



# THE **PROBLEM SOLVING** Toolkit



# PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND BETTER DECISIONS

Strong problem-solving and critical thinking skills help professionals approach challenges with clarity and confidence.

Whether you're navigating a workplace issue, managing competing priorities, or working through a complex assignment, the ability to analyse situations and evaluate solutions is invaluable.



The good news is that these skills can be developed with practice. By approaching challenges with a structured and thoughtful mindset, you can make better decisions, reduce uncertainty, and work more effectively in both professional and learning environments.

In this guide, we cover four practical approaches to strengthen your problem-solving and critical thinking skills.



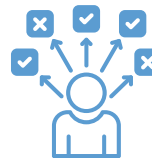
## Understanding the Problem

Clearly defining the challenge before tackling the problem



## Generating Solutions

Exploring approaches to solving the problem



## Evaluating Options

Considering different solutions and potential consequences



## Implementing & Reviewing Solutions

Using a structured approach to move forward

# DEFINING PROBLEMS



One of the most common mistakes in problem-solving is trying to solve a problem before it has been fully understood. Jumping straight to solutions can lead to wasted effort or actions that address symptoms of the problem, rather than the underlying issue.

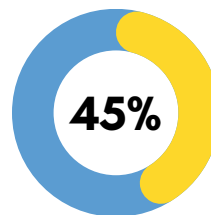
Effective problem-solving begins with **clearly defining the problem.**

## Why problem definition matters

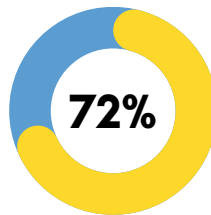
When problems aren't fully understood, it can lead to focusing on the wrong issue, overlooking important information, or applying solutions that fail to address the root cause. This can waste time, resources, and effort while allowing the real issue to continue affecting performance.

Clearly defining the problem helps ensure that everyone involved has a shared understanding of what needs to be resolved.

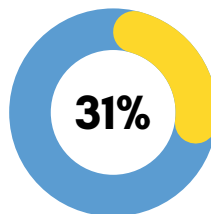
By taking the time to fully understand the situation, organisations can direct their efforts towards the correct objective and implement solutions that are effective and sustainable.



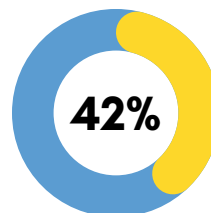
"Solving complex problems" is one of the main areas where employers **report skills gaps** among employees.



**72%** of employers consider problem-solving and critical thinking as two of the most important **traits** they look for during recruitment.



Skill shortages remain a challenge for UK employers, with around **31%** reporting workforce gaps in problem-solving areas.



**42%** of employers say skills shortages (including problem-solving) have led to lower productivity.

# METHODS OF UNDERSTANDING

Understanding the true nature of a problem is the first step to solving it effectively. You can use two techniques for this: the **Kipling Method**, which prompts you to explore the situation from multiple angles, and the **5 Whys**, which helps you to get to the root of the problem.

Using both approaches together ensures you capture the full context, identify underlying causes, and clarify the problem before moving on to solutions.

## Combining the 5 Whys & Kipling Method

Method	Example
<p><b>Step 1: Applying the Kipling Method</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is involved or affected?</li> <li>• What exactly is happening?</li> <li>• When did the issue occur?</li> <li>• Where is the problem arising?</li> <li>• Why is this happening?</li> <li>• How did the issue arise?</li> </ul> <p>Then, write out a refined sentence that includes the answers to the questions above.</p>	<p><b>Step 1: Applying the Kipling Method</b></p> <p>Kipling Insight: Who = Customers; What = Late delivery; When = Past month; Where = Online orders; Why = Orders not processed on time; How = Complaints increased.</p> <p>Refined Problem: Online customer orders have been delivered late over the past month because the order processing stage is taking longer than expected, causing complaints to increase.</p>
<p><b>Step 2: Dig Deeper With the 5 Whys Technique</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the initial problem statement that you came up with from the Kipling analysis.</li> <li>• Ask “Why is this happening?” repeatedly to uncover the root cause.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Step 2: The 5 Whys Technique</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why are the deliveries late? Processing delayed.</li> <li>• Why? The staff are overwhelmed.</li> <li>• Why? The new system slows the workflow.</li> <li>• Why? Training on the new system is incomplete.</li> <li>• Why? No clear rollout plan</li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 3: Clarify the Problem</b></p> <p>Including insights from both methods, write a final, single sentence that summarises the true problem. This ensures you’re tackling the real issue, not just the symptoms.</p>	<p><b>Step 3: Clarifying the Problem</b></p> <p>From the Kipling and 5 Whys analysis, it’s clear that the root problem is that orders are delayed because staff were not fully trained on the new system rollout.</p>



# ENCOURAGING CREATIVE THINKING



Once a problem has been clearly defined and the root causes understood, the next step is to generate possible solutions.

## Why Generating Multiple Solutions Matters

It's often tempting to move forward with the first solution that comes to mind. However, generating several possibilities allows you to think them through and compare different approaches to identify the one that offers the best outcome.

## Brainstorming: Encouraging Creative Thinking

One of the most widely used techniques for generating ideas is brainstorming. Brainstorming involves generating as many potential solutions as possible without immediately evaluating or criticising them.

The goal is to create a space where ideas can be explored freely before narrowing down the options.

## Tips for Effective Brainstorming

- Focus on quantity first, quality later
- Avoid judging ideas during the initial stage
- Encourage different perspectives and suggestions
- Build on ideas suggested by others
- Use mind mapping to organise your ideas visually

Once a range of ideas has been generated, you can begin to assess which solutions are realistic and effective.

## THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT SOLUTIONS

Another structured creative thinking method is SCAMPER, which encourages you to consider different ways to improve or adapt a situation. **SCAMPER** stands for:

**Substitute** - What could be replaced or changed?

**Combine** - Can two ideas or processes be merged?

**Adapt** - Can a solution used elsewhere be applied here?

**Modify** - Can something be adjusted or improved?

**Put to another use** - Can existing resources be used differently?

**Eliminate** - What could be removed to simplify the process?

**Reverse** - What happens if the process is done differently?

Using these prompts can stimulate creative thinking and help you approach problems from new perspectives.

### From Ideas to Potential Solutions

After generating a range of possible ideas, the next step is to narrow them down to the most practical and effective options. At this stage, it is helpful to consider questions such as:

- Which solutions address the root cause of the problem?
- Which options are realistic given available resources?
- What potential benefits or risks might each solution involve?

Selecting two or three strong potential solutions will allow you to evaluate them more carefully in the next stage of the problem-solving process.



# EVALUATING SOLUTIONS

Once you have 2–3 possible solutions, the next step is to evaluate them to determine the best option for your current problem.

## Evaluating Solutions Using a Decision Matrix

A decision matrix is a useful tool for comparing solutions. Each option is evaluated against set criteria and scored, typically from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). Totalling the scores helps identify the most balanced and practical option, making decision-making clearer and more objective.

	SOLUTION A	SOLUTION B	SOLUTION C
Effectiveness	3	2	5
Cost/Resource Requirements	4	3	3
Implementation Time	3	1	4
Potential Risks	1	4	2
Long-Term Impact	1	5	4
Total Score	12	15	18

While the highest score may indicate the strongest option, it's also important to consider the problem's context and whether certain criteria (such as cost or risk) should carry greater weight.

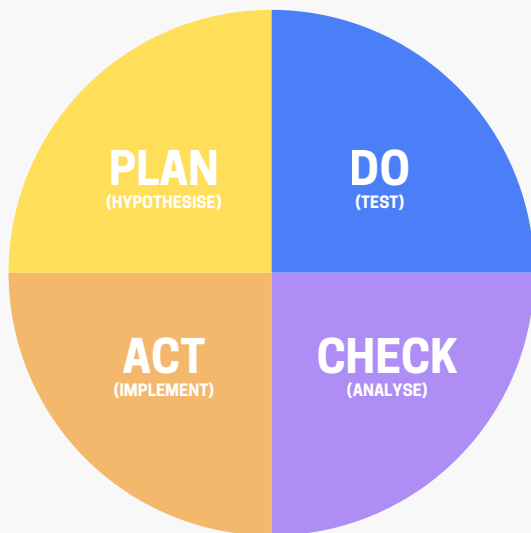
## Considering Risks and Consequences

Every decision involves risk. By applying critical thinking, you can anticipate potential risks and outcomes and plan the most effective response. Below is a list of questions you should always consider when choosing a way forward:

- What could go wrong?
- Are there any unintended consequences?
- What are the short-term and long-term impacts?
- Who might be affected by the decision?

Carefully evaluating your options helps ensure that the chosen solution is both practical and sustainable.

# THE PDCA CYCLE



Once the most suitable solution has been identified, the next step is to implement it in a structured and thoughtful way. This not only involves putting it into practice, but also monitoring the results and making adjustments where necessary.

Using a structured framework helps ensure that solutions are applied effectively and that lessons can be learned from the process. One widely used approach is the **PDCA Cycle**, also known as the **Plan-Do-Check-Act model**.

The PDCA Cycle provides a simple, systematic method for implementing and reviewing improvements.

## Plan

Define the actions required to implement the chosen solution. This stage may involve setting clear objectives, assigning responsibilities, and determining the resources needed.

## Do

Implement the solution on a small scale or within a controlled environment where possible. This allows the approach to be tested before being applied more widely.

## Check

Evaluate the results of the implementation. Consider whether the solution has effectively addressed the original problem and whether any unexpected issues have arisen.

## Act

Based on the results, decide on the next steps. If the solution has been successful, it can be implemented more broadly. If improvements are needed, adjustments can be made and the cycle repeated.

# THE VALUE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Structured approaches like the PDCA Cycle encourage continuous improvement. Rather than viewing problem-solving as a one-time activity, this approach recognises that processes, systems, and working practices can always be refined.

By regularly reviewing outcomes and learning from experience, you can strengthen your problem-solving capabilities and respond more effectively to future challenges.



## Final Thoughts

Problem-solving and critical thinking are essential skills that support success in both work and professional development. By taking time to clearly define problems, evaluate all possible solutions, and apply structured thinking, you can make better decisions and approach challenges more effectively.

While problems are an inevitable part of professional life, they also provide opportunities for growth and learning. Each challenge offers a chance to refine your thinking, improve your approach, and develop stronger problem-solving capabilities.

By applying the techniques explored in this guide, you can build confidence in your ability to assess complex situations and identify effective solutions. Over time, these practices become habits – supporting clearer thinking, stronger decision-making, and better outcomes in both work and professional development.



# DLC TRAINING

A DISTANCE LEARNING COLLEGE

DLC Training is a leading UK provider of flexible, online professional training courses designed to support career development and organisational success.

Whether you are looking to enhance your productivity, develop new skills, or achieve a recognised qualification, DLC Training provides the tools and support to help you succeed. [Contact us today to find out more.](#)

All of our online distance learning courses are acknowledged as full UK qualifications, accredited by Ofqual and recognised worldwide. We have partnerships with some of the leading names in education including [CIPS](#), [CIPD](#), [CILT](#), [ILM](#), [CMI](#), [IoSCM](#) and [AAT](#), and are striving to be a world leader in workforce development and career progression.

From our founder to our team of tutors, the experience within our organisation is unrivalled. As a student, you will receive guidance and support from these professionals throughout your studies.



Phone

**[0800 012 6770](tel:08000126770)**



Why Choose DLC?

**[Read More](#)**



Website

**[www.distancelearningcollege.co.uk](http://www.distancelearningcollege.co.uk)**



Email

**[info@dlctraining.co.uk](mailto:info@dlctraining.co.uk)**