What's Your Problem Solving Style?

When faced with a problem, which response sounds most like you?

- "I take action and rely on my instincts to point me in the right direction."
- "I think about the problem, consider several possible actions, then choose the one that best fits my objectives."

These responses define the two primary problem solving style preferences - intuitive problem solving and analytical problem solving. Which one best defines your "home base" style and how can you use this understanding to become a better problem solver?

Intuitive problem solvers (*the first response above*) rely on their experience and judgment to quickly size up a situation and take action. By definition, intuition is the way experience translates into action. Therefore, intuitive problem solvers naturally display these kinds of problem solving skills:

- Recognizing the early signs of problems or opportunities (*recognition*)
- Sizing up situations rapidly and seeing the big picture (*integration*)
- Quickly seeing the likely outcome of each possible response (*projection*)
- Ability to decide and act without deliberate analysis (*action*)

There is a strong correlation between experience and effective intuitive decision making. Those who have built a base of knowledge in a particular area over time have the ability to become effective intuitive problem solvers in that area. However, if you are an intuitive problem solver, be aware of these dangers:

- Although your effectiveness is based on speed, this can be dangerous in situations where your internal "signals" are incorrect. Since many intuitive problem solvers don't bother to test or verify their instincts, the very characteristics that make them effective in one situation can turn disastrous in another.

- Others may not be able to easily support your decisions. Why? Because your bias for action can sometimes be perceived as "ready, fire, aim." In these situations you must explain the logic behind your actions so others can see what you see.

- Having experience in a particular area or discipline does not in itself translate into intuitive problem solving skills. What is critical is that you learn from past failures and successes and are able to call upon that knowledge on demand.

How can the intuitive problem solver benefit from more analytic problem solving approaches?

1) Understand that intuition is not the best way to handle all situations. Learn to recognize signs that indicate a more deliberate analysis is needed. These include:
   - new situations – never been faced before, therefore you have no direct base of experience from which to draw upon.
   - complexity – many factors whose relationships need to be understood before determining a course of action.
   - reaction time – the situation does not require immediate action.
   - risk – the consequences of a poor decision are high.
   - other stakeholders – other parties who need to be involved in the decision making process.

2) Learn effective analytical models for situation analysis and decision making. Practice them and understand where they can be used to improve judgments and decision making. The models need to be systematic, visual in nature and repeatable by individuals and workgroups.

Analytical problem solvers (*the second response above*) apply a more measured approach to problems and often rely on analysis before taking action. Analytical problem solvers have skills in these areas:

- Collecting and organizing information to accurately define a problem or situation.
- Applying analysis tools or models to research a situation thoroughly, identify relationships and interactions, and discover subtle clues that help determine the heart of the problem.
- Clearly thinking through the benefits and risks of each alternative course of action.
- Selecting the best course of action.

Analytical problem solvers rely on consistency of thought process to help them sort through and make sense out of complex situations and problems. As such, they are very valuable in situations where analysis must be thorough and complete, and a wise choice of action is critical. However, if you are an analytical problem solver, be aware of these dangers:

- You will tend to apply an analytical approach to all problems, even those whose characteristics do not require rigorous analysis. As a result, you'll tend to "over engineer" solutions and spend too much time doing it.

- You'll miss the "window of opportunity" time for many situations where a good solution now will pay off much better than a great solution later.

- The knowledge you've gained from the past is valuable and needs to be integrated into your problem solving. However, you'll tend not to trust your intuition. As a result, you'll overlook old (but effective) solutions to new problems.

How can analytical problem solvers benefit from more intuitive problem solving approaches?

1) Acquire a wider variety of experience (and feedback) so you can tap into that knowledge when quick response problems arise.
2) Learn and apply effective analytical models for problem solving and decision making and integrate them into the way you think. Learn to shortcut these methods so you can do much of the analysis mentally, rather than formally.
3) Realize that uncertainty is a fact of life in business, and confront it head on rather than allowing it to delay your actions. The main sources of information uncertainty are:
   - Missing information (*lack of*)
   - Unreliable information (*not trustworthy*)
   - Conflicting information (*inconsistent*)
   - Noisy information (*irrelevant*)
   - Confusing information (*complex / hard to understand*)

In the face of uncertainty, use former Secretary of State Colin Powell's 40%/70% rule. He claimed that if he was ever less than 40% confident in a pending decision, he needed to gather more information. But, if he was more than 70% confident, he probably gathered more information than was necessary. In other words, the information "sweet spot" lies somewhere between the two.

The Decision Focus® models for problem solving and decision making help you learn and apply both kinds of problem solving in the situations where they are most beneficial. Decision Focus equips you with the skills needed to optimize your natural problem solving abilities and fill your problem solving gaps with proven methods that endure. Click here to learn more.