The logical problem solving process was first identified by Richard Wallen and published widely for the first time in the late 1960s by Edgar Schein in Process Consultation Volume 1 (A really good book for OD Practitioners!). The process has since been widely disseminated and used. It contains the following steps:

1. What are the symptoms? - What problems are presenting themselves?
2. Gather information. What do we know about the problem? What else is going on?
3. Analyse the information. What are the root causes?
4. Generate solutions. Think of all the ways in which the root causes could be addressed.
5. Choose the best solution or combination of solutions that will most effectively eliminate the root cause of the problem.
6. Plan how you will implement the chosen solution or combination of solutions.
7. Implement your plan and test that it is doing what you thought it would.
8. Check that the solution you have implemented has in fact dealt with the problem root cause and decide what can be done next to improve the situation still further.

The Simple Mistakes That Cost Billions Of Pounds

Most people see the symptoms of a problem and attempt to fix it with one of the first ideas that come to mind. We call these people the “one to five hipsters” because they shoot from the hip and miss steps 2, 3 and 4 of the problem solving process. Sometimes this approach is fine because the answer is one that is known. But often, the answer used is not the right one, and when implemented will in fact create new or more problems that were not originally present. Classic examples of this are:

- Unnecessary reorganisations of enterprises – reorganising structure where lack of process is the problem
• High rise flats - dwellings built to improve the quality of life for those who were living in communities of old houses in inner city communities where refurbishment have been a better solution for most.
• You can probably think of your own examples if you take a little time.

As you will realise these solutions created immense problems in their wake. So it is with most incorrectly solved problems.

As you can imagine if we have been solving problems in this faulty way as individuals, in business and in our public sector for year after year we will have been creating layer upon layer upon layer upon layer of problems. If this goes on long enough then as you can imagine we will be left with an immense complex tangle of symptoms and problems that seem almost impossible to unravel. Does this seem familiar?

Who Do You Know That Makes These Mistakes In Problem Solving?

The “one to five hipsters” that we described earlier are those that miss most of the steps in the process. The most important errors come from:-

a) Not understanding the problem because of a failure to gather information in step 2
b) The most important errors come from omitting step 3 and from not knowing how to analyse the problem to identify root cause. (Most people are wholly unaware how to do this. It is not taught at school or college for the most part.)
c) Further limitations are also created by omitting step 4 - the failure to generate as many solutions as possible to address the problem. This means that many more creative and plain better solutions are simply never considered.
d) Sometimes step 6 is done to a certain extent but mostly it is not. Step 7 is easily addressed and the chosen solution albeit often the wrong one will be implemented in some way, shape or form. This is often done in a rather messy way as the planning as not been done to ensure smooth installation.
e) Finally step 8 is omitted or fudged in some way. Primarily because no root cause has not been identified. If you don’t know what problem you are trying to solve how can you measure your effectiveness? What happens instead is that evaluation is not done. An alternative is to claim a series of benefits completely unconnected to be original problem as the worth of the solution. Most often this is an error but sometimes it is a cover up for the fact that the real problem has not been addressed and a great deal of money has been spent!