

# PROBLEM SOLVING ON THE JOB

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## AGENDA

- Starter
- Outside the Box
- Consequences, Consequences
- On the Job
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

### Objectives

Students will practice developing alternatives and analyzing consequences in order to solve problems at work.

Students will apply problem solving strategies to specific workplace problems.

### Materials Needed

- White paper, markers, colored pencils, rulers, magazines, glue, scissors, etc. (Part I)
- Copies of a news or magazine article for each student about an allegation of workplace discrimination (Part III)

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**Starter (3 minutes)**

Ask students if they have ever used a correction fluid like Wite-Out or Liquid Paper to fix a mistake they made while writing. If they haven't, explain that correction fluid is a white, paintlike liquid used to hide errors on paper.

Tell students that correction fluid was invented in 1951 by Bette Nesmith Graham, a secretary. Before the advent of word processors and home computers, all typing had to be performed on typewriters. Work done on a typewriter, unlike work done in a word processor, could not be edited before appearing on paper. Therefore, a single mistake—no matter how minor—meant that the whole page had to be retyped from the beginning. Graham, who was proud of being an efficient employee, wanted to find a better way to fix typing errors. One night, she mixed paint and created what she called “Mistake Out”; she soon began using it at work. Her correction fluid quickly became popular, eventually leading her to establish a company that she later sold for \$47.5 million.

Explain to students that, in business, people look for inventive and creative solutions to problems. In this situation, correction fluid solved the problem. Tell students that in this lesson they will be focusing on steps three and four of the problem solving process: develop alternatives and analyze consequences.

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**Part I Outside the Box (20 minutes)**

Purpose: Students develop possible alternatives to solve workplace problems.

**1. Students identify the kinds of problems that occur in the workplace.**

Ask students to list problems that they have experienced at their jobs, including self-employed positions such as babysitting or dog walking. Suggest that students also list job problems that they have heard about from friends or family members. Write student responses where everyone can see. (Students might respond: not knowing how to do a task, scheduling conflicts, a supervisor who doesn't seem to like them, uncooperative or unfriendly co-workers, gender or racial discrimination, sexual harassment, etc.)

**2. Students develop a workplace scenario that calls for creative problem solving.**

Tell students that they are now going to use one of the problems they just listed in order to practice developing alternatives and analyzing consequences.

From the list students developed, choose a problem for them to work on in which inventing a system, process, or object might produce a solution. Ask the class to further develop the situation, providing who, what, when, where, why, and how details. Write student responses where everyone can see as a reference for the next activity.

**3. Students invent possible solutions to the problem that they have developed.**

Ask students if they have ever heard the expression, “Think outside of the box.” Elicit students’ thoughts as to what the saying might mean. Lead them to understand that the saying means considering all possibilities, even those that might seem unusual or strange at first. Point out to students that thinking “outside of the box” is a useful strategy in this step of problem solving, when it is important to consider as many solutions as possible.

Remind students of the story behind correction fluid. Tell students that this is an example of thinking “outside of the box.” Explain that they are now going to create similar inventions to solve the problem that they just discussed.

Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Remind students that their inventions can be objects, systems, or processes. Tell students to try to “think outside of the box” when considering solutions. Tell them that each group will choose one possible invention to present to the class.

Give the groups about five minutes to come up with their ideas.

Provide groups with art materials and instruct them to create visual representations of the inventions that they have decided upon.

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## Part II Consequences, Consequences (10 minutes)

Purpose: Students analyze the consequences of the inventions they created.

### 1. Students present their inventions to the class.

When students have finished working, ask each group to share its invention with the class and explain why it chose the particular invention that it did.

### 2. Students analyze the consequences of their inventions.

After each group presents its project, ask the class, “What are some of the possible consequences of this invention?”

Remind students to consider all possible consequences, both positive and negative. If students need prompting, provide them with examples of the possible consequences of correction fluid (e.g., more work could be performed, as mistakes were easier to fix; less time was needed to prepare a typed document; work might have become sloppier as correcting mistakes became less time consuming).

Have a volunteer write students’ suggestions on the board. When students have exhausted their ideas, review the list that they created. Ask them to determine whether or not the invention seems effective. Also encourage students to consider what other changes might have to take place in order for their inventions to work.

**Part III On the Job (15 minutes)**

*Purpose:* Students apply their problem solving skills to a real workplace issue.

**1. Students learn about the Civil Rights Act.**

Explain that one problem that may occur on the job is discrimination. Explain to students that federal law prohibits discrimination based on:

- Race, color, or national origin
- Age or gender
- Religion
- Pregnancy
- Disability

Many states also have laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, parental status, marital status, and political affiliation.

**2. Students identify possible solutions for problems involving discrimination in the workplace.**

Ask students to suggest possible actions for situations in which they believe that they have been discriminated against on the job. Students may identify some of the following approaches:

- Document instances in which you believe you have been discriminated against by writing down what happened and who was present.
- Check your company's policy or talk to your supervisor to see if what you're experiencing is considered discrimination.
- If you can, use good communication skills to talk to the person and tell them that you believe they are discriminating against you and you want it to stop.
- If the behavior doesn't stop, follow the company policy and take the next step. If necessary, seek help from your supervisor or human resources manager.
- If the person practicing discrimination is your supervisor or the human resources manager, see their supervisor.
- If none of these steps takes care of the problem, file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Go to [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov).
- If you file a complaint, understand that the charges you are bringing are very serious and that you must not take them lightly. The records you have kept will be very helpful in ensuring that the claim is responsibly processed.

**3. Students apply their solutions to an example of workplace discrimination.**

Distribute copies of a news or magazine article relating allegations of workplace discrimination or tell students about an incident with which you are familiar.

Divide students into groups of five or six. Have each group review the situation described in the article and apply steps three and four of the problem solving process by developing possible solutions to the problem and analyzing the consequences.

Ask each group to share its results with the class.

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### Conclusion (2 minutes)

Conclude by asking students to list the four steps of the problem solving process that they have practiced so far. Tell students that the next lesson will focus on the final two steps: make a decision and evaluate the results. Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Thinking “outside of the box” can help you develop many possible solutions to a problem.
- It is important to consider the consequences of potential solutions before making a final decision.
- The Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in the workplace.

### Student Assessment

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1. What are the benefits of thinking “outside of the box”?
2. What can you do if you see discrimination in your workplace?

## LESSON EXTENSIONS

### Using Quotations

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“Each problem has hidden in it an opportunity so powerful that it literally dwarfs the problem. The greatest success stories were created by people who recognized a problem and turned it into an opportunity.” —Joseph Sugarman

Have students brainstorm problems on the job that might be seen as opportunities.

### Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

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Have students write “if, then” statements that might solve problems at work (e.g., “if someone is not willing to share equipment with you, then ask someone else”).

Have students create a book of “if, then” at-work statements.

### Writing in Your Journal

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Have students write about why it is important to be able to solve problems on the job.

Have students discuss ways that being a good problem solver could benefit people in the workplace.

### Using Technology

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Have students create lists of questions for professionals in different fields about the various work problems they encounter. Ask your school’s office manager and principal if your students could send their questions to professionals who are willing to answer them.

Discuss with students the answers that are sent back to your class.

## Homework

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Ask students to interview someone about job-related problems. Ask them to discuss the course of action that the person took in response to these problems. Discuss the results of the interviews. What were the reactions to the problems encountered on the job and the courses of action taken to deal with the problems?

## Additional Resources

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Have students read a story from *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*.

Have students write letters to the author of the story that share their reactions to it.