Dealing with problems and the decision-making process

This Topic guide vitally helps you identify decision-making and problem-solving strategies for planning your own work, the importance of consistent communication and methods to define performance measurement criteria.
1 Common workplace problems

Problems can often happen in workplaces, and common sense is usually the best tool. The sooner an issue is dealt with, and the more correctly a process is followed, the less likely it is that outside assistance will be required. Employers should have good processes and procedures for dealing with issues, and should make sure that employees are aware of these. Everyone in the workplace should understand what is expected of them.

Even with the most careful planning process, problems can occur, and some of them may be of your own making.

Common problems that occur within PR include undesired results despite following plans, such as:

- poor attendance at an event you have organised
- complaints from clients
- a crisis arising that is outside of your control – for example, a bad news story about your client breaks on the day of a big launch, taking attention away from the product
- negative publicity elsewhere in the media, or a direct competitor stealing the limelight
- delays with deadlines created by you or your supplier.

In addition, PR can involve unforeseen complications that may have nothing to do with your client, but can still affect the impact of your work, such as:

- unforeseen disruptions caused by emergencies
- travel chaos and the consequences of this
- IT or equipment failure
- problems or issues with the event venue
- contractor failure, where something supplied is faulty or is not available on time.

Communication problems, poor performance and errors

Unfortunately, there will be times when problems are down to human error. More often than not, these issues boil down to one or more of the following:

- communication failure, when an important message does not get through to the intended recipient
- poor performance – for example, a rushed piece of work is not up to the required quality
- errors, which can be caused by any of the above, but may also be caused by working in a hurry or not being sufficiently thorough.

When one of these problems occurs, it is important to take action. If you work within an agency, dealing with a problem proactively can be the difference between keeping and losing a client. If you work in an in-house PR department, it can mean the difference between keeping and losing customers.

The first thing to do is identify the problem and work out what needs to be done to correct it. Once you have a clear plan of action to resolve the problem, this plan should be communicated so that everyone involved has confidence that the problem is being managed.
Once the issue is resolved, take stock and identify why the problem occurred. Understanding this will help you to work out how to prevent the problem from happening again.

### 2 Dealing with problems

There are several stages to dealing with problems. The first of these stages is before the problem has occurred. It is vital that you understand the performance expectations placed on you and the goals that the project aims to achieve. Once you understand these, you will be able to identify where problems may affect one or both of these factors.

When you have identified the problem, you need to plan how you will deal with it. To do this effectively, you should use the following steps.

1. Identify the facts of the problem. What is the issue? What went wrong? Why did it happen? What are the consequences, and how important is this issue?

2. Identify the outcomes and goals in resolving the problem. The primary outcome is likely to be to realign the project so that it is like the problem never occurred. However, there are likely to be related goals such as maintaining the client’s confidence in you.

3. Identify the deadlines and priorities. Resolving problems will often add extra tasks, and may even have reopened tasks you thought had been completed. Refocus your project plan to take this into account.

4. Identify the processes and company procedures that need to be followed. How do these affect the relationship with clients? Are any of the decisions involved in resolving the problem beyond your authority?

5. Identify the resources needed to resolve the problem. If the problem is relatively straightforward, you may be able to handle it on your own. However, if it is more complex, you may need help. Do not be afraid to ask for help and support if you need it.

6. Put the plan into action. Make sure you communicate the action you are taking clearly and give regular updates, as this will help your colleagues and your client see how you are resolving the issue.

#### Preventing future problems

The best way to deal with problems is to take responsibility or ownership of them. This does not necessarily mean that you were the cause. However, if you did contribute to the problem, it is important to acknowledge your role in order to use this as a learning experience.

When you notice a problem, it is best to act in a timely fashion. This does not mean panicking and making rushed decisions, but it also does not mean ignoring the issue and hoping that it resolves itself. Be proactive and deal with the problem before it can get worse.
Sometimes problems are a result of a lack of experience. Remember to ask questions of more experienced colleagues and ask for feedback on your performance. They will have valuable experience of pre-empting problems gained over the years and can offer you tips and tricks to avoid the same problems recurring.

The most important lesson you can learn from problems is identifying the factors that contributed to the problem. Was enough time allocated to specific tasks? Did the project have enough resources? If you can identify when these are likely to be issues, you can help to prevent future problems.

**How and when to refer problems**

You will not always be able to resolve problems on your own. Even though you may be keen to impress your manager with your ability to make and carry through difficult decisions, it is always best to keep them informed as to what you are planning. It is very important at this stage of your career not to exceed your authority and not to let your enthusiasm get you into trouble.

The problem may exceed your authority, it may demand more than your experience and current level of ability or it may require specific training. Recognising when you alone cannot deal with a problem is as important as recognising the problem itself.

When seeking the help of colleagues to resolve a problem, it is important that you identify:

- the severity of the problem – is this to prevent a crisis with a key customer or to avoid missing critical deadlines, or is it less serious?
- who should be involved in resolving the problem – make sure you approach the right colleagues and contacts, rather than asking anyone you can think of.

Even if you feel panicked, you need to explain the issue as calmly as possible to your colleagues. Make sure your communication is concise and clear. It should be based on facts and policy (if appropriate), and you need to suggest solutions and projected outcomes rather than simply presenting the problem.

**Chain of command**

It is important not to exceed your authority. Important decisions are made at higher levels in a company based on company strategy, so it is important to balance this with your personal aims.

The chain of command is a term used to refer to the line of authority in a business. This describes the levels from the most senior person to the most junior person in the same organisation.

On a PR project, the decision-making process is often shared within the team, but the most senior person takes the final decision on the strategy. This helps to draw on everyone’s experience. However, these decisions take longer than smaller decisions that can be made by individuals, so it is important to consider the impact of timing.
In order to complete the assessment for this unit, you will need to demonstrate your understanding of the types of problem that may occur in your workplace and how you could deal with them. To prepare for this part of your assessment, address the following questions.

1. Describe the types of problem that might occur with your work.
2. Explain how you would deal with these problems.
3. Explain how and when you would refer problems to relevant colleagues.

3 The decision-making process

Problem solving and decision making are important skills for PR and for life. Problem solving often involves decision making. There are processes and techniques to improve decision making and the quality of decisions. Decision making is more natural to certain personalities, so these people should focus more on improving the quality of their decisions.

People who are less natural decision makers are often able to make quality assessments, but then need to be more decisive in acting upon the assessments made. Problem solving and decision making are closely linked, and each requires creativity in identifying and developing options, for which the brainstorming technique is particularly useful.

Some useful methods for effective decision making and problem solving are given below.

1. **Problem identification**: what is the problem? What is the outcome that you want to achieve by resolving this problem? Is the problem complex? How does it rank alongside your other priorities? Are there any risks?
2. **Collect key data**: gather all the facts and understand their causes. Which stakeholders are involved? What is the company or project hierarchy with relation to this problem? Is there a deadline? What resources and budget do you have available?
3. **Initiation**: think about or brainstorm possible ideas, options, alternatives and solutions.
4. **Evaluation**: consider and compare the pros and cons of each option. Consult with your Account Manager if necessary – it probably will be.
5. **Implementation**: select the best option – avoid vagueness or an unsatisfactory compromise.
6. **Inform**: explain your decision to those involved and affected, and follow up to ensure proper and effective implementation.
Pros and cons decision-making method

Another simple process for decision making is the pros and cons list. This method also applies to all sorts of problem solving where issues and implications need to be understood and a decision has to be made.

- First you will need a separate sheet for each identified option. On each sheet write clearly the option concerned, and then beneath it the headings ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ (or ‘advantages’ and ‘disadvantages’, or ‘for’ and ‘against’).
- Then write down as many effects and implications of the particular option that you (and others if appropriate) can think of, placing each in the relevant column.
- If helpful, ‘weight’ each factor by giving it a score out of, e.g. five points (where five is extremely significant, and one is of minor significance).
- When you have listed all the points you can think of for the option concerned, compare the number or total score of the items between the two columns.
- This will provide a reflection and indication as to the overall attractiveness and benefit of the option concerned. If you have scored each item you will have two total scores: one each for pros and cons. The bigger the difference between the total pros and total cons, the more attractive the option is.
- If you have a number of options and have completed a sheet for each option, compare the attractiveness (point difference between pros and cons) for each option. The one with the biggest positive difference is the most attractive option.

You will find that writing things down in this way will help you to see things more clearly, and become more objective and detached. This will help you to make clearer decisions.

Pros and cons weighted decision-making template – example

The example on page 7 weighs the pros and cons of changing from an existing supplier to a new supplier.

The weighted pros and cons are purely examples. Our decision-making criteria depend on our own personal situations and preferences. Your criteria and weighting will also change according to time, situation and probably your mood.

Use whatever scoring method you want to. You can score each item up to 10 (as used below), 20 or 100 – whatever makes sense to you personally. Or you can use an ‘A/B/C’ or three-star scoring method. It is important to use what works best for you.
In the example shown in Table 1.5.1, there seems to be a clear overall (and measurable) advantage in the decision to go ahead and change supplier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros (for or advantages)</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Cons (against or disadvantages)</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower costs</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Current supplier does OK</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of smaller units</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>They have worked hard to build relationship</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local outlet</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No problems in the past</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green business</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>High price, high volume</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership approach</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Change can be very stressful</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’ll be really exciting</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 6 pros</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total 5 cons</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that with this decision-making method it is even possible to include ‘intangible’ emotional issues in the pros and cons comparison – for example, ‘It’ll be really exciting’ and ‘Change can be very stressful’.

A decision-making list of pros and cons helps remove the emotion which blocks clear thinking and decision making. It enables objectivity and measurement, rather than allowing you to react from instinct or avoid the issue altogether. Objective measurement helps in making a confident decision.

The total weighted scores are the main deciding factor rather than the total number of pros and cons. However, there is not a scientific ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to consider the total number of pros and cons compared with the total weighted scores.

If the weighted scores are indicating a decision that makes you feel uncomfortable, then check your weightings, and also check that you have not missed out any factors on either side of the table. If you leave the weightings and factors unchanged it may be that a difficult path is the best one to take.

Seeking feedback or input from a trusted neutral friend can be helpful in confirming your factors and their scores.

**Portfolio activity**

In order to complete the assessment for this unit, you will need to demonstrate your understanding of how to use the decision-making process. To prepare for this part of your assessment, address the following questions.

1. Explain the key stages in the decision-making process.
2. Explain why it is important to know the limits of your authority when making decisions and to not exceed those limits. What kind of decision would you need to refer to a manager?
Unit 1: Principles of personal responsibilities and how to develop and evaluate own performance at work

1.5: Dealing with problems and the decision-making process

Jacob gained three A levels and went on to study Communications at university. He was looking forward to a graduate job in PR. Unfortunately university was not for him so he left to work in an employment law practice as an office junior – the job seemed secure but it was a world away from what he really wanted to do.

Jacob left after a year and went to work for a small marketing company as their marketing communications executive. (Although he had no relevant experience, he wrote an interesting application letter and performed well at interview so the managing director gave him his first break in a communications job.) He threw himself into the work – promoting events, writing press releases, meeting journalists and working with the design team on marketing material. The company was a Social Enterprise working with not-for-profit clients. However, Jacob’s job was made redundant when the recession hit.

He then applied for a job as a communications officer with a national children’s charity and, with his experience and good performance at interview, he was accepted.

Jacob now works in the communications team producing positive PR for the charity. He also writes for the in-house newsletter and, with his experience of working to tight deadlines and his knowledge of employment issues, he has recently been involved in writing a column offering guidance to the branches of the charity which employ volunteers.

‘I couldn’t be happier working in the not-for-profit sector – it’s as fast paced as working in a normal PR agency with the added advantage that you really feel you’re doing something worthwhile! I’m pleased to say my previous jobs have helped enormously and I am able to put the knowledge I gained to good use.’

Further reading
Websites
Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS): www.acas.org.uk
Chartered Institute of Public Relations: www.cipr.co.uk
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB): www.citizensadvice.org.uk
Directgov: www.direct.gov.uk
Gantt Chart (Project management): www.ganttchart.com
National Careers Service (Skills Health Check): https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/tools/skillshealthcheck
Pareto Principle (Time management theory): www.projectsmart.co.uk/pareto-principle.html
Trades Union Congress: www.tuc.org.uk
Books
Unit 1: Principles of personal responsibilities and how to develop and evaluate own performance at work

About the author of Topic guides 1.1 to 1.5

Bill Moir coaches individuals to achieve full potential in their chosen field of work and has also implemented tactical learning and development programmes to assist PR organisations achieve their goals through their people.

As a learning and development specialist his work is underpinned by best practice and relevant theory gained from many years experience within various sectors including PR.

His writing and delivery is therefore informed by the expertise of working cross-culturally with an impressive portfolio of organisations. Originally an Education graduate Bill has recently been awarded a Doctorate in the field of Human Relations.

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