

Lean Focus



10 Problem Solving Mistakes That Kill Companies

“Mistakes are always forgivable, if one has the courage to admit them.” – Bruce Lee

Martial arts greats, such as Bruce Lee, are not usually quoted in the same context as organizational problem solving. It is not too far a stretch, however, to say that the best organizations are the ones that also solve their problems the best – not the organizations that have no problems. Besides, there is simply no such thing as an organization without some degree of problems. Benjamin Franklin might have even done better by adding that the only sure things in life, besides death and taxes, are problems. Thus, it is especially important for organizations to learn how to solve their problems without making what I call the 10 Problem Solving Mistakes That Kill Companies. Based on over 20 years of problem-solving experience for organizations both large and small, I have seen how these 10 mistakes seriously impair an organization’s abilities to solve their problems effectively, and can ultimately prove deadly to a company’s long-term survival:

1. **Determining Relevance** – Many times, organizational leaders fail to determine the relevance of their problem in the grand scheme of their organization’s overall objective(s). Organizational stakeholders may devote unnecessary time and resources to solving a problem that is relatively trivial in the larger scope of an organization’s targeted goal. On the other hand, organizations may devote little or no time to solving a large problem that demands a closer look, and possibly requires an even more immediate solution.

2. **Defining the Problem** – Unfortunately, I have seen many organizations try to solve a problem without first accurately defining the problem. Like a physician administering treatment without an accurate diagnosis, such an approach also creates an air of nebulosity surrounding the problem. Of course, this results in applying the wrong countermeasure to the ill-defined problem. A root cause analysis is in order. Indeed, some organizations may experience distress when they cannot readily find a problem to solve! Perhaps Steve Jobs said it best: “If you define the problem correctly, you almost have the solution.”
3. **Breaking Down the GAP** – A failure to break down the GAP is when organizations do not understand the impact various contributors have in their part of the problem. For instance, the 80/20 rule can help you identify systemic issues which can be solved by effective countermeasures. Also called the Pareto Principle, the 80/20 rule is a huge timesaver insofar as it states that nearly 80% of a problem’s effects originate from only 20% of its causes. More precisely, a Pareto chart helps organizations understand the aggregate causes of given problems – helping them close the GAP. You will find that breaking down the GAP is integral to avoiding deadly mistakes which may infect the organization from the inside out.
4. **Analyzing Without Insight** – While colorful charts and graphs look impressive, they may not hold the keys to effective problem solving. Sometimes, organizations will go to extraordinary lengths to produce graphic representations which are more aligned with the purpose of self-service than arriving at countermeasures based on logical, insightful problem solving. Moreover, such “mental masturbation” leads problem solvers to over-rely on their methods of presentation as opposed to their powers of deduction.
5. **Jumping Ahead** – When organizations jump ahead, they all too often see a problem for which they have an immediate countermeasure – usually based on past experience. A type of cognitive bias, problem solvers should beware of forming a countermeasure to a unique problem just because it has worked in the past. Organizations are better served by approaching each problem with a “beginner’s mind”. Easier said than done, applying a beginner’s mind ensures a fresh approach to problem solving as new problems arise, regardless of how successful past experience has been at solving them.
6. **Failing to See** – Problem solving requires the faculty of sight, both literally and figuratively. When people overlook the obvious or the not-so-obvious, they unwittingly or lazily accept blind decision-making as an adequate countermeasure to a problem. However, organizational leaders may have forgotten to look for causal relationships, or they may have forgotten to go to the gemba and do something as simple as observe and listen to people who may know the problem firsthand. According to gemba pioneer, Masaki Imai, “When management focuses on gemba or worksites, they discover opportunities for making the company far more profitable and successful” (Imai, 1997, 14).

7. **Choosing the Blue Pill** – If you have ever seen the film, *The Matrix*, you may remember that Morpheus offered Neo the choice between the red pill or the blue pill. Indeed, the blue pill would have nicely sedated him, but, luckily, he chose the red pill and awakened from his blissful ignorance – putting him on the path towards self-realization. Similarly, many organizational leaders choose the blue pill at every daily management meeting. Their undeclared motto is: “Ignorance is bliss”. Of course, this motto is a deadly mistake in problem solving.
8. **Playing the Victim** – Playing the victim is more common in organizational problem solving than one would think. There is an old saying: “Clean up your own backyard before you go knocking on your neighbor’s door.” This adage has relevance in the world of organizational problem solving insofar as many investigations into a problem’s countermeasures may be undertaken only to avoid responsibility, or blame another individual, department, or organization for said problem. Of course, this type of problem solving is mere scapegoating, and gets everyone in the organization nowhere *really* fast. It is a misguided and deadly mistake in problem solving and should be avoided.
9. **Declaring Allegiance** – By declaring allegiance to a given method of problem solving, organizations and their leaders can become stuck in their own “tunnel vision”. Their egos are too attached to given countermeasures. The process of declaring allegiance results in closed minds and unsolved problems – another deadly mistake.
10. **Celebrating Victory** – Everyone wants to win. Everyone in an organization wants a given countermeasure to solve a problem – the sooner the better. However, spiking the ball at the one-yard line is not a touchdown, and does not merit a dance in the endzone. When organizations see countermeasures begin to succeed, they may fall victim to celebrating the “victory” too early. Remember to save the endzone dance for when the football crosses the goal line and the ref signals “TOUCHDOWN!”. Any celebration can be an embarrassingly deadly mistake.

By avoiding these 10 deadly mistakes in problem solving, an organization gets stronger. Effective countermeasures help organizations build their problem-solving muscles. Making mistakes along the way is not a problem, either. However, repeating those mistakes indicates a lack of insight about the problem-solving process. Based on my experience, an organization dedicated to fixing these mistakes is seizing the opportunity to do their best, thus ensuring their survival.

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DAMON BAKER



Damon Baker
CEO | President

damon.baker@leanfocus.com
(630) 340-2751
[linkedin.com/in/damonbaker](https://www.linkedin.com/in/damonbaker)
www.leanfocus.com

BACKGROUND
Damon is the President & CEO of Lean Focus. For over 25 years, he has been implementing lean in consulting, operations, continuous improvement, and GM & VP-level leadership roles for such companies as Danaher, HNI, Eaton, Argo Consulting, Experian, and Winegard. Trained by disciples of the Toyota Production System, he worked in a Shingo Prize winning facility and is a Shingo Prize Examiner. Over his career he has demonstrated hands-on leadership and facilitation of 500+ kaizen events for 50 major corporations in 16 different countries. Damon led the North American Danaher Business System Office. While at Danaher, one of his mentored operating companies was nominated Most Improved Plant, and one of his factories won Best Plant Worldwide 2 years in a row. Damon holds an MBA from St. Ambrose University and a Bachelors of Arts in Management and Marketing from Iowa Wesleyan University.

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References

Imai, M. (1997). *Gemba Kaizen*. New York City: McGraw-Hill.