

Winnie the Pooh and Problem Solving*

By Stephen C. Finch

In the Hundred Acre Wood lives Winnie the Pooh and all his friends – Eeyore, Owl, Rabbit, Piglet, and Tigger. Everyday Pooh faces life's problems, and being a "bear of Very Small Brain," he has trouble solving them. "Prob...lem...sol...ving?" Pooh said slowly, scratching his head. "That sounds like a 'what'. The 'whats' are easy. It's the 'hows' that are difficult." With these fictional characters and their world as a setting, authors Roger E. Allen and Stephen D. Allen have crafted a fun, yet instructive story.

And so it is that The Stranger, a visitor to the Wood, teaches and explains the unique SOLVE Problem-Solving Method, a step-by-step system of identifying, analyzing, and resolving problems. Pooh learns all the principles of practical problem solving, which can be applied as easily to rescuing Tigger from high up in a tree as to the many challenges that are part of today's rapidly changing and complex world.

We are not unlike Pooh, in that we also face problems every day in our business and personal life. However, not being a "bear of Very Small Brain," we can learn to solve them successfully. Let's take a brief look at the SOLVE process.

"S" – Select the Problem or Situation. The Stranger says, "One thing that I want to stress. We decide that the nature of problems that came to you was that they could be simple or complex, single or multiple, subjective or come to you disguised, and that emotional factors or attitudes of yours or of those involved can affect your solutions and how you deal with the problems." The Stranger went on to say, "When you are selecting a problem, you must be careful that you have selected the problem you want or need to solve. As Phaedrus wrote, 'Things are not always what they seem.'"

"O" – Observe, Organize, and Define Problems. "Once we have decided what the problem is, the next step is to Observe the problem or situation, Organize the different parts, and begin to Define them. We do this by deciding where things are now, where we would like them to be – which would be our goal – and by noticing anything that might be in the way of achieving our goal," said the Stranger.

"L" – Learn by Questioning. The Stranger went on to say, "The reason we ask questions during this part of the process is to confirm the facts of the problem or to verify some of what is already known. We might want to ask questions to find out things that we don't know or to fill in gaps where we do know. We ask questions to gauge the relative importance of different elements."

"V" – Visualize Possible Solutions. "We'll see how creativity and experience are helpful in thinking up solutions, how you can take different approaches depending on the problem, and even some useful techniques that will help you come up with more solutions when you can't think of any. Of course, once we have thought of some solutions, we'll need to review them and pick the best one, and then spend a little more time refining our best solution to improve our chance of success," the Stranger explained to Pooh and Owl.

“E” – *Employ the Solution and Monitor Results.* As the Stranger further explained to Pooh, “Once you have Selected, Observed and Learned all about your problem, and you have Visualized Possible solutions and chosen one, the final step is to put that solution into place. The way that is done is to ‘create a path from here to there,’ then to ‘test on a small scale’ and finally to ‘Employ Your Solution and Monitor Results.’ “So when we have chosen a solution,” continued The Stranger, “we create an Action Plan that lists all of the things we must get or do to be able to put our plan into use.” One more thing the Stranger cautioned, “When we Employ the Solution we’ve chosen, it is important to really watch for signs as to whether the solution is working or not working as well as we would like, we can still change and adapt it, whereas if we aren’t open to the signs, our solution could fail and we wouldn’t have a clue as to why. This is called ‘feedback.’”

Pooh summarizes the process with a “Pooh Poem.”

*“Select the problem of the day,
Finding one that’s right to do,
You can choose it either way,
You pick it or it picks you.*

*Observe it very carefully.
‘Where do I start? Where am I going?’
And don’t forget about the bee,
‘What’s in the way of doing or knowing?’*

*Learn all you can by asking a lot,
But in the right order, as they are now,
Mostly Whys and then some Whats,
Then Where and When and Who and How.
(And after each, ask Why again.)*

*Vis-u-a-lize ideas, of course,
We think our thoughts, and hope that they
Will put the cart behind the horse,
And not around the other way.*

*Employ the best idea found,
And watch what happens most precisely,
Making sure by looking ‘round,
That things are working out quite nicely.”*

*Allen, Roger E. and Stephen D. Allen, (1995). Winnie-the-Pooh on Problem Solving. New York, NY: Dutton, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc.

All text in quotation marks taken directly from Winnie-the-Pooh on Problem Solving.

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