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Equip Your Employees to Problem Solve

A few years ago, I visited a local manufacturing company. As I sat in the president's office, two of his employees leaned in his doorway and said, "Shane, we have a problem."

I observed as he methodically guided his employees through their own thought process.

He asked, "What's going on?" Then, "What contributed to this?" Then, "What else?"

Upon hearing their explanation, he went on, "What are your options?" Wanting them to dig below the surface of their initial reaction, he went on with a few more, "What else?" He gave them time to think.

This situation needed an immediate answer. So, he went on, "What option do you like best and why?"

During further discussion, he also asked about involvement of others, implications, etc.

Finally, he asked, "What happens now, and what do you need from me?"

They shared their next steps, said they were good and thanked Shane for his support.

One of the most important tools you can have—for both yourself and your employees—is a process to solve problems. Shane used a process to guide the discussion. His process is similar to the one we teach, called CIDER. I'll share it here:

Clarify the problem. Focus on understanding the real problem completely, rather than focusing simply on symptoms. Define the desired state.

Identify ideas and possibilities. Delay the selection of solutions by actively seeking other ideas, possibilities, and alternatives to consider. This is the brainstorming step.

Decide on actions. Weigh the ideas that have been generated, along with their implications and potential impact on others. Decide on what to try.

Execute the plan. Put the decisions and actions into play.

Review and evaluate outcomes. Gauge the results of the actions taken and their effectiveness at bringing about the desired state. Return to earlier steps as necessary.

Reflecting back to Shane's conversation, it was fulfilling to see the engagement of his employees and the sense of pride they felt by being asked, not told. Shane likely had a ready answer of some kind, and—based upon his experience with these types of situations—could have directed his employees what to do.

How valuable, in contrast, to equip them with this process so next time they can do this thinking for themselves.

Aleta Norris provides an ongoing column on developing better leadership skills. She is a leadership expert and Principal at Living as a Leader LLC.

