Problem Solving Strategies

Problem Solving Strategies provide consistent processes for Teams to use when developing new goals and strategies for their plans. Knowing how and where to start to solve a problem is difficult, especially when tackling complex issues. Using consistent processes for thinking through the 'problem' provides the Team with a ready-made place to start, so that goals and strategies to solve it can be systemically and strategically put in place. Problem Solving Strategies include processes for Root Cause Analysis and SWOT. Using a few of these tools, processes and strategies, everyone can become a skilled facilitator of effective meetings. A good meeting not only helps the team get work done in the context of their plan, but also makes use of the pooled talents of the group, empowers team members and creates a sense community and connection with each other.

Problem Solving 5 Whys Root Cause Analysis Process

Description

5 Whys to get to root cause

The first step in problem solving is to start with an accurate statement of the problem. Teams often start with the symptoms rather than real problem. 5 Whys is a process to look within a problem and, layer by layer, uncover the underlying root cause.

Symptoms versus root cause

When the problems that take up much of our work day are really symptoms, rather than root causes, we end up in a constant cycle of confronting the same issues over and over again – that feeling of always 'putting out fires.' It is not a productive use of time and there is little or no progress forward from occurrence to occurrence

Problem solving at the root cause level

Uncovering root cause of problems gets at the core of the reasons the issue occurs and recurs. In the context of a strategic plan, the problem situation can be resolved or improved.

Root Cause is not a process for assigning blame

Assigning blame to particular systems or groups of people does not solve problems. Problems that Teams can strategically solve through planning are those that are within the sphere of influence of the team. Often 'solvable' problems are those that are real or perceived disconnects in practices, communication or knowledge. Steer away from root cause that cites a lack of time, money or personnel. While these shortages may be true enough, they are not generally solvable by a local multi agency team.

Root cause is the first step to solving a problem

Problems require further analysis to develop strategies, baseline/progress data and timelines in order to resolve them.

Resist discussing solutions

It is premature to discuss potential solutions at this stage, although Teams will be tempted to do so. When useful ideas surface during 5 Whys discussion, write them down to consider later at an appropriate time in the planning process. If 'How' or 'What if' is being asked, instead of 'Why', the Team has likely arrived at a root cause.

Facilitator Role

Begin by asking 'What' questions

Ask 'What is the problem with _____?' and similar questions to begin discussion. Continue discussion using 'What' questions until there is a brief, clear, factually worded statement of the problem that everyone understands in the same way. Resist the temptation to begin solving the problem – root cause has yet to be unearthed.

Ask the first 'Why'

The first 'Why' question is a restatement of the problem, beginning with the word 'Why'. The Team discusses possible responses to the 'Why' question. Keep responses based in fact, grounded in something that does actually occur and not conjecture about something that might or could occur.

Ask the second 'Why'

The 'answer' to the 1st Why becomes the 2nd Why question and so on until no additional useful information results. Repeatedly asking 'why' provides opportunity to dissect the original statement, breaking it down into increasing smaller increments to arrive at the core of the problem.

Asking 5 'why' questions is only a rule of thumb

As a process, 5 Whys is flexible, and not rigid like a procedure. The Team may find only 2 or 3 Whys are needed in one case and 7 or 8 Whys for another to get to a root cause. Whether it takes 2, 5 or 9 Whys to get there, the Team 'will know' when they have hit on a logical root cause to which everyone agrees.

Sometimes, the answer to a 'Why' question is 'we don't know' or 'we're not sure'

Usually that means the Team needs to get more information or gather data in order to stick with the facts, and not rely on opinion, conjecture or perception. Make note of the data or information that is needed and return to this 5 Whys once it is gathered.

Arriving at root cause is a judgement by the Team

A cue that the 5 Whys have run their course is that the next 'Why' does not provide any additional insight or useful information. Here are some typical types of root cause:

•   flawed or absent knowledge, process or procedure

•   pervasive misinformation or misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities of one another's systems

•   a disconnect in practices or procedures across service systems

•   flawed or absent communication within or among service systems

Problem Solving SWOT Process

Description

SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. SWOT is a structured small group discussion process to identify the internal and external factors that are helpful and harmful to addressing the problems at hand.

The SWOT process provides a neutral framework for identifying the factors that are a common priority when multiple agencies are involved in implementing a strategic plan. Each agency has its singular priorities, requirements, accountability measures, procedures, etc. A plan must be built on 'common ground' doable and acceptable to all agencies involved.

The SWOT discussion offers Teams a systematic process for pondering internal and external factors that exist within and across the agencies represented. The SWOT process is indispensable to informing the direction of the next steps in designing your strategic plan.

Internal Factors

Forces or dynamics which are present within one, some or all of the agencies represented by your team

Strengths: characteristics of one, some or all of the agencies on your Team that provide an advantage for sustaining and extending multi agency planning practices in your locale.

Weaknesses: characteristics of one, some or all of the agencies on your Team that provide a disadvantage for sustaining and extending multi agency planning practices in your area.

External Factors

Forces or dynamics which emanate from the environment outside of one, some or all the agencies represented on your team

Opportunities: Elements from the environment beyond your direct influence that the team could exploit toward an advantage for building the region's capacity to collaborate across systems to support transition youth

Threats: Elements from the environment beyond your direct influence that could undermine or be a detriment to building the region's capacity to collaborate across systems to support transition youth

Facilitator Role

Organize for discussion by appointing a facilitator, and a recorder.

The facilitator keeps the discussion moving, ensures everyone gets a turn to speak and actively participates.

The recorder prepares 2 flip chart sheets. Label one 'Internal Factors'. Drawing a large 'T' on the center of the chart paper, label one side 'Strengths' and other 'Weaknesses'. Prepare the second piece of chart paper the same way, using 'External Factors', 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' as the labels.

Once discussion starts, the recorder writes each person's contribution in the appropriate labeled column on flip charts. The recorder accurately and objectively records each person's contribution, without editing or critiquing. Ask only clarifying questions if necessary. The recorder should also add their own contributions.

In each of the four discussion areas, strive for no more than 15 and no less than 10 responses. Start with the 'Strength' question then move to the Weakness question, as 'Strength' responses wind down. It is OK to go back and forth between Strengths and Weaknesses. Remember, this is a flexible discussion process. Once responses to Strengths and Weaknesses have been exhausted, then go onto discussion of the two External factor areas in the same way.

Facilitator Questions

Use these questions to get discussion started:

• What are the strengths internal to our agencies that contribute to our ability to coordinate and collaborate to provide services for transition youth?

• What are the weaknesses internal to our agencies that interfere with our ability to coordinate and collaborate to provide services for transition youth?

• What are the opportunities external to our agencies that we could take advantage of to further the ability of our agencies to coordinate and collaborate to provide services for transition youth?

• What are the threats external to our agencies that could undermine the ability of our agencies to coordinate and collaborate to provide services for transition youth?

Important Note: It is assumed that no one's system is adequately resourced. Focus instead on including points your team has a more direct ability to influence and change

Synthesizing SWOT across categories

Discover the potential and possibilities of actions and ideas by discussing how Strengths and Opportunities and Weaknesses and Threats can be matched or combined. Doing so results in novel, more powerful goals and strategies by bringing together internal and external factors. It can give rise to new partnerships. Consider how internal Strengths can mitigate external Threats. And how internal Weaknesses can be overcome by external Opportunities.