

JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING

Joint problem solving is a technique to establish effective and appropriate solutions to problems by involving all the parties who are concerned or affected by the problem. It involves discussion and interaction between managers and workers that results in a binding decision.

PROSPECTIVE USERS:

Joint problem solving can be used in any type of factory that wishes to resolve day-to-day problems by involving all parties concerned in making a joint, binding decision.

PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Joint problem solving can be adopted to resolve a very broad range of problems or unsatisfactory situations including deviations from expected standards which prevent the achievement of objectives. Typical day-to-day problems requiring joint problem solving relate to overtime arrangements, welfare, meals, minor safety issues, training, work processes, and social activities

PROCESS

There are many ways to solve problems, but the most effective ones are when a group gets together, examines the issues, and tries to think of various solutions. This comes from the premise that we can only get so far by ourselves and solutions are much more effective when others are involved.

Steps in implementation

Joint problem solving usually involves *negotiation* in formally established committees or through ad hoc working groups specially formed to investigate and resolve a particular problem. The essential feature is that managers and workers, together, make decisions that are binding. The following steps indicate briefly what is involved in negotiation with a view to joint problem solving:

1. Two or more parties come together and talk with a view of resolving a problem by making compromises and eventually reaching an agreement.
2. Pay close attention to the diversity of the group and any power struggles that may occur based on social status or gender.
3. You cannot negotiate effectively if you are not open to listening objectively to the other side's arguments.
4. Effective negotiation occurs when both parties
 - Separate the people from the problem. Don't attack individuals. Focus on the problem or issue, not the people who represent it.
 - Focus on interests not positions. Try to understand why the other party is making particular demands. Explain your own interests.
 - Identify options for mutual gain. Try to work together to determine several options that may be acceptable.
5. Use objective criteria to evaluate options.



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RESOURCES REQUIRED

The resources required for joint problem solving are limited. They include a meeting room or facility accessible to workers and managers and a designated manager to initiate discussions and negotiations, and follow up on decisions taken.

POSITIVE IMPACT

The benefits of joint problem solving include the following:

- Problems are solved by diverse groups providing more creative and interesting solutions.
- Decisions taken through joint negotiation are generally more binding as they involve buy-in and a sense of empowerment of all parties concerned.

CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS

You cannot have useful joint problem-solving if workers do not feel comfortable sharing ideas with their managers. You need worker input to find the appropriate solution and to ensure that any changes are successfully adopted. You therefore need to create an environment where workers and managers work together to improve the factory. This requires effective communication (see FIP Good Practice Guides: *Internal Communication* and *Social Dialogue and Workplace Cooperation* – an overview).

It is also important to remember that when we work together we must have an open mind and respect the differences within the team. For example, men and women may approach a problem from different perspectives. People of different ages or cultures may also have different approaches. This should not be a stumbling block but rather an advantage, as diverse groups will provide more creative and interesting solutions (see Positive Impact above). Therefore, wherever possible, we should include as many different people as possible in our problem solving discussions.

INDICATORS FOR MONITORING

Indicators would include a record of the number of meetings held between managers and workers to resolve problems as well as the number of problems actually resolved through joint negotiation between managers and workers.

Further Information Available:

FIP References:

Module 1 - Workplace Co-operation

FIP Good Practice Guide – Social Dialogue and Workplace Cooperation: an overview

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