

# Recognizing & Interrupting The Chain of Events that Leads to a Crisis

**CDE #22398**

**BY MARK BOUDREAU**

**P**roblems, problems, problems! *Issues, difficulties, occurrences, set-backs,* any way you describe it, it's still a "problem." But what exactly is a problem? Are employee matters problems? Are equipment malfunctions problems? American Heritage Dictionary defines a *problem* as:

1. A question to be considered, solved or answered;
2. A situation, matter or person that

presents perplexity or difficulty; or  
3. A misgiving, objection or complaint.

We all encounter things that happen unexpectedly. If that thing is good, then we define it as luck; however, if it is more on the negative side of the scale, we call it a problem. Understanding exactly what problems are helps us to resolve them in an efficient and predefined manner. To understand problem solving, you first must understand:

- Exactly what problems are;
- How problems get started and what causes them to escalate; and
- How problems come to your attention.

Finding the origin of any problem makes it easier to decide your best course of action. In this article, we look at *problems* and see how they start, which will better prepare us to properly solve them when they occur. It's important to be able to identify problems early, because the longer a problem exists, the more difficult it is to solve. It's also important to prioritize problems in order of importance, so you can solve the most important and pressing problems first. Before we begin solving problems, we must be able to:

- Describe the chain of events that turn into a problem (i.e., how problems start); and
- Prioritize identified problems in order of importance.

### CHAIN OF EVENTS

Problems don't just happen. They occur because one or more events lead to another and another and so on, until eventually it gets noticed by someone and is labeled a "problem." Often, defining the problem will reveal one or more obvious solutions. However, more difficult problems require more work and research to find ultimate solutions.

The first, or initial, event is something that occurs out of the ordinary. It may be something trivial, such as a malfunctioning indicator light on a dispatcher's console or perhaps an employee who arrives late one day for a shift. In itself, the event may not be significant, but it's the beginning of what may eventually become a problem.

The secondary event(s) occurs when something interrupts or alters the normal flow of work. If our flashing console light stops flashing, we may check another source to see if the equipment is actually

malfunctioning (e.g., listen to the radio to see if the dispatch is going over the airway). An incident of an employee who is late for a shift—but not so late that it's noticed—may not appear to be significant, but the lateness of the employee will be noticed very quickly by the person who was supposed to be relieved.

The final event occurs when something stops a process or creates a situation that's no longer tolerable. This is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. At this point, almost everyone recognizes that a problem exists. As a supervisor, you may not be the first to know about the problem, but you'll be the last because those who are aware will expect and demand a solution.

attempt makeshift repairs to continue with business, but a total rebuild of the structure may prove necessary. All too often, the time and resources to rebuild are non-existent. You then attempt to patch the roof and cover the furniture with plastic in an effort to move ahead.

A *planner* is a person who takes into consideration or anticipates the potential for a problem before it reaches even the initial event stage, or someone who can identify a problem brewing while it's still in the initial event stage. Planners take subtle actions that minimize the effects of the initial event, then monitor the results to see how they affect the remainder of the operation. Planners use training, education

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*Discussion point:* When has this happened to you? Can you think of an example of a problem that started from a small, almost insignificant event, then escalated into a large problem?

### PLANNERS VS. FIREFIGHTERS

If a problem is left alone, it's destined to reach the final event stage. Imagine a problem being a lit candle. Eventually the candle will burn down. If it's not extinguished or controlled, the candle can burn the surface of whatever it sits upon and a large fire can result from what was a small flame. When a problem gets to the final event stage, it has become that large fire. Now, you need to call out the firefighters to put out the fire and control the damage. When water is poured on the fire, what wasn't burned gets damaged. You may

and experience to notice little things and realize their implications. A burned-out console light may not be cause for alarm, but it can set off a chain of events that can lead to a large problem. The employee who reports to work late should be corrected promptly; isolating this one occurrence may prevent it from becoming a bigger issue.

Are you a firefighter or a planner?

### SOLVING THE PROBLEM

The first step to properly solving any problem is to notice the little things that may lead to a problem. Have you ever noticed that some supervisors never have any problems on their shift? Perhaps they identify and resolve potential problems before they exist.

Foreseeing the initial event, or even the

## THE ANATOMY OF A PROBLEM

secondary event, and taking appropriate mitigating action is the key to effective problem solving. This is a really easy statement to make; however, in the real world, attempting to foresee all the potential events that may cause a problem, then taking appropriate actions, is difficult—perhaps impossible. There are so many events that take place each day. Which will become a problem, and which will not? How do you know which events are significant and which should be of no concern? Here are a few tips:

- **Equipment doesn't fix itself.**

An intermittent problem is simply a problem that shows its symptoms on an irregular time schedule. Take care of equipment maintenance problems promptly, and document actions taken.

- **Little difficulties with employees don't ever go away.**

Like children, some employees learn rather quickly how to hide their mistakes to keep you (the “parent”) from taking unpleasant actions. Like parents do, supervisors must seek the truth, reward those who confess before being caught and punish those who attempt not to be caught. Unlike a parent, document the occurrence and action taken.

- **Letting someone else solve a problem that you should solve yourself rarely works to your advantage.** It's better to ask for help to solve a problem or work with someone else to solve a problem. Remember to document the occurrence and the solution, and note both parties' collaborative efforts.

Sometimes the best solution is a logical solution. Sometimes the best solution seems more outrageous than the problem.

### PRIORITIZING PROBLEMS

Sometimes we're inundated with so many problems that we find ourselves losing control. It's because of this that we must prioritize the problem-solving processes so that we can make the most out of our time and resources. *Solve the important problems first.*

One tried-and-true method of prioritization is to make a list of all the issues you

must deal with. Your list may include both long-term and short-term items in need of addressing. Most of us have done this before but find ourselves unable to accomplish much due to newly developing problems that we feel need immediate attention. And, thus, our list gets longer, and we revert to *firefighter* mode. Sound familiar?

The pragmatic approach to prioritization involves categorizing each problem/issue in order of importance. This order will dictate the speed with which a problem needs to be addressed.

It's human nature to list our problems and address the easy ones first. Doing so gives us a feeling of accomplishment at the end of the day when we see that we were able to strike through seven problems from our list, even though four new problems were added. Where we run into trouble is when we discover that the seven “problems” we solved weren't really problems, just minor issues. Then we look at our list and see that the big, unpleasant problems are still there. We may have actually thwarted a potential big problem, but, nonetheless, the big ones just got bigger.

The pragmatic approach to prioritization involves the following criteria:

1. Are there any problems that will or potentially will cause harm to people if left unattended? *If so, these problems/issues need to be listed first.*
2. Are there any problems that may/will cause severe damage to equipment if left unattended? *If so, list these next.*
3. Are there any problems that involve people from outside the organization? *List these next.*
4. Are there any problems that involve people from inside the organization? *List these next.*
5. Are there any signs that this event may have spawned another event(s), which may indicate that this was an initial event? *List these next.*
6. Are there any signs that this event was caused by or was the result of another event that is already listed or not listed? (Is this a secondary event?) *List these last.*

Again, the key to prioritization is to put out the big, or potentially big, fires, then work on the secondary and initial events.

### TIME MANAGEMENT

Your employees, especially line-level staff, are essential to this process. A supervisor cannot know every initial event or every secondary event that occurs. Those who operate the equipment and take care of the calls are the ones who see the operational events that start problems. They hear initial complaints from callers, see the likelihood for potential equipment failures and work through the problems that do occur. They are your eyes and ears in the comm center and around your facility.

Train your people to provide you/your supervisory staff with the input necessary to discover and, more importantly, report the little things. All events must be monitored after attention has been given to them to ensure that the progress (solution) is positive. But you must continue to fight fires while taking care of the little issues. Eventually, the little problems will be detected, discovered and resolved, and the big things (fires) will be extinguished, too. When they say, “He/she never seems to have any problems on their shift,” they'll be talking about you!

The use of quality assurance (QA) memoranda assist in eliminating potential problems before they surface. QA memos are used on those occasions when something is found after the fact and the occurrence is determined closed and not an initial or secondary event. For example, a call review reveals that a calltaker omitted the use of proper verbiage when answering an emergency line and disconnected before the caller at the end of the call. The call itself was good, but the issuance of a QA memo to the calltaker reminds the calltaker to follow proper procedure to prevent a potential problem.

If a problem persists after the issuance of a QA memo, it should be followed by a written warning and, in some cases, suspension and termination. Your policy manual should allow for these steps to be taken and should specify that, depending on the severity of the action, any or all steps can be eliminated and immediate termination may result.

### SOLVE THE PROBLEM NOW

Sometimes you should wait to take action, and other times you must act promptly to solve immediate problems, such as when a life-threatening situation exists, an on-the-spot policy decision needs to be made or

the effects of a series of actual or potential events need to be mitigated. Solutions must be fast, decisive and correct. How do we solve problems quickly, and what must happen after that?

- Initiate effective, immediate interventions to problems when they occur.
- Describe the procedures that are used to refer problems and remedies up and down the chain of command.

Management places supervisors in key areas of the department to intervene when problems arise and to refer recurring problems to management for possible actions. The best supervisors are those who can intervene when problems occur and solve the problem quickly within management guidelines.

The first step to effective intervention is to recognize the problem. Recognition implies that the supervisor is aware of their surroundings and technically and operationally sophisticated. It also implies that the supervisor has enough experience to see potential problems and react to them. This experience is normally gained through trial and error after years on the job.

Recognizing and defining a problem can lead to possible solutions. *One approach:* Develop a problem definition statement that is clear, concise and understandable. For example, a problem definition statement may be: "The average time from call receipt to call dispatch has increased from 45 seconds to 82 seconds over the past six months." This statement is clear and concise. It seems to be taking longer to dispatch a call now than it took six months ago. This is a problem!

Next, develop a clear, concise and measurable goal statement that defines where you want to be when the solution is implemented. Continuing the example, the goal statement may be: "The average time from call receipt to call dispatch will be less than

50 seconds six months from now, and stay at or below that figure for six additional months." With this statement, you are not only setting your goal, but you are also prescribing a standard that must be held for an additional six months. It is very measurable and obviously attainable.

After a problem is recognized, the next step is to quickly look at all possible reasons the problem occurred. Here, you're looking for the initial and secondary events. Many supervisors skip or forget this step and fail to look at *why* something happens. Often, the answer to the why question will provide direction to the possible solutions.

Next, see if possible solutions pop out at you. Your training, education and experience may help you decide on the appropriate course of action immediately. Finding out why can help you to make the appropriate and immediate decisions based on the root of the problem, rather than putting a Band-Aid solution on the symptoms.

The solutions are then quickly judged by eliminating those that are not feasible, not practical or against policy. Obviously, it's vital that the supervisor have a solid working knowledge of policy, procedure and, in some cases, law. Follow these guidelines:

- Eliminate those solutions that are against the law or violate agency policy and procedure.
- Eliminate those that are obviously (or intuitively) not feasible.
- Eliminate those solutions that are not in the best interest of the parties involved.

You should now be down to one or two solutions. If you're down to only one solution, your action decision has been made. If there's more than one solution left, you follow similar guidelines to the above, but instead of eliminating solutions, make *quality* decisions about them:

- Which potential solution is in the best interest of all involved?
- Which is the most feasible option (easiest to do)?
- Given the circumstances, which will work best now?

The next step is to initiate your immediate action solution. Action must be quick and decisive, with no perceived hesitation. You must make everyone involved aware of your decision, and make certain that everyone involved understands the solution. You must also monitor the imple-

mentation of the solution (the aftereffects) to ensure that everyone is in compliance with the decision.

After final review, you may find it necessary to refer the situation to management for changes or adjustment in policy and procedure, disciplinary actions, equipment repair or replacement or updated/ additional training. The supervisor may also simply wish to raise an issue that has previously not been addressed.

The referral can take several forms. A memo or e-mail up the chain of command or perhaps a presentation or training session can be provided to certain staff members. Sometimes, an informal discussion with your supervisor will yield results, but remember to always follow up in writing. To facilitate a formal written referral, the following guidelines should be used:

- Put your thoughts in writing in memorandum format. Ideas in writing always convey a feeling of commitment.
- Schedule a time with your supervisor to discuss your observations and solutions, rather than simply leaving a copy in a mailbox. This meeting should take place as soon after the incident as possible.
- Use the meeting to present your memo and your ideas.
- Ask your supervisor what the next steps should be.

One of the biggest mistakes that supervisors make is to *not* refer problems. If the problems are never referred, they will never be solved and recurrences are bound to happen. When these recurrences happen, the supervisor can take full credit for *not* solving the problem.

## EVALUATE RESULTS

The last step in solving a problem is to follow up on the solution. You have to check on your solution to determine if it was the best solution available (i.e., if it worked). This step of quality control adds to your experience. It also allows you and others to review the situation and all possible solutions in the clarity and objectiveness offered by time. **||PSC||**

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## ▶ 6 STEPS TO SOLVE ANY PROBLEM

1. Define the problem.
2. Analyze potential causes.
3. Identify possible solutions.
4. Select the best solution.
5. Develop an implementation plan.
6. Implement the solution, and evaluate progress.

# ▶ CDE #22398 EXAM: THE ANATOMY OF A PROBLEM ~

1. **People who go from one serious, immediate problem to another are characterized as:**
  - a. Planners
  - b. Plan-fighters
  - c. Firefighters
  - d. Eventualists
2. **The final event is the stage in a problem:**
  - a. That contains the root of the problem, finally becoming obvious.
  - b. That stops a process or creates an intolerable situation, needing immediate attention.
  - c. That interrupts the flow of work and causes mild concern on the part of the worker, but may not be noticed by the supervisor.
  - d. That, when it occurs, points out a problem to the public.
3. **The first priority problem to solve is one that:**
  - a. May cause harm to people.
  - b. May cause harm to the agency's reputation.
  - c. Involves the public or people outside of the organization.
  - d. Involves command staff of another agency.
4. **Immediate problem solving is necessary because:**
  - a. Every problem has a unique solution.
  - b. Problems are a function of management, and management pushes problems to those who are in line positions.
  - c. No one else cares about solving problems.
  - d. Management places supervisors in key areas to immediately intervene when problems arise.
5. **The first step in immediate intervention in problems is to:**
  - a. Recognize that the problem exists.
  - b. Scold those who caused the problem.
  - c. Order solutions to be implemented immediately.
  - d. Institute a process of causal identification and sorting.
6. **It's important to be decisive when implementing an immediate solution because:**
  - a. You must instill confidence in your decision to those who will implement it.
  - b. Once a solution is decided, there is no turning back.
  - c. It's standard procedure to order solutions firmly and decisively in crisis situations.
  - d. The public expects it.
7. **After an immediate solution has been ordered and executed, the last step may be to:**
  - a. Provide operational feedback to those who tried to understand the problem.
  - b. Refer the solution to other shifts for immediate implementation, as if ordered by the command staff.
  - c. Provide a summary of your actions to your supervisor and the media, utilizing a media release.
  - d. Refer the problem and solution up through the chain of command for possible policy and procedure changes, etc.
8. **Long-term problem solving processes are necessary so that:**
  - a. Many people can be involved in the process, spreading around the blame for the problem.
  - b. The most creative and effective solutions can be determined and implemented.
  - c. Everyone in the command staff can have a hand in the process.
  - d. No one person can take credit for a particularly creative solution.
9. **A problem definition statement and a goal statement are important because:**
  - a. They define who caused the problem and what the expected solution may be.
  - b. They force people to talk about the problem in subjective terms.
  - c. They describe the problem and the expected end result of the solution.
  - d. They set the tone for implementation of the results of the final evaluation.
10. **Evaluation is important in long-term problem solving because:**
  - a. It provides a look at the effectiveness and applicability of the solution.
  - b. It provides verification that the group was correct in all of its assumptions.
  - c. It ensures that the problem was properly defined, regardless of the effectiveness of the solution.
  - d. It is required by law.

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