



Solving problems can sometimes be as easy as listening to employees.

◆ SURESH LULLA, QIMPRO CONSULTANTS PRIVATE LIMITED

**SPEED
LEARNING
CAPSULE**

Peels and Meals

Once upon a time, officers had separate canteen facilities to that of workers. Two decades ago, the earthmoving equipment plant of a major auto unit in South

India was no exception. A large workers' canteen was operational, on a three-shift basis, on the ground floor and a neat compact officers' mess was designed for the floor above. The latter was also the regular venue for entertaining national and international visitors.

So what was the problem? The staircase leading to the officers' mess was a challenge for the nasal system of the sophisticated visitors! Polite handkerchiefs partially came to the rescue. Why? The garbage containers were placed under the staircase and they chronically overflowed! Quality was certainly not a way of life in the vicinity of the canteen.

The new President of the plant, who was a quality enthusiast, questioned the volume and cost of garbage. A key piece of information was that the local municipality refused to shift all the garbage, resulting in the daily rental of private dump trucks.



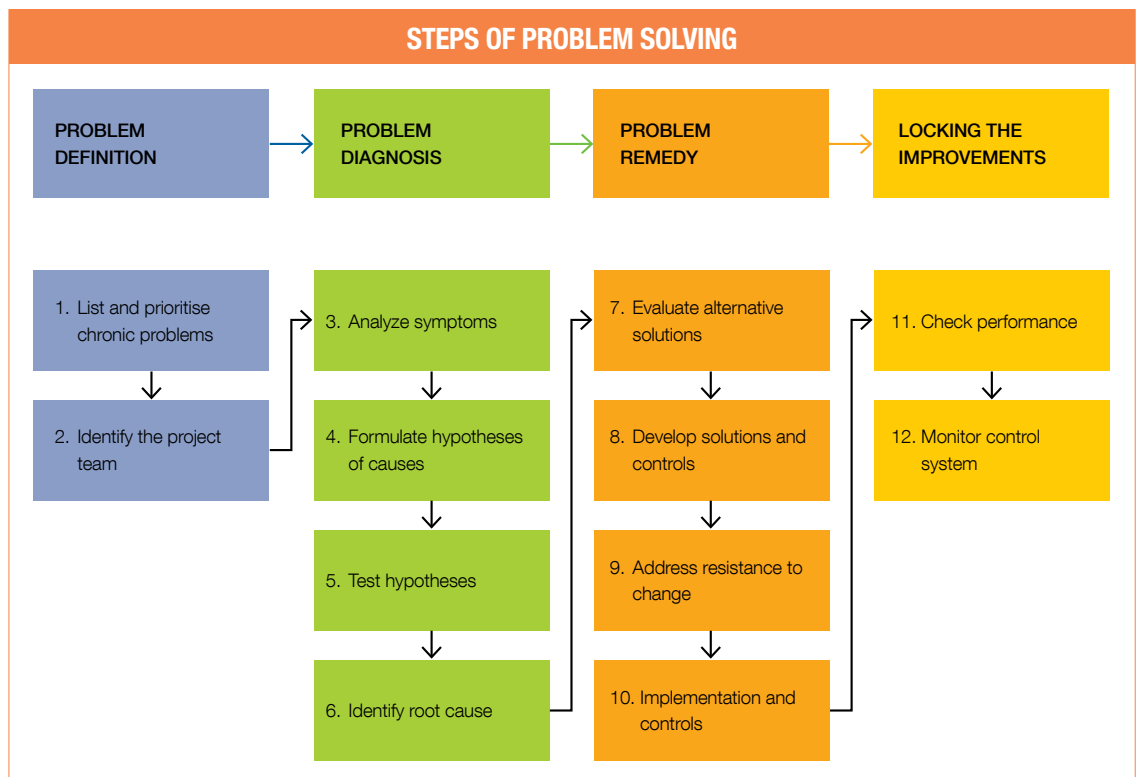
These dump trucks cost the plant ₹ 7,000 per day. Over and above this was the cost of wasted food. Collectively, we refer to this as Cost Of Poor Quality (COPQ).

A management team was appointed by the President to solve the problem. In order to understand the situation, the team set up two types of bins; one for avoidable waste (such as cooked food) and the other for unavoidable waste (such as peels and packaging). Avoidable waste accounted for two-thirds of the total canteen waste.

The team then embarked on a diagnostic journey, interviewing workers at meal time (remember, the plant worked three shifts). Here is a flavour of responses to the question “Why do you waste food?”

“We are in South India and you serve us North Indian food.”

“The meal break is only 30 minutes, and the lines are too long. So I pile up food.”



“The ladles are too large. I could do with smaller servings.” “The thalis are much too large. So I pile up food.”

The remedial actions involved:

1. Inviting a team of wives, by rotation, to set the menu and supervise the same.
2. Scrapping the large ladles and thalis, and replacing them with smaller ones.
3. Investing the saved COPQ into worker welfare.

The workers’ canteen now doubles up as a recreation club with facilities for table tennis and carom. The walls are sparkling white and adorned with paintings done by the children of the workers. In fact, they even published a calendar that showcased 12 of the best of these paintings.

Lessons learned:

1. Chronic problems tend to become culture issues
2. Challenge every norm
3. See the problem with your own eyes
4. Listen to the ‘Voice of Workers’
5. Treat the workers with dignity
6. Earn the trust of workers through leadership actions

This fable aims to demystify the key types of problems. A ‘problem’ is a specific and visible performance deficiency in any manufacturing,

service, or business process; and the corresponding product, service, or document. Problems come in two avatars: sporadic and chronic.

Sporadic Problems

A sporadic problem is a sudden negative deviation from the standard or status quo. The remedy lies in restoring the standard. Example: a house on fire! Put the fire out through firefighting.

In quality control, problem-solving means detecting a sudden change, identifying the cause of the change, and returning the process to the original standard.

Chronic Problems

A chronic problem is a long-standing negative situation which requires remedy through challenging and changing the standard. Example: recurring house fires! Fix the cause of the fire through fire prevention.

Chronic problems are often difficult to solve and are accepted as inevitable. They must be addressed through quality improvement. The goal of quality improvement is to challenge the standard and achieve a level of performance never before achieved. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suresh Lulla is Founder and mentor, Qimpro Consultants Private Limited, a focused quality management consultancy. He is also the author of *World-Class Quality: An Executive Handbook and Quality Fables*.

