

Problem-Solving

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ **Be aware of the steps involved in problem-solving, especially those steps that are commonly skipped or glossed over.**
- ▶ **Be aware of the importance of an effective problem-solving process in the overall environment of the farmers market.**

Whether you are solving problems on your own or as part of a group, there are steps that are common to the process. This chapter focuses on the process of solving problems in groups and these same steps apply equally to a manager's individual efforts.

Why Use a Formal Process for Solving Problems?

Managers, farmers, and groups solve problems all the time, so why bother using a formal process with distinct steps to solve problems? Sometimes a group is lively and creative and moves from one problem to the next easily. Other times, groups get bogged down and cannot define a problem or offer a solution. Following are several problem-solving strategies to use with your group to avoid getting stuck and bogged down.

Problem-Solving Steps

Problems are situations you want to change. Problem-solving means situation-changing, and the change that is appropriate depends entirely on the definition of the problem. If your definition of a problem only identifies symptoms and does not really get to the source, then your solution is not likely to work. An effective problem-solving process starts with attention to defining the problem. Consider all of the following problem-definition questions:

- Is there a problem?
- Where is the problem?
- When is this a problem?
- Is this really a problem?
- Whose problem is it?
- How does this problem affect the market, etc.
- Can the problem be dealt with by this group or are others ultimately responsible for solving this problem?



Once the group has perceived a problem and decided that it is the appropriate body for solving it, create a statement defining the problem. It is sometimes effective to state the problem as a question. Avoid allowing the definition to include a solution. You might ask group members to state the problem in a “how to” format rather than a definition—“how to change or modify stall assignments to insure better access to the parking area” is a more valuable problem definition than “no one likes the stall assignments.”

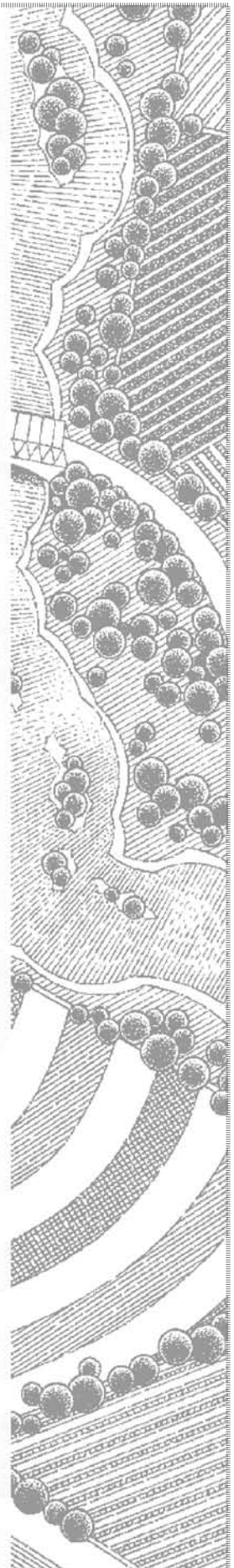
If defining the problem is difficult, try focusing on several key words and asking what is meant by those words in the context of the problem. Defining what is meant by “better access” in the preceding problem statement, for example, can help not only to define the problem but also to suggest changes.

Additional input. Some market problems may require additional information before the group can proceed. The parking access problem, for example, may require information from the city about increasing the market’s parking area. Be cautious about terminating a meeting because additional input is needed. Continue to work through the problem and seek input for change using “need additional information” as part of the process. For instance, “if the city allows us to use the twenty-five-foot right of way, then ...”

Generating alternatives. Thinking of solutions is the bridge between defining a problem and deciding on a solution. All potential solutions need to be valued. Your group may need to be reminded that “no idea is dumb.” This is a time for creativity, and every idea potentially has merit. Use the following list as a guide to generating alternatives.



- Begin generating alternatives by clearly stating the problem.
- Make sure all ideas are recorded.
- Set a time limit for generating alternatives.
- State an objective such as “let’s see if we can produce fifteen different ideas.”
- Remain neutral and insist that all participants remain neutral. This is not yet the time to evaluate ideas.
- Make sure the person responsible for recording has time to verify that everything is written down.
- Draw out people who have not contributed.



- Bring the discussion to clear, decisive end when the set time limit or number of ideas has been reached.

Developing criteria for evaluation. Generating criteria is a way to evaluate the alternatives without allowing personal opinions to determine the outcome. Possible alternatives to changing the farmers market layout include:

- Leave it as it is.
- Divide the sections, putting produce in one section and value-added sales in another.
- Rearrange the market according to plan A.
- Rearrange the market according to plan B.
- Buy new tables and signs.
- Change the stall criteria.

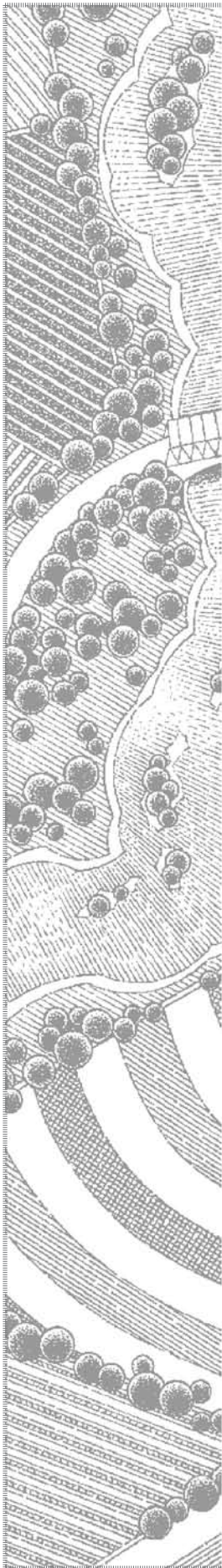


Then, putting the alternatives aside, work out criteria for assessing the alternatives. Sample criteria include:

- Must cost less than \$2,000.
- Increases ease of consumer access.
- Increases market visibility from the street.
- Reduce the visibility of produce trucks.

To help the group apply the established criteria, draw a grid that lists the alternatives on one side and the criteria across the top. Have the group work through the grid, assessing whether each alternative meets a specific criteria. As the grid is completed, one or two alternatives will begin to emerge as meeting more of the criteria than other choices. At that point, encourage a brief discussion of what participants like about each alternative in light of the criteria. As one or more of the alternatives becomes favored, ask the group whether there is anyone who cannot live with the favored alternative. If no one raises an objection, then consensus has been reached and the group has made a decision. If objections are raised, ask what changes can be made to make the alternative more acceptable.

Always keep in mind that it may be possible to merge two alternatives. It also is possible to implement two separate alternatives that do not conflict. Many times a group will be content to recommend two solutions and allowing an individual or another group to decide between them. This solution works well when your group seems to be unable to achieve consensus within a specified time frame. As a last



resort, have the group vote. You may want to remind the group that the vote may result in a less cohesive group. It also may be necessary to remind members who continue to maintain extreme positions that the group may end up losing more time by voting than if they tried to modify an existing alternative.

Planning Implementation

At the center of most implementation planning is some type of flow chart, diagram, or prioritized list. Some activities must precede others. Have the group generate a list of all the activities that need to be performed to implement the decision. After the list is generated, shuffle the activities around until everything is listed in a logical order. Always ask what has to be accomplished before this activity can begin. Use the same techniques and time limits previously discussed to keep your group moving through this process.

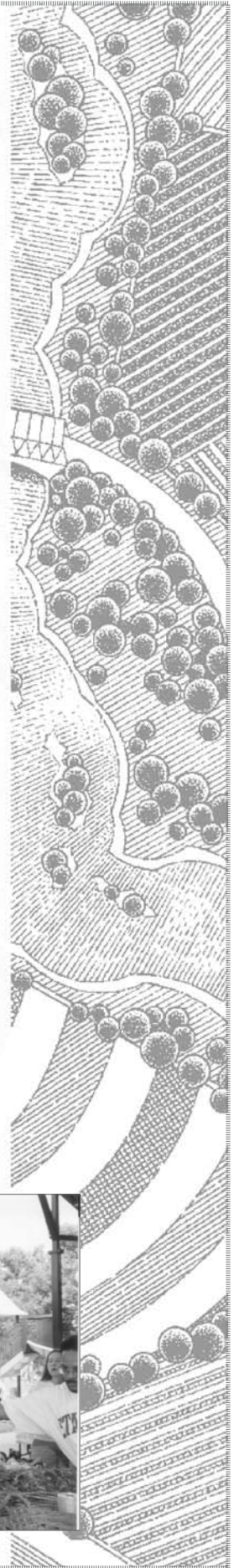
Ask Basic Questions

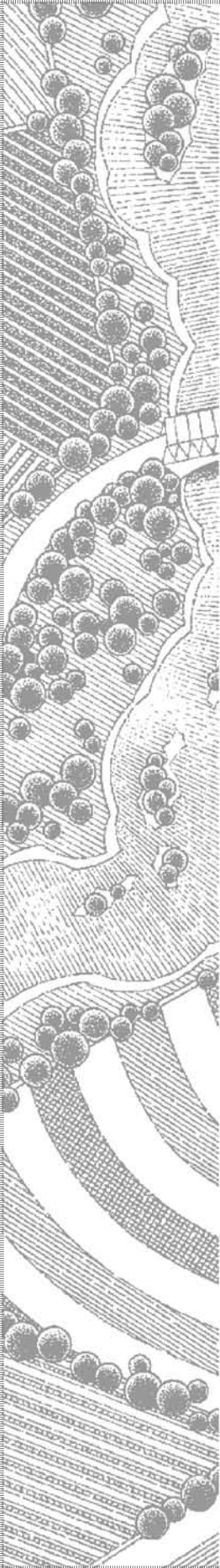
When the group decides on something that has to be done before the next meeting, make sure that the basic questions of who, what, when, and where are answered. "Who will volunteer to get the new city parking ordinances? Okay, Jim says he will do it. When will you have this done? By next Monday? When can the rest of us get this information? Okay, you will email and fax it to everyone by Monday night." Record the who, what, when, and where for each item on your chart, diagram, or list. Hold off on long-range items that require the results from shorter-term ones. Add the who, what, when, and where as you reach these items.

Monitor Implementation

Problem-solving only results in change if and when the decision is successfully implemented. Many groups try to leave the responsibility for implementing a decision to someone else. This rarely works.

The responsibility for implementation should rest with the group that made the decision. The manager, a member or the chairperson of the board of directors, or a member of the group that made the decision should also monitor implementation,





following up to see that individuals who took on responsibilities are on track in accomplishing their tasks.

Evaluate the Solution

Once a solution has been implemented, the group should evaluate its success. Did the actions taken really solve the problem? How well? How do you know? You can use the criteria you generated while choosing a solution to evaluate the effectiveness of that solution. If everyone is satisfied and there are no unforeseen and unacceptable consequences, then you have successfully solved the problem. If there are elements of the solution that did not work as planned, you may need to take further action.

Conclusion

Whether solving problems individually or in groups, the process involves the basic steps of defining the problem, generating solutions, making a decision, implementing the decision, and evaluating its success. Many groups skip the follow through and evaluation, allowing a problem to become perennial. This saps the energy of the organization as people begin to feel that meetings are all talk and a waste of time. Effective problem-solving, with attention to follow through and evaluation, contributes to the strength and success of a farmers market.

