

Tool: 10

BALANCING YOUR PERSONAL AND TEAM PROBLEM SOLVING STYLE

The thought processes that underlie innovation are the same thought processes that underlie our ordinary activities.

Tool 10, is an exercise to help you gain insight into your current, personal problem solving style. You can also use the same diagnostic across your team to create a balanced approach to problem solving and innovating.

The tool takes you through the 8 stages of the problem solving wheel, identifying where you may want to spend time building your skills in some of the stages.

Throughout this book, we have touched on the close relationship between creativity, innovation and problem solving. It is an area that has recently excited the world of psychology and there is emerging work that can inspire us.

In his book on innovation and problem solving, Robert Wiseberg¹ explains how psychologists are finding evidence that, *“The thought processes that underlie innovation are the same thought processes that underlie our ordinary activities.”* and he goes on to suggest that, *“From this perspective, the term creative thinking is misleading at least and perhaps a misnomer, one just uses ordinary thinking to bring about innovations.”*²

This suggests that our first priority should be to focus on how we can harness and improve our “ordinary thinking” to bring about innovation.

How do you currently tackle problem solving?

Maybe, before you go any further, you may want to pause and reflect on how you currently tackle problem solving exercises.

Do you get out a blank sheet of paper and craft lists? Do you mind-map³ the problem either on paper or using software? Or maybe you do not have a preferred problem solving

¹ Wiseberg is a professor of psychology at Pennsylvania Temple University in the USA

² Wiseberg, R. (2006) p5

³ Tony Buzan is credited with the “mind-mapping” methodology in his book *Use Your Head* (1974).

methodology as such, you just approach them in an effective, but unstructured and mood-governed way.

In my work I have noted three general stereotypes in managers’ problem solving styles - the Coyote, the Competitor and the Eagle. I wonder if you would recognise yourself in any one of them?

Are you a Coyote?

If you look at the problem solving wheel, the Coyote tends to go straight to Stage 6 - The Plan.

Coyotes require only a general awareness of the problem before getting stuck into delivering a quick solution. In fact, the first reasonable solution that appears is frequently adopted and data gathering is a retrospective action that will justify the solution they have already chosen. They tend to work on their own and a Coyote does not like challenges to their chosen solution, perceiving it as either a negative attitude, or slowness to reach the same conclusion by others.

Are you a Competitor?

On the problem solving wheel a Competitor goes straight to Stage 4 - Generating solutions.

Rather than the Coyote’s single quick solution, a competitor will identify a range of choices. However the solutions tend to be drawn from the same old repertoire - e.g. cut jobs or set new performance indicators. I may get into trouble here, but personal experience suggests most Competitors are from the professions, seeing the world and its problems only through their professional, specialist lens⁴.

Competitors can be mesmerised by their status and as a result they don’t actually see

⁴ Either to get myself into more trouble or support my case I would cite doctors, who for many years could not conceive of nurses or para-medics being capable of doing elements of their work, or police who felt only uniformed officers could fill senior posts in such things as HR or accountancy within a constabulary.

The key to using Tool 10 is to start with yourself and identify the skills development you may require, to change from a Coyote, or Competitor or a mix of the two, into an Eagle.

some of the problems, or approach them logically. They will suggest that something cannot be done, when in-fact what they mean is “I cannot possibly pass control to others!” They are solution-centred, rather than problem-centred.

Or, are you an Eagle?

The Eagle harnesses the full 8-stage sequence of the problem solving wheel. They will spend a lot of time at Stages 1-3, identifying exactly what the problem is, gathering and reviewing the data, asking “What does it really tell me?”.

They do not feel threatened by others’ contributions and are willing to entertain and examine a range of solutions (Stage 4). These can be from many sources, no matter how crazy they may seem¹.

Building on those foundations, they move through the rest of the stages of the wheel.

The chaos of an unbalanced workgroup

A problem in public sector collaborations is that a workgroup is often made up of Coyotes, Competitors and Eagles from different organisations. This can create chaos in innovation activities as they default to stereotype under pressure. As an innovation leader, you have a role in forming the workgroup into a slick, innovation team and managing a balanced team thinking process².

The key to using Tool 10 is to start with yourself and identify the areas of skills development and useful tools you may require, to change from a Coyote, Competitor or mix of the two, into an Eagle. Then you can put your team through the same process to build a coherent problem solving workgroup.

¹ The US advertising executive Charles Brower wrote: A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip and worried to death by a frown.

² Chrislip, D.D. & Larson, C.E. (1994) p4. suggest that good problem solving leadership “inspires commitment to action, leads as a peer problem solver, builds a broad based involvement and sustains hope and participation!”

How can you use this tool?

Tool 10 is a learning exercise to help you gain insight into your current problem solving style. It takes you through the 8 stages of the problem solving wheel, enabling you to identify where you may want to spend time building your skills in particular stages.

It can also be used to develop the skills of your innovation team, but always begin by working on yourself first.

There are three steps in the process:

Step 1: On the opposite page are 40 key statements about approaching problem solving.

If you agree with a statement put a “tick” in the circle. For example:

26. In project planning, I schedule a creative-phase, and plan the best way to manage it.

Or, if you disagree with the statement put an “X” in the circle. For example:

26. In project planning, I schedule a creative-phase, and plan the best way to manage it.

Answer on the basis of what you actually do, and not on the basis of what you imagine is correct.

Step 2: This is explained in detail, 2 pages on and you shouldn’t look at it until you have completed ticking or crossing your numbered statement circles.

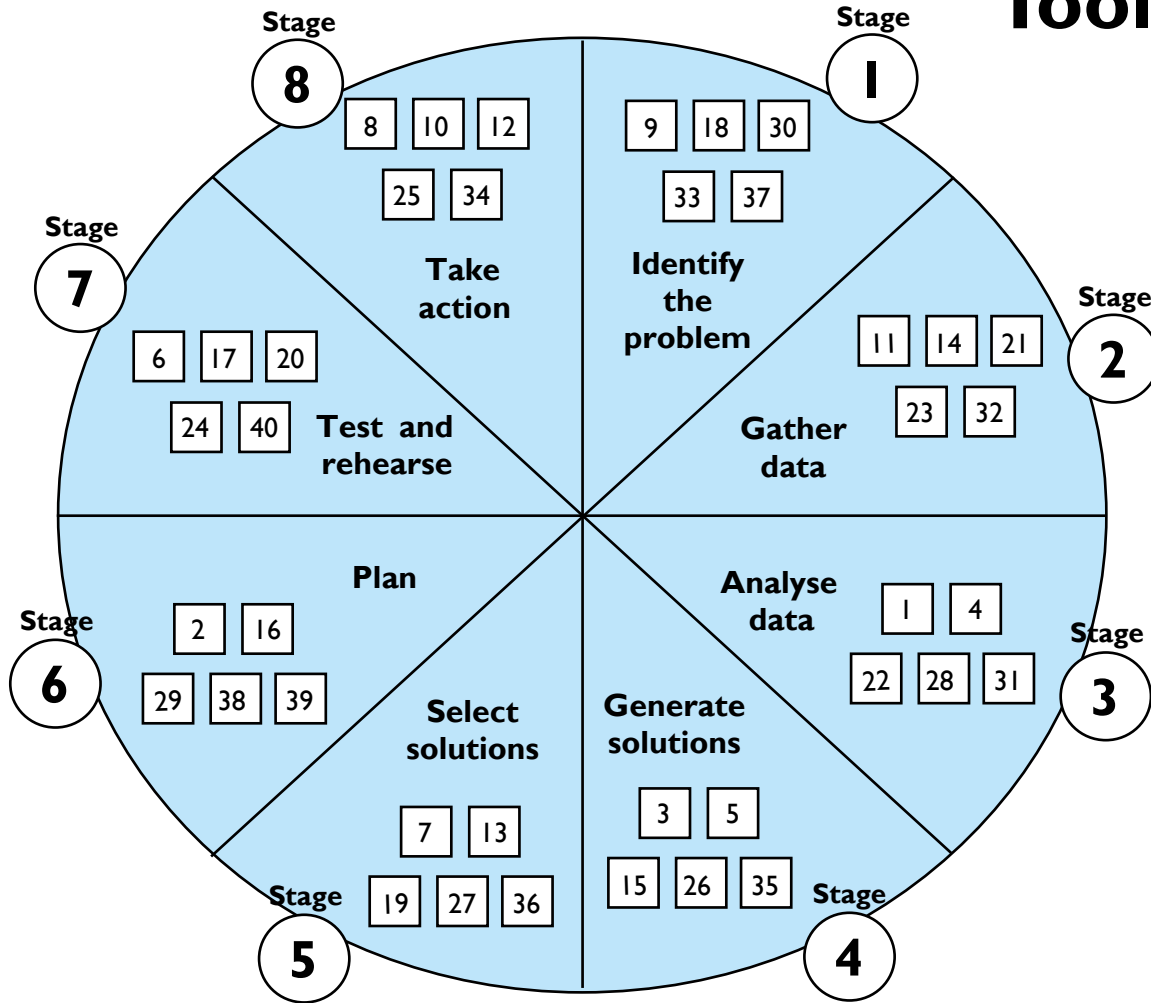
Step 3: This step explores in more detail what this exercise may be telling you about your strengths in the problem solving wheel. You can then develop a personal development plan in the areas where skills improvement will help build your innovation leadership.

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What is your current problem solving style?

- 1. I prefer to stand back from the problem and view it from all perspectives
- 2. I carry out planning in two stages: I determine the key steps and then I look at the detail required.
- 3. I like to develop a wide field of alternative solutions before making a final choice.
- 4. I feel that a study of the relative power of forces within a situation is the key to knowing where change can best be made
- 5. I don't believe in adopting the first idea that comes into my head.
- 6. I believe that the way to gain consensus and commitment is through inviting participants to fine-tune the original plan.
- 7. I like to consider all the available options, comparing them against each other.
- 8. I tend to work on the basis of existing tried and tested solutions, making minor modifications.
- 9. Time spent explaining and restating the problem at the beginning of a meeting to work on it, is never wasted.
- 10. I feel it is better to do something quickly, than to spend too much time thinking about it.
- 11. When I'm working on something, I don't just collect the data that supports my preferred picture of a problem but deliberately collect data that seems to offer contradictions.
- 12. I think it is dangerous to consider too many alternatives.
- 13. I prefer to have a range of practical alternatives before deciding upon a solution.
- 14. I am willing to step back from a situation to consciously capture all of the data to focus on the real problem.
- 15. I always encourage everyone to display and explain all their ideas in their own words.
- 16. I always anticipate the high level of detailed thinking which may be necessary to deliver a course of action.
- 17. I prefer to talk through all aspects of a plan with others to ensure that no areas are omitted before taking any action.
- 18. I don't get irritated with people who talk to little purpose.
- 19. In solving a problem, I draw up criteria for a solution, which can then act as a filter for my wilder ideas.
- 20. A plan is just a piece of paper until it has been subjected to a disciplined review.
- 21. I feel that in order to be accurate, my work must be detailed.
- 22. A key issue is not just the weight of the relevant data, but our ability to discern any trends or messages within it.
- 23. I won't let a project progress without planning to understand all the data available.
- 24. I like to know how my personal contribution, and what we (as a team) jointly contribute, will combine to deliver the final goal.
- 25. If you jump into the situation, you can always modify your approach as you begin to understand more about the problem later on.
- 26. In project planning, I schedule a creative-phase, and plan the best way to manage it.
- 27. I prefer to make a decision based upon clear, logical choices.
- 28. I like to sift out all the problems which cumulatively affect my decisions.
- 29. I will not support a vague general commitment to action.
- 30. I believe that it is essential to produce a clear statement of the problem.
- 31. I tend to sit back and review the individual factors and relationships, which have determined a situation.
- 32. I consciously listen to what other people think before forming my own conclusions.
- 33. When I'm working on a serious issue, the more I learn about the problem, the more the problem itself seems to change.
- 34. I prefer to get on with things rather than spend a lot of time thinking about them.
- 35. I think it is best to work with a wide range of ideas, because it is more likely that the best one will emerge.
- 36. I tend to ignore pressure to accept the obvious solution
- 37. I do not like to undertake a task when the objectives are not clearly specified.
- 38. I feel that it pays to visualise the solution as a stream of activities, which together deliver the solution.
- 39. My attitude is to think things through clearly, before taking action.
- 40. I check everyone's understanding of their own contribution to making the solution work.

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How did you get on?

Let's move to the next step, identifying where your personal areas of problem solving development lie.

Moving your "X"s onto the problem solving wheel...

In the 40 questions on the previous page, you will have marked a number of them with an "X". Each of the 40 questions relates to a particular stage in the problem solving wheel above. For example, in Stage 1 (Identify the Problem) in the wheel above is indicated by the way you answered questions 9, 18, 30, 33 and 37.

This next step is about transferring your "X" marked questions to the problem solving wheel above. For example, if you marked question 9 with an "X", then circle question 9 on the wheel above. This is illustrated in the diagram on the left. Carry out the same activity for all the questions you marked with an "X".

You may have some stages with no marked questions - that is fine and shows that your skill

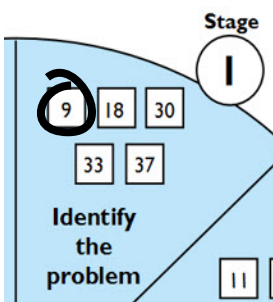
level in those stages is well developed. It's the stages where you have a few circled numbers, in the wheel above, that we want to focus on.

In Stages 1-7: One circled question indicates a possible requirement for skills development. Two highlighted questions in a stage suggest a potential training need for acquiring improved skills to handle that stage of the problem solving process.

In Stage 8: the situation is *reversed*. Any un-circled question indicates a potential area for development. Two un-circled boxes suggests a potential training need.

What is the learning you and for your team?

Once you have transferred all your crosses from the 40 questions onto the wheel, look at the top of the next page to find out what the diagnostic may be saying about you personally.



An example of transferring the "X" questions to the wheel

What could this diagnostic be telling you?

Stage 1: Circling Q.9, 30, 33 or 37 indicates a flaw in your performance as you appear prepared to tackle a problem without a clear understanding of exactly what it is and without clear agreement with colleagues. **Circling Q.18** indicates that you are not a listener and you may be overlooking gems of wisdom that can emanate from less confident colleagues.

Stage 2: Circling Q.11, 14, 21 or 23 alludes to a personality that is willing to guess at solutions without having the full, verified data to hand. **Circling Q.32** indicates that you have Coyote tendencies towards colleagues, writing them off as little value to the problem solving strategy.

Stage 3: Circling Q.1, 4, 22, 28 or 31 in this segment implies that you may have a blockage when it comes to fully recognising what the gathered data is telling you. Ignoring, or not reflecting on what the data tells you is a symptom of Competitor behaviour. The more questions circled, the greater the problem you may be exhibiting.

Stage 4: Circling Q.3, 5 or 35 intimates that you may need to improve your solutions development skills, overcoming that Coyote behaviour of settling for the first option that arises. **Circling Q.15 or 26** intimates a lack of skill in providing creative space for the best, and most innovative, solutions to be generated by yourself and your team.

Stage 5: Circling Q.7, 13, or 36 infers that you dislike having a range of solutions to choose from. It probably feels so much easier if you just latched onto the one you personally think is best. **Circling Q.19 and 27** infers that you do not create decision making strategies for identifying the best solution from a range generated by yourself or your team.

Stage 6: Circling Q.2, 17, 29, 38, or 39 suggests that your planning skills are weak. You are not “chunking” the solution into a manageable delivery plan. As a result, you are probably converting any plan into a new problem, rather than a resolution to the original problem.

Stage 7: Circling Q.6, 17 or 20 shows that you are not a team player when it comes to rolling out a plan. You are exhibiting both Coyote and Competitor behaviours and maybe you need to work hard on your ability to lead a problem solving team. **Circling Q.24 or 40** implies that your connection with the rest of the team’s abilities and input needs to be strengthened.

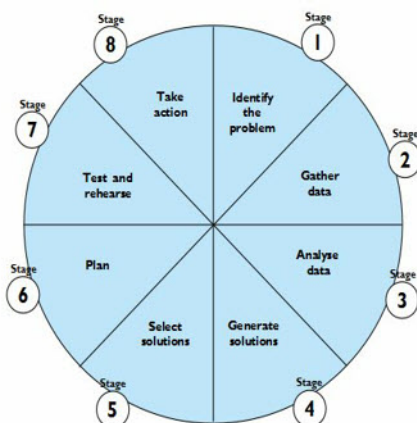
Stage 8: If you have not circled Q.8, 10, 12, 25 or 34 then you are either a Coyote or Competitor. You are indicating a willingness to ignore the key stages of the planning wheel and exclude team members from the problem solving and innovation process.

Then reveal on a flip chart a copy of the wheel that you prepared earlier.

How to complete the diagnostic with your team

To use this diagnostic successfully with your team, make one photocopy of the 40 questions and the diagnostic wheel for each member, but do not give them the table above.

Do this exercise in two chunks.



Firstly ask them to “tick” or “cross” the 40 questions. If it takes them 10 seconds to consider and answer each question, that will require 400 seconds - so roughly 7 or 8 minutes. Do not give them longer than this as the first answer that comes into their head is what we want, not a rationally considered answer that is warped by wondering what they think the answer should be.

Then ask them to transfer their crossed questions to the wheel.

Here’s one I prepared earlier

Then reveal on a flip chart a copy of the wheel that you prepared earlier. It does not have to have the numbered squares in it, just the 8 segments with their titles.

Then work your way round the team, by going through each stage in the wheel, asking people to put up their hands if they have transferred two or more Xs against the statement numbers. Make sure you include your answers in this exercise to exhibit your leadership.

Where people put up their hands, put ticks against that segment. As a result you will be able to see the balance of the team in relation to their problem solving skills.

You can then put in place a strategy for balancing the team’s problem solving approach.

Tool: I0

USER LOG

Projects & date tool used	What was the desired outcome of using this tool?	What actually happened?	What would you do differently next time?