Problem solving

1) General definition of the subject

According to American Society for Quality, problem solving is "the act of defining a problem; determining the cause of the problem; identifying, prioritising and selecting alternative solutions; implementing a solution". Other definitions split the first phase in three parts: "problem finding", "fact finding" and "defining the problem". Still others propose a more neutral approach, where problem solving is identified with the process to reach a goal, for which one has to overtake obstacles.

In this tab we choose to refer to the definition propose by ASQ, that seems to be less speculative and more useful in daily working life.

2) How to adapt this subject to your organization

Problems in social economy organizations, or in welfare organizations in general, can arise in many ways: they can be problems related to the process of production and delivery of services, they can be problems related to the internal organization of work, they can be problems related to the management of resource flows, they can be problems related to the relationship between the producer of services and the beneficiary....the list of course could go on. What is important is to try to define a problem solving procedure that can be adapted from time to time to the specific situations in our organization.

3) How to increase your awareness on this subject

The ability to communicate is cited as the basis of other skills in the SWEET environment. But in order to be able to communicate effectively, it is generally necessary to learn:

a) Clarity. This means transmitting messages while minimising the risk of being misunderstood

b) Conciseness. Short explanations force us to 'get to the point' and hold the listener's attention

c) Correctness. Communication should use language that is as error-free as possible.

d) Concreteness. The message should be connected to the reality to which it refers, and not conveyed in an abstract manner.

e) Consistency. The parts of the communication respect a logical flow, so that the listener can easily connect the parts.

f) Completeness. Leave no useful information out of the communication.

g) Politeness. Communication is polite with respect to its audience.

(h) Inclusiveness. Communication should eschew the use of stereotypes or expressions that may be deemed offensive or exclusionary.

4) What you could do (examples)

Based on the steps outlined above, possible action strategies can be proposed.

0. Verify that the problem actually exists. As we mentioned, the definition of what constitutes a problem is not straightforward, as anything that stands between me and my goal can be seen as a problem. However, in the operation of a business, we will only consider those situations that prevent the achievement of a goal according to a previously used or predetermined framework. So the first thing to do is:
- Ask whether there is a problem. It may seem trivial, but this involves questioning the situation according to a

critical thinking model: it is not enough for someone to say there is a problem to assert that the problem actually exists.
- Ask whether what we call a "problem" is a persistent issue, meaning it recurs every time we execute a procedure (i.e., a series of actions). If the answer is yes, then we can proceed!

1. Identification of the problem.
a. Ask as many people as possible involved in the process to articulate what the problem is.
b. Prepare a brief report of the responses obtained from each person.
c. Develop a concise summary of the problem (preferably in one sentence).
d. Compare the definition with all the people involved in the process (including those who could not articulate the problem).

2. Goal setting versus problem solving.
a. Define whether the problem can actually be solved.
b. Determine if the problem can be solved even partially: the part sufficient to achieve our goal.
c. Develop a proposal for selecting a goal (or multiple possible alternative goals).
d. Propose the goal to co-workers.
e. Choose a goal.

3. Identify and explore possible solutions.
a. Identify possible solutions through communication and exchange with co-workers and by analyzing solutions identified by others in similar situations.
b. Draft a summary outline of possible solutions.
c. Categorize possible solutions according to their characteristics:
i. The safety of the solution
ii. The affordability
iii. The impact on people involved in the process
iv. The fairness
v. The workability
d. Propose the solution outline to co-workers.
e. Choose the "best" solution.

4. Implement the chosen solution:
a. Develop an implementation plan.
b. Execute the implementation plan of the solution, with as few deviations as possible!

5. Monitor (and adjust) the implementation:
a. Define a timeframe to allow the solution to take effect.
b. Ask whether it is working.
c. If it is not working: restart the process by seeking another solution (or implementing one of those not chosen initially).
d. Before implementing an alternative solution, try to draw lessons from the solution that did not work!

5) Exercises for the evaluation

How to assess whether your problem solving skills are improving? Try gathering a group of at least 3 of your colleagues, with whom you work closely and on common issues. Identify with them a problem considered as "minor": f.i. the coffee machine in the lobby makes a very bad coffee. Try applying the passages for problem solving to find a solution. Apply the solution. Test your coffee! (and collect the advise of your co-workers…)

6) Resources

https://www.demetraformazione.it/compete-competences-for-effective-labour-market-entry/
https://www.radford.edu/content/cobe/innovation-analytics/analytics/career-prep/report-e.html
https://louisville.edu/ideastoaction/about/criticalthinking/what
https://asq.org/quality-resources/problem-solving
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_solving