Who doesn’t have problems? Everybody has problems.

That’s why good managers are encouraged to see problems not as hurdles, but as opportunities.

You’re told to attack them head on.

Thankfully, there is a better way to do that. There is a simple, proven approach to problem-solving.

It won’t solve every problem, but it will create a habit of improving on those difficult situations everybody encounters.

The two key features all problems have in common are goals and barriers.

Identify these, and you’ll have the road map you need.

Goals

Problems involve setting out to achieve some objective or desired state, and can include avoiding a situation or event.

Goals are simply what you wish to achieve, where you want to be in a situation.

When you’re hungry, your goal is to eat something. If you are heading out to dine, your goal is to eat something special.

If you are the CEO, your main goal is to maximize profits. And
there are dozens of smaller goals you must have to get you there.

Barriers
If there were no barriers in the way of achieving a goal, then there would be no problem. Problem-solving involves overcoming the barriers that prevent achieving goals.

A barrier to the problem of being hungry might be having no food. It is usually solved with a trip to the market.

Steps to Problem-Solving
Effective problem-solving involves working through these six steps.

1. Identification
This stage involves detecting and recognizing that there is a problem; identifying the nature of the problem; then defining it more specifically.

All this sounds very obvious, but requires clear thought and analysis.

Identifying a problem can be a difficult task in itself.

Is there really a problem at all?

What is the nature of the problem?

Is it simple, or more complex?

How can the problem be best defined?

It is only by going through the mental steps of defining the problem that you will understand it more clearly and be able to communicate it accurately to others.

This leads directly to the second step.

2. Structuring
This stage involves a period of observation, inspection, fact-finding and developing a clearer picture.

Structuring involves gaining more information and increasing understanding by building a comprehensive picture of both the goals and the barriers.

Structuring happens almost automatically for simple problems, but can take effort for more complex problems.

3. Solutions
During this step you will generate a range of possible courses of action, but this is not the time to evaluate them fully.

In a group situation, this stage is often carried out as a brain-storming session, letting each person in the group express his or her views on possible solutions (or part solutions).

Finding solutions involves researching and reaching out for expertise.

4. Decision-making
This stage involves analyzing the different solutions and picking the best one.

This is the most challenging part of problem-solving, because it’s where things can go way wrong.
Some solutions may not be possible because of time or cost constraints. Some solutions create new problems.

But pick a course of action, be confident, and move onto the next step.

5. Implementation
Implementation means acting on the chosen solution. During implementation more problems may arise especially if identification or structuring of the original problem was not carried out fully.

6. Monitoring/Feedback
The last stage is about reviewing the outcomes of problem-solving over a period of time, including seeking feedback.

It is good practice to keep a record of outcomes and any additional problems that occurred.