

# HOW THE BEST TEAMS SOLVE PROBLEMS

**Problem-solving skills are playing an increasingly important role in the workplace, says Stefan Doll, but for teams to be successful, and for diversity of thought to flourish, they need people with social skills as well as problem-solving skills.**

**M**ost employers ask for good problem-solving skills, and job applicants are eager to prove that they have them. When the World Economic Forum aimed to predict how technological advancements like AI and automation will transform our labour markets (WEF, Jan 2016, *The Future of Jobs*), problem-solving skills were still on top of the list with 36 percent of all jobs and across all sectors needing this skill. Furthermore,



the report said, “social skills—such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others will be in higher demand ...” and “cognitive abilities (such as creativity and mathematical reasoning) and process skills (such as active listening and critical thinking) will be a growing part of the core skills requirements for many industries.”

Problem-solving skills are hugely desirable now, and they will be increasingly important in future.

The easy problems have been solved already. The complexity of today’s problems requires a range of specialists to collaborate. Very rarely, solutions are developed and implemented by one person in isolation. People usually meet to discuss the design, testing, and implementation of an idea.

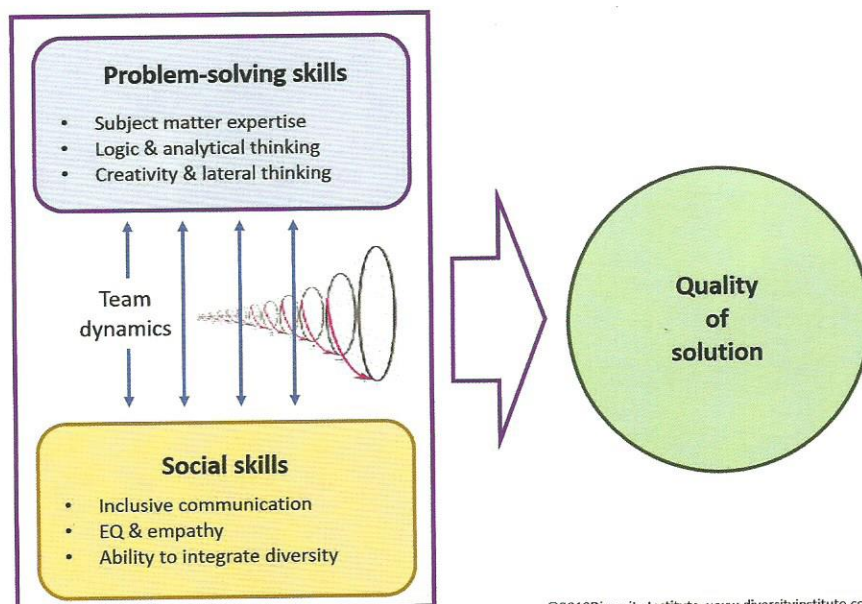
Of course, in business we have a variety of discussions to find the best solution, from what coffee we should provide our staff to how do we overcome bottlenecks on the production line. When two or more people come together with the goal of finding the best possible solution, they need social skills as well as problem-solving skills. Only with good capabilities in both skills sets, will a team have a chance to reach their best solutions, strategies, and decisions.

### THE INTERSECTION OF PROBLEM-SOLVING AND SOCIAL SKILLS

In New Zealand and other western cultures, we are trained to solve problems from an early age. However, we have not been trained to do this effectively in a group of diverse people—which is what most work situations require. Diverse problem-solving teams often lack the right social skills, yet social skills are a critical second dimension to the success of problem-solving teams.

1. **Problem-solving skills.** Those are skills people have in relation to the problem. For example, engineers have skills to identify the cause of an engine failure. People know their subject and can make valuable contributions by applying logic and creativity, analytical and lateral thinking.
2. **Social skills.** Those are skills that take care of the social dynamics

## TWO-DIMENSIONAL PROBLEMS IN DIVERSE TEAMS



between people while solving the problem. For example, people effectively collaborate with good communication, EQ, empathy, and the ability to actively solicit and integrate diversity.

Problem-solving skills, social skills, and team dynamics together determine the quality of the solution. The team cannot utilise the full benefits of its diversity without displaying inclusive communication, EQ, empathy and an ability to integrate diversity.

Every team is diverse when we understand diversity as the different ways we think, feel and act. Some teams are just more diverse than others. In that sense, every team needs those skills. Team members have different strengths in those skill sets. As a team they can complement each other, but ideally each team member has at least a basic skill level in both.

So what can we do to enhance the problem-solving and innovation capabilities of diverse teams in our organisations? Here some tips on how to boost the social skills.

### INVITE DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT

Teams often have good functional diversity—for example, the managers of production, sales, HR, finance come together, or a range of technical

specialists in an R&D team. But research suggests that adding social diversity—for example, a mix of gender and ethnicities—can further increase the problem-solving abilities of the team for two reasons.

First, they bring more diverse perspectives to the issue. Second, according to Katherine W. Phillips (*How Diversity Makes Us Smarter*, Scientific American), adding social diversity “makes people believe that differences of perspective might exist among them and that belief makes people change their behavior.”

Increased social diversity makes us more creative, more diligent and harder-working because, compared to a more homogenous group, we anticipate differences of opinion and challenges. We prepare better and are mentally

**EVERY TEAM IS DIVERSE WHEN WE UNDERSTAND DIVERSITY AS THE DIFFERENT WAYS WE THINK, FEEL AND ACT.**



more awake and present because our brain is forced to process complex and unexpected information and we expect that it will be harder to collaborate and reach an outcome or agreement. Diversity gives our brain a powerful workout.

Diversity of thought can flourish in an inclusive environment, a space of psychological safety, where the contributions of individuals are encouraged, heard, and appreciated no matter how different they are. This can be achieved by applying an opportunity mindset—a mindset that allows us to listen to different views with curiosity, not with judgement. When people see differences as an opportunity, they can resolve those differences and potential conflict in a constructive way.

#### GET EVERYONE TO PARTICIPATE

Make yourself heard if you have a different view or a contribution to make and help others to do so. Sometimes people mistakenly assume they are not loyal to their team when they express a different perspective or dissent. The opposite is the case. Sometimes they don't want to rock the boat and shy away from a discussion. In that case, the team runs the risk of approaching a problem only from one perspective.

A strong desire to reach consensus increases tunnel vision and blind spots. At best, the team arrives at suboptimal solutions, at worst they lose serious money and reputation.

So how can we get everyone to participate and share their views?

- Ask in the meeting invitation for people to come prepared with some thoughts on a specific topic. Introverts will feel more comfortable as they have had time to think through their contribution, while extroverts have time to bring some structure to their thoughts that makes it easier for others to follow.
- At the meeting, give everyone the same time to share their thoughts first, without the whole team starting to discuss them. Only questions to clarify understanding are appropriate in this first round of participation. The timekeeper, facilitator, or chair intervenes when people are taking

## WHEN PEOPLE SEE DIFFERENCES AS AN OPPORTUNITY, THEY CAN RESOLVE THOSE DIFFERENCES AND POTENTIAL CONFLICT IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY.

up more time. Each contribution should be recorded on a whiteboard or post-it to ensure that even the most diverse perspectives are not skimmed over.

- The second round of participation is about reflecting on the contributions made, sharing what resonates and why, prioritising, deciding on what should be further explored and what information is still required.

#### INCREASE TOLERANCE FOR DISAGREEMENTS

Diversity of thought is often smothered by the urge to have consensus. We can encourage diversity of thought with the expectation that there will be (and should be) tensions in the team. For example, there should be a healthy tension between marketing and operations because the needs and desires of those departments are often in conflict. Marketing is coming up with fancy ideas on packaging to attract customers while operations would like to keep it simple and consistent to be more efficient.

If the team articulates the natural tensions between them, it becomes normal to voice different views. Team members also learn about each others' stressors which helps to increase their tolerance towards differences.

Diverse perspectives keep flowing better when we normalise disagreements. We can give team members added responsibilities around boosting the collective social skills of the team. For example, one person takes on the role of a 'process observer'. While it is important for everyone to be mindful

of team dynamics, someone can take the additional responsibility of helping others to listen, speak uninterrupted, and advocate for the use of inclusive language. The process observer is also more likely to intervene when judgements and assumptions are made or when people are getting personal.

Another team member can take on a 'devil's advocate' role to avoid group think. They are mandated to share what could go wrong and why a solution would not work. When those roles are rotated between the team, each member becomes more agile in taking different perspectives and no one person is associated with, for example, being the 'devil's advocate'.

#### GET TO KNOW THE TEAM ON A PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL LEVEL

Connecting on a personal level is the foundation for a safe, empathetic, and caring environment. People who are working together on a regular basis benefit from knowing the person they are working with beyond their positions and relevant skills. What are they interested in outside of work? What happens in their lives? What is important to them?

The personal, human connection allows people to speak up and listen with an open mind. The personal connection enables people to be honest, humble, even vulnerable, which are all expressions of a psychologically safe environment. When we know each other on a personal level, we are more likely to find the right words in case we disagree, and we are more likely to be empathetic when we resolve differences.

In summary, problem-solving teams require problem-solving skills and social skills. Diverse teams successfully solve complex problems when they understand how to interact in an inclusive way, expect to have different views and disagreements, and connect on a personal and emotional level. **ET**

**STEFAN DOLL** is founder and principal consultant at the Diversity Institute ([www.diversityinstitute.co.nz](http://www.diversityinstitute.co.nz)). Contact: [stefan@diversityinstitute.co.nz](mailto:stefan@diversityinstitute.co.nz)

