

Methodology as an Enabler or a Bottleneck for Problem Solving

Who loves problems? You might love to face the challenge of solving a problem. But once you win the challenge, it should not come back to haunt you.

Problem solving is what everyone does, whether it is in the professional area or in the personal life. However, the main challenge in problem solving is to 'kill' the problem forever.

We use all possible means to solve problems – brainstorming, experience, knowledge, logic etc. We are most of the times successful too, but for the short term. To ensure that the problems get 'killed', we need to identify the 'Root Cause' which can then be addressed. Most often than not, we treat the symptoms rather than the 'root causes' because we fail to identify the same.

To identify the 'root causes' and address the same, where conventional methods don't work, we use structured problem solving methodologies like Lean, Six Sigma, Design, Innovation, Triz, TQM, TOC, Business Process Re-engineering, 5S, Kaizen, etc. Such methodologies bring in an excellent framework, step by step methodical approach to problem solving, which delivers the desired benefits. All such methodologies have defined steps to follow and also have various tools and techniques assigned with those steps. Adhering to this framework along with the right inputs (resources, expertise etc), one can solve most chronic and critical business issues.

However, there is a word of caution. When we start experiencing results from one particular methodology, there is a high likely-hood of getting biased to that methodology and expecting all solutions through the same 'toolkit'. We then start assuming that all problems have to be handled in the same manner and leads us to force fit the same tools and techniques for any kind of problem.

The result of this is higher lead time in problem solving, dissatisfaction of the people involved and other stakeholders. Though the results would come, the 'experience' of problem solving takes the joy away most of the times. Hence, there is little 'intrinsic' motivation left which also pushes people away from usage of such methodologies again. The methodology starts becoming a burden rather than an enabler.

What we fail to realize is that all problems are not alike. All problems do not need the same level of analysis, same tools and techniques to get solved.

It has also been seen that sometimes the delay leads to abandonment of the projects due to frustration by some stakeholder – project team, sponsor etc.

Methodology is a great enabler when its underlying principles are understood and applied rather than being a blind follower of the associated tools and techniques. So the next time you hear, “Hey! This project cannot be considered closed because you have not done a Measurement System Analysis”, you know which net this guy is stuck in.

One in a series of thought articles from Breakthrough Management Group India

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