Ask the Experts!

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Question: **Why should I be interested in Structured Problem Solving for myself and my staff?**

My Answer: First, a little personal history. In my prior experience as a project engineer, department and division manager, and ultimately company president, I found the route to advancement was primarily technical competence. The person with the best skills and productivity would generally be picked to move ahead and supervise others. This makes sense, as that individual would typically have the highest product knowledge and be able to get the job done. Certainly people skills come into play for obvious reasons.

What was lacking? We had the technical ability and often additional management training. For me, it was seminars and masters programs in business and finance. And of course trial and error. But no one showed me how to methodically organize and tackle challenges and problems. Lucky ones had a gut instinct to collect some information and not jump in too fast. The real heroes, however, were those who could dive in and instantly make adjustments and changes and come up with a quick fix. We cherish those as the "firefighters", who don't wait and think, but just act.

This may serve us well at times, but often we face the same problem a little later or end up churning and not getting anywhere. But there is a lot of action. As people move up through an organization, less time can be spent on personally solving problems, and more time goes towards directing others to do it, and churning becomes wasteful and frustrating.

How does Structured Problem Solving fit in? One skill we're never taught in school or in training is how to organize and methodically approach problems. Sure, we talk about "Ready, Fire, Aim", and how we should think first, but never dig into that in depth. VMEC has put together a workshop which guides us through the right processes. Based on Dr. W. Edwards Deming's Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle and the single page summary (an" A3", named after the size of the paper that has traditionally been used), Structured Problem Solving teaches us to slow down a little bit at the front end to really get at the actual problem and to make sure we solved it, or at least learned from the PDCA cycle, so we'll get closer to a solution the next time.

I've found a few fun techniques I can use from this workshop; rather than rely solely on traditional brainstorming and flip charts, and sometimes a change to fishbones, mind mapping and even failure mode matrices can be good tools. It's a nice mix for any leader or manager to have in their skill set. It's worth giving it a try for yourself and those you call upon to address problems beyond the "just do it!" category.

Hope to see you at the next VMEC workshop!