



EDSICO

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY EDSICO



MASTERING STRUCTURED PROBLEM SOLVING

FROM FIREFIGHTING TO ROOT CAUSE CLARITY

A practical guide to defining problems,
identifying root causes, and implementing
sustainable improvements.



Insights from

MICHAEL MCLEAN

Consultant | Quality Systems & Standards Expert

Mastering Structured Problem Solving

Organisational Problem-Solving Maturity Assessment

Effective problem-solving is not simply about resolving issues quickly. It is about understanding what should be happening, defining the problem clearly, using evidence to identify the root cause, implementing the right solution, and ensuring the improvement is sustained.

This assessment is designed to help you evaluate how consistently these practices are applied across your organisation. It provides a practical view of your current problem-solving maturity, highlights areas of strength, and identifies where greater structure, discipline, and capability may be needed.

The objective is not to achieve a perfect score, but to identify where your organisation can move from reactive problem-solving toward a more structured, evidence-based and sustainable approach.

How to Use This Assessment

Rate each statement from 1 to 4 based on how consistently it reflects your organisation today.

- 1 — Reactive: Rarely in place; largely dependent on firefighting or individuals.
- 2 — Developing: Some practices exist, but they are inconsistent.
- 3 — Established: Practices are generally defined, understood and applied.
- 4 — Leading: Practices are embedded, measured and continuously improved.

1. Start With the Standard — Process Foundation

1. Are expected standards, procedures or process requirements clearly defined before problems are investigated?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Are procedures and work instructions current, practical and accessible to the people performing the work?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Do teams compare actual performance against a documented standard or expected outcome?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Is the actual process understood, rather than relying only on how the process is supposed to work?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Are important process changes reflected in procedures, standards and documentation?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 20

2. DEFINE — Problem Clarity

1. Is the problem clearly defined before possible solutions are discussed?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Does the problem statement describe the specific deviation rather than a broad symptom such as “delays” or “communication”?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Is the scope clear enough to prevent the investigation becoming too broad or too narrow?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Is the operational, financial, quality, safety or delivery impact understood and, where possible, quantified?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Do key stakeholders share the same understanding of the problem being investigated?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 20

3. ANALYSE — Evidence, Variation and Root Cause

1. Are facts, observations and reliable data collected before conclusions are reached?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Are assumptions and opinions clearly separated from verified evidence?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Is the quality, completeness and reliability of the available data assessed?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Do teams examine process variation and distinguish normal variation from unusual or special causes where relevant?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Are structured root cause tools such as 5 Whys, Fishbone, process mapping or data analysis used appropriately?

Score (1–4): _____

6. Are suspected root causes validated with evidence before corrective action is approved?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 24

4. EXECUTE — Solution Design and Controlled Implementation

1. Are proposed solutions clearly linked to verified root causes rather than symptoms?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Are alternative solutions considered before a preferred option is selected?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Are risks, downstream impacts and unintended consequences considered before implementation?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Are significant changes tested on a controlled or limited scale where practical?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Are employees and stakeholders who understand the process involved in solution design and implementation?

Score (1–4): _____

6. Are expected outcomes and success measures agreed before implementation begins?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 24

5. SUSTAIN — Verification, Standardisation and Learning

1. Are results measured against the original problem statement and agreed success criteria?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Is evidence used to confirm that the improvement actually worked?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Are successful improvements incorporated into procedures, standards, training and normal ways of working?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Are improvements monitored over time to detect regression or new variation?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Are lessons learned captured and shared across relevant projects, teams or business areas?

Score (1–4): _____

6. When a solution does not work, does the organisation return to analysis rather than forcing the solution to continue?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 24

6. Leadership, Culture and Systems Thinking

1. Do leaders focus on understanding how the system allowed a problem to occur rather than immediately identifying someone to blame?

Score (1–4): _____

2. Do employees feel safe raising problems, errors and concerns early?

Score (1–4): _____

3. Do leaders provide sufficient time, resources and support for proper investigation rather than demanding only immediate fixes?

Score (1–4): _____

4. Are employees trained in structured problem-solving methods relevant to their roles?

Score (1–4): _____

5. Are cross-functional teams encouraged to investigate problems that span organisational boundaries?

Score (1–4): _____

6. Are people recognised for preventing recurrence and improving systems, not only for “saving the day” during crises?

Score (1–4): _____

7. Is continuous improvement treated as part of normal work rather than a separate initiative?

Score (1–4): _____

Section Score: _____ / 28

Overall Maturity Score

Total Score: _____ / 140

Maturity Percentage: $\text{Total Score} \div 140 \times 100 =$ _____ %

Interpretation

25–44% — Reactive: Firefighting, individual dependency and symptom correction dominate.

45–59% — Developing: Structured practices exist but are inconsistently applied.

60–74% — Established: Core problem-solving practices are generally embedded.

75–89% — Advanced: Strong evidence-based and process-focused capability.

90–100% — Leading: Problem solving is embedded as an organisational learning capability.

Your Problem-Solving Profile

Strongest area:

Lowest-scoring area:

Most important recurring problem currently facing the organisation:

One behaviour we should stop:

One capability we should strengthen:

One improvement we can begin in the next 30 days:

Three Priority Actions

Priority 1: _____

Owner: _____

Target Date: _____

Priority 2: _____

Owner: _____

Target Date: _____

Priority 3: _____

Owner: _____

Target Date: _____

Closing Reflection

A mature problem-solving organisation is not one that experiences fewer problems. It is one that understands problems earlier, learns from them faster, and prevents them from becoming recurring failures.

Summary & Next Steps

After completing the checklist:

- Identify areas where reactive firefighting is replacing structured problem-solving.
- Assess whether problems are clearly defined before solutions are implemented.
- Evaluate how effectively evidence and data support decision making.
- Strengthen the use of standards, documentation, and process discipline.
- Embed sustainable improvements through root cause analysis and continuous improvement.
- Foster a culture that improves systems and processes rather than assigning blame.

Organisations that consistently solve problems at the root cause level reduce recurring issues, improve operational performance, increase customer satisfaction, and create a culture of continuous learning and excellence.

Need Support?

If your assessment identifies opportunities to strengthen your organisation's problem-solving capability,

EDSICO can help.

 [Book a Free Consultation with EDSICO](#)

👉 <https://edsico.com.au/>

✉ Email: info@edsico.com.au

🔗 Or [reach out via LinkedIn](#)

Watch the full podcast episode.

Hear from Mark McLean | a veteran consultant with decades of experience across engineering, quality systems, and ISO standard development

👉 [Watch the full episode on YouTube](#)

Use this checklist alongside the ebook to assess your organisation's problem-solving maturity, identify improvement opportunities, and build a sustainable culture of operational excellence through structured problem-solving