

Problem-solving: A new technique

BY HAL ROSENTHAL

Over a five-year period from 1965 to 1970 I was involved in an extensive inquiry into the ways in which American business address problem-solving and the reasons why those methods don't work so well.

What I discovered is that conventional problem-solving technology, although widely accepted, is inherently unsound.

The bulk of existing problem-solving methodology was founded on the assumptions of logical order and progression, but those assumptions are out of step with the basic structure of problems, which structure is unequivocally random.

In practice, the words or language used to express problems are unwittingly acted upon as if they were the problem itself. This results in solutions that are disconnected from the actuality of the problem, which in turn leads to undesirable consequences.

This discovery led to the basis for an alternate method of problem solving. Instead of starting with the customary and costly investigation of the facts and data associated with a problem, it is possible to work backward — together with the client — to state the problem, and to take a journey into the heart of the problem. One of

the nice things about using the method is that it allows extensive involvement of management's know-how.

An intriguing aspect of the method is that it produces solutions

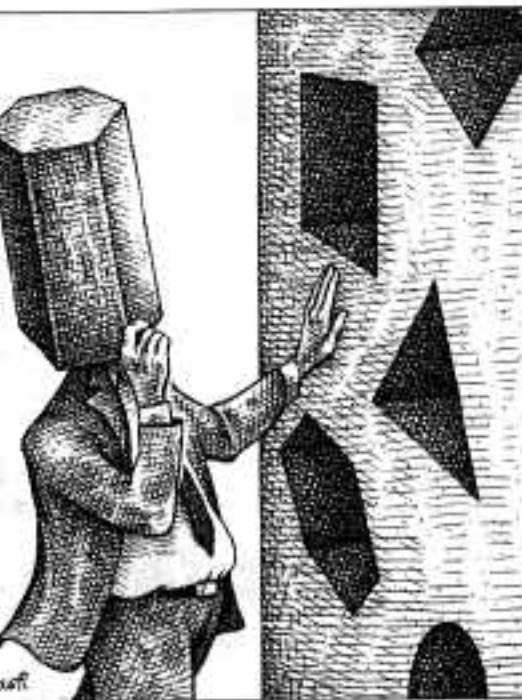
correct, then starting out with a statement such as "How can we solve this problem?" is clearly the wrong way to go.

What is this new method of problem definition? I call it "basic inquiry," with the emphasis on basic. It's quite simple and it's done as sort of a word game or an exercise.

Say your problem is that you need to increase sales. What is your actual "need"? List the possible strategies that might satisfy the need.

Does increasing sales still look like the best way to go? If yes, explore "increase." List what kind of increase there might be. Total dollars or total units? Specific units? Categories of units, by price, by profit, by region, by manufacturer? List them all, unless of course you intend to increase sales of all products across the board.

If so, you would of course lay specific plans to handle larger receivables, increase bad debts, larger inventory, higher insurance costs, less working capital, reduced lines of credit and larger loans, more interest expense, undesirable changes in sales mix, disproportionate commission costs, increased advertising, larger commitments to fixed resources, supervision and control problems,



not as a result of seeking solutions, as might otherwise be expected, but through the activity of problem definition.

I am convinced that problem definition is where the action is, and that solutions are a natural outgrowth of the definition function. If I'm

