BEYOND PROBLEM SOLVING

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Obstacles - those frightful things we see when we take our eyes off our goals.   T.E. Catanzaro, DVM, MHA, LFACHE

Some practitioners erroneously believe that solving immediate practice management problems is the best way to change productivity and performance. A better approach is to cultivate ideas whose application and impact range beyond the task of the moment. Overcoming inertia and getting things done rely on follow-through and breakthrough skills.

BREAKTHROUGH SKILLS

As a team leader or a team member, you must first learn how to present your ideas in a comprehensive and enlightening manner:

* **COVER YOUR BASES.** Before you show off your personal planning skills, make sure you are seen as doing a good job with your current responsibilities. If you don't have time to think beyond the immediate concerns on most practice days, delegate the more repetitive day-to-day responsibilities to dependable staff members.

* **NETWORK.** Before you suggest an idea at a team meeting, try to get a feel for the other team members' interests and concerns. Know the problems they face and the solutions they have developed and address the issue at hand in terms that include their interests.

* **SEEK OPPORTUNITIES.** View problems as opportunities to solve challenges. A strategic thinker sees multiple alternatives in events that others view as crises or failures. Nurture this attitude within the practice team.

* **BE POSITIVE.** Make your suggestions in a non-confrontational way. If your idea impacts others, soften your approach with phrases like "What are your thoughts on . . . ?" Remember, the staff within most every practice cares, they want to help, and their suggestions most always come with good intentions. Look for the caring intention BEFORE you evaluate the idea(s).

* **DON'T LIMIT YOURSELF.** Do not hesitate to make suggestions that are not related to the bottom line. Clients must believe you care BEFORE they believe in your health care plan. The value of an idea to

a practice is measured in quality of life as well as quality of care. Practice benefits can and should go beyond the cost-saving or profit-producing ideas.

FOLLOW THROUGH SKILLS

Planning a project can be completely different from its implementation and far more difficult than ever anticipated. When projects stall, everyone becomes frustrated. Projects stall for many reasons, but the obstacles which initiate the stalling have some commonality. The first secret to proactively enhance the follow through is to recognize obstacles of your own making:

*   **FANTASIES.** The mind can envision how well a plan will work, and it is far happier than when overseeing the actual implementation hassles. You need to set the fantasy aside and get your hands dirty. Edison had a vision of how a light bulb should work but had to build over 1,000 of them to turn his vision into reality. Are you ready for 999 failures to become famous for your new ideas within the professional or client-based community?

*   **FEAR OF FAILURE.** Fear that results will fall short often cause us to let a project quietly die rather than live with poor results. Remind yourself that concrete results, even those that fall short of expectations, are far better than none at all.

*   **INVISIBLE RUTS.** A common pitfall is mindlessly following old habit patterns. We have learned from what went before, and know what works, but the practice plateau or lifestyle stagnation is caused by "non-change" rather than the pursuit of unique or new experiences. Ask if those old stale protocols are important and determine "why" if the tendency is to retain them. If the "why" is simply, "We have always done it this way," then bypass them, as necessary, to get things done.

*   **COMFORTING MYTHOLOGIES.** Don't fall prey to the slogans or comforts of tradition. Southern California community needs are different than the rest of the USA, suburban needs are different than small town rural America. Marketing gimmicks must be tailored to the community needs, not to the practice by some article or consultant who has not even been in your practice. If you believe "everything is fine as long as everybody is busy," you might overlook the benefits of new projects.

*   **EGOTISM.** Thinking that your own intuition and insights are infallible cuts you off from your colleagues' ideas. Doctor, paraprofessional, or animal caretaker, it does not matter. Everyone has a mind and each mind has unique ideas to share, if harvested in a caring manner.

Objectively review all suggestions, including your own, and implement the best.

* **FAILURE TO DELEGATE.** You may be shouldering the whole burden because nobody else is as effective as you are . . . or because you don't want to share the credit when a project is done. Either way, you place the project at risk. Your odds of success increase greatly when you take on only the tasks that suit your abilities best and let others take on the rest. Train each person to a level of trust, then delegate the accountability for the outcome to them (not just the process). Let them improve the program(s).

* **INFLEXIBILITY.** When an approach is not working, substitute something more positive. If your staff does not implement your ideas, ask them for alternatives. Let them develop unilateral plans and put those into action, then evaluate at 90 days for benefits. Never veto ideas just because they are not yours! Flexibility often requires taking a step backward, but ends up being more productive.

* **LOVE THE INTRIGUE.** They are either with you or against you, right? Put aside petty intrigues and enlist everyone's help. A "them versus us" practice staff will never be a health care team. Only "we" can cause harmony and success. If you love intrigue more than progress, or you prefer to take credit and give blame rather than take blame and give credit, go into politics or the spy business.
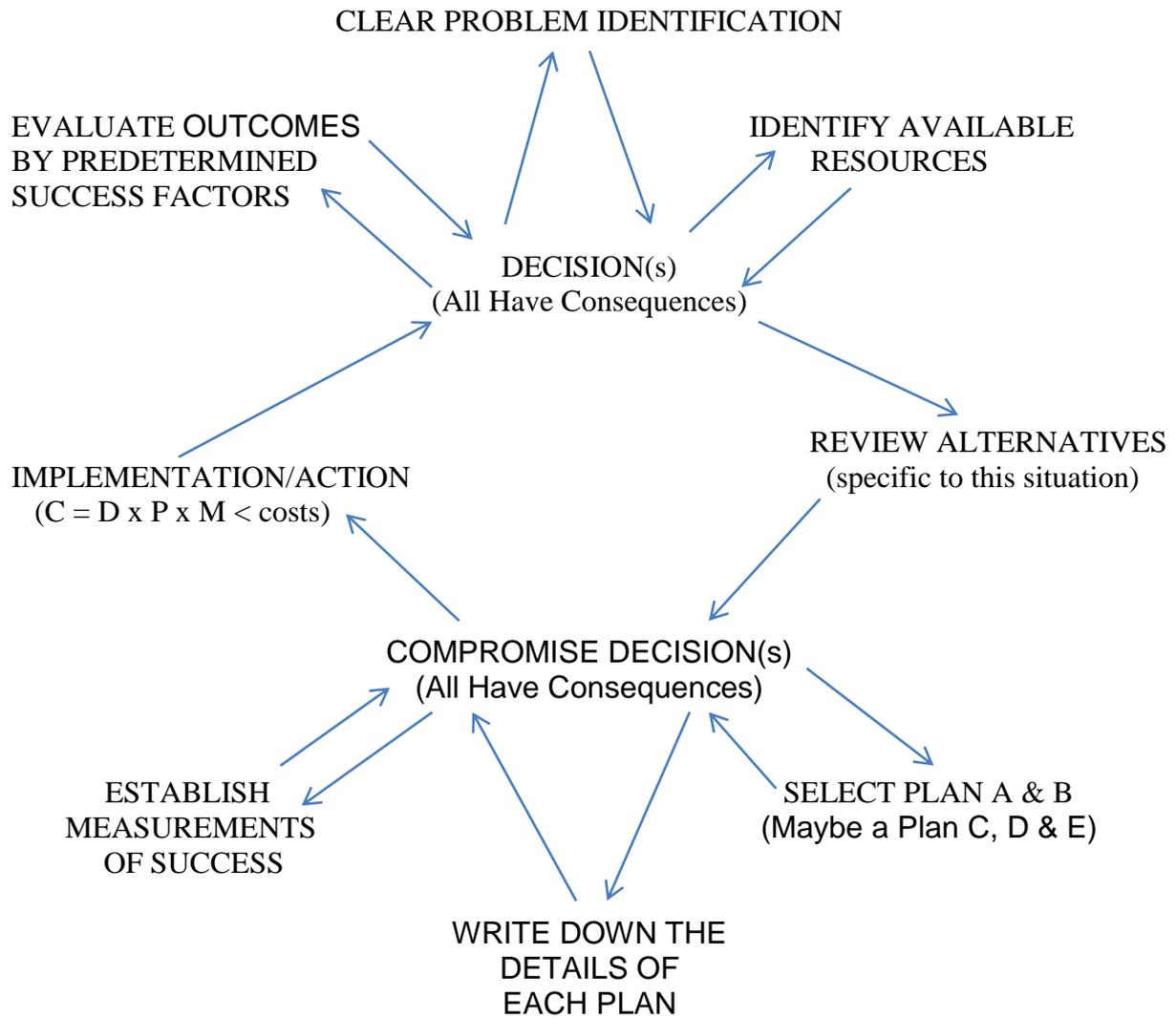
POWER UP FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

In our daily routine of practice we rely upon habits to get the job done, but when we need a creative or innovative solution, many veterinarians don't know where to start. There are tools that teach creative problem solving. They don't give you genius, they simply pull out the genius within you.

For those practices that do not have computers, or their computers are not friendly, the soft-cover texts, *A KICK IN THE SEAT OF THE PANTS*, or *A WHACK ON THE SIDE OF THE HEAD*, by Roger von Oech ($10.95 and $12.95 respectively, ISBN 0-06-09024-8 and 0-446-39158-1), provide exercises, stories, tips, and techniques to help you strengthen each of your own creative skills. The books are sold separately, but sometimes you can find them together with a deck of innovation cards, and the set is called a "WHACK PACK." These aids can be used to awaken these skills in your staff, since they are the best problem solvers we have. Then all you have to do is capture the great ideas from the flow of innovation.

For those who have an ability to use a computer, friendly or otherwise, some of the more helpful software programs include:

* *IdeaFisher* (approximately $495) contains two parts, the Idea-Bank which cross-references 60,000 words in 700,000 ways, and the Q-Bank which has 3,000 very specific questions designed to help you solve common business problems involving product lines. Available in IBM PC and Macintosh versions from Fisher Ideas Systems, 714/474-8111.

* *Namer* (approximately $195) can help name products or services; it encompasses all kinds of product categories, but it is really best for naming health care products and high-tech services. It will combine root words related to those fields and come up with 200-300 possible names. Available in IBM DOS from Salinon Corp., 214/692-9091.

* *Idea Generator* (approximately $195) combines seven brainstorming techniques to take your answers and reintroduce them as questions that force you to view a problem at a greater depth. Available in IBM DOS from Experience in Software, 415/644-0694.

* *Mindlink* (approximately $499) uses a "mental gym" to warm up your mind with creative exercises, then the program runs you through a disciplined, step-by-step problem-solving activity. It forces you to remove yourself totally from the problem. Available in Macintosh from Synectics, 802/457-2025.

* *Inside Information* (approximately $119) is a very new desktop accessory that contains 65,000 key words and their definitions and related concepts. Available in Macintosh and IBM DOS from Microlytics, 716/248-9150.

New software to enhance creativity and innovation comes out every week. There are many other products coming available to help problem solving, innovation, and creative thinking for the average computer user. It is a smart idea to stop at the local software store and discuss your needs with a hacker on the staff. Do not buy the software product until you have booted it up yourself, fed in a current problem or idea, and see what the program can do for you. Not all programmers have the same logic tree as you, and very few understand health care delivery, much less veterinary medicine. These programs are just a logic tree that can be used by most decision makers who want assistance in innovative and creative thinking.

CLEAR PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

EVALUATE OUTCOMES
BY PREDETERMINED
SUCCESS FACTORS

IDENTIFY AVAILABLE
RESOURCES

DECISION(s)
(All Have Consequences)

REVIEW ALTERNATIVES
(specific to this situation)

IMPLEMENTATION/ACTION
(C = D x P x M < costs)

COMPROMISE DECISION(s)
(All Have Consequences)

ESTABLISH
MEASUREMENTS
OF SUCCESS

SELECT PLAN A & B
(Maybe a Plan C, D & E)

WRITE DOWN THE
DETAILS OF
EACH PLAN

Problem Solving Process - VCI Veterinary Leadership Pocket Guide

DOING GETS IT DONE

When a project stalls, making a new beginning can provide the spark that lets a project catch fire. Inactivity leads to inertia, then the consultant must be called in to break the paradigms which formed the inertia. Picture your practice as a giant boulder resting on level playing field. Time has caused it to settle into a depression. With all the strength available, the boulder may only be moved an inch or two. If something isn't immediately added to the depression, the boulder will return to where it was. On the other hand, if something (e.g., an idea rock) was added to the void created by moving the boulder, it will not be able to return to the "old position" and just sit there. Each movement of the boulder allows another idea rock to be added to the temporary void. In time, the depression will be filled with new ideas and the boulder will be moved on the level playing field in whatever direction is needed, and with a lot less effort than ever before.

With or without an electronic computer, use your brain's natural logic for a five minute "boulder moving effort" when searching for the breakthrough or follow-through ideas. If you are stuck, agree with yourself that you will start to work on a task at a particular time and will continue for five minutes. At the end of the five minutes, determine if you want to continue another five. Make the same determination again, and so forth. This enables you to take focused action rather than view the project as behemoth and helps to build immediate response rewards. If all else fails, stop, relax, and remember the words of Isaac Newton:

"If I have ever made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention than to any other talent."