it over
2. Take a break, or work on another project
3. Let all the information sit for a while

This is an important stage for Reflectors.

Stage III: Illumination (The moment when the new solution (idea) emerges)

1. You have an aha moment
2. You see the problem in a completely different light
3. Or a solution (s) comes to you
4. You now have an opening to develop a strategy to resolve your problem

This is another important stage for Reflectors.

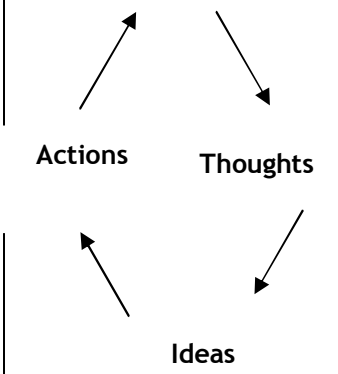
Stage IV: Verification/Implementation (Test out the idea then apply it)

1. Test the idea to see if it's a workable solution to your problem
2. Use the criteria you developed in Stage I to judge the quality of the solution
3. Refine the idea if you have to
4. Implement the solution
5. Evaluate the solution
6. If you find that the solution doesn't work, go through the process again

This is an important step for all types of problems solvers, but more so for Influencers who have to get "buy in" and Innovators who take pride in doing what's never been done.

The type of problem solver you are informs how you approach the challenges, problems and issues that you will inevitably face in your work and life. The problem solving process outlined above is solid and has been used successfully for decades. The entire process can take hours or it can take months depending on the complexity of the problem.

Table 1: Stages to (Problem Solve) Generate Your Great Ideas

	Stages		
	Problems, Challenges	• Define the problem/challenge to solve • Gather information relating to possible solutions using all data collection techniques – interviewing, observing and so on • Develop a set of criteria to judge the quality of the ideas	Preparation
	Thoughts	• Read all information gathered • Extract relevant information • Synthesize information • Process information by formulating options and testing alternatives	Preparation
		• If you cannot find a solution, take a break and stop consciously thinking about it • Let it sit for a while • Work on an unrelated task	Incubation
	Ideas	• You have an aha moment • A solution comes to you when you least expect it	Illumination
	Action(s)	• Test the idea to see if it makes sense, or if it's workable using the criteria developed in the preparation phase • Rework the idea if necessary • Implement the Idea • Evaluate the solution • Repeat the process if you need to	Verification/ Implementation

For more ideas, and if you love stories, read the responses of the 34 people profiled in *Tales of People Who Get It* http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=670937.

Be sure to check out Avil Beckford's website at http://www.ambeck.com

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