

# Problem Solving

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## Without An Elephant

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One question: Would you like to learn a technique that might make the problem-solving process work more efficiently and perhaps, just perhaps, produce better results? In this article, Nancy Yeend presents the W-I-N method.



Of course, you know how to solve problems—that is what you do for a living. One question: Would you like to learn a technique that might make the problem-solving process work more efficiently and perhaps, just perhaps, produce better results?

### **Define the Problem**

The John Godfrey Saxe’s poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, is an example of how people can view the same situation from very different perspectives.

*“It was six men of Indostan*

*To learning much inclined,*

*Who went to see the elephant*

*Though all of them were blind,*

*That each by observation*

*Might satisfy his mind.”*

Each person approached the elephant from a different angle or perspective. The person, who touched the trunk, said it was a snake; the person who touched the leg, said it was a tree; the person who touched the tail, said it was a rope; and so it went.

It depends where people stand when defining a problem, just like where the men stood when examining the elephant. Saying, “I want a million dollars” does not define a problem. The “I want” is actually a quick fix solution and does not define the problem or clarify the situation that a person wants changed. Most people do not take the time to define the problem before they start haggling over potential solutions. This becomes a major reason of why negotiations break down.

### **W-I-N Method**

To avoid the mistakes that Saxe’s poem illustrates, it is important to remember that people define a problem from their own perspective. One helpful approach is to consider the W-I-N technique.

The “W” in the W-I-N method represents what a person says he/she “wants”. It is their idea of a solution, but it fails to explain the situation or define the problem. To fully define a problem, a person cannot linger on the “I want”, but must move on and consider all aspects of the situation.

The “I” represents the situation, as it “is”, according to each person involved in the dispute. The “is” represents a mixture of both facts and perceptions. Listening to how a person describes the situation, the circumstances, their impressions of the other side, and related factors helps clarify the situation and further defines the problem to be resolved.

The “N” stands for the underlying human “needs.” This last element is critical, and yet often skipped in the rush to find resolution. Typical “needs” are recognition, validation, acknowledgement the other person was wrong, etc. Understanding a person’s basic “needs” provides insight into a wider variety of ways to solve a problem, thus identifying a broader spectrum of potential solutions.

Some examples of solutions that meet basic “needs” include receiving a good job recommendation, getting enough money to pay medical expenses, confidentiality, staying in business, avoiding significant tax consequences, maintaining a relationship, future rights, prevention, finality, etc. The list is a varied as the people trying to solve the problem. Understanding and meeting the “needs” of people involved in a dispute is the key to finding solutions that work and last. Also, meeting

basic human “needs” often produces settlements that are not exclusively about money. Sometimes a sincere, heart-felt apology and acknowledgment of having done something wrong, settles a case. Taking responsibility for making a mistake helps satisfy the other person’s “need” for acknowledgment, recognition, and/or validation.

### **Examples**

Example 1: When a 48-year old man with a high school degree, who worked for a company for 30 years, was let go and given a “modest” severance package, he filed a wrongful termination suit, arguing age discrimination, and demanding one year’s salary, because a 30-year old woman was hired. W-I-N analysis:

Want: One year’s salary.

Is: “I was discriminated because of age and gender.”

Needs: Acknowledgement for 30 years of service; recognition for a job well done; economic need for continued income; and sense of justice and fair treatment—not discriminated against.

As it turns out, the younger woman had a college degree, was proficient in technology, and the company was going to expand and invest in a total makeover in all aspects of the company’s technology programs. The case settled, in other words the problem was resolved, when the company disclosed their new changes, and the man acknowledged that he did not have the requisite skills. The man’s needs were met, because he was given a larger severance package that included paying for him to attend a program that would improve is technology and computers skills, and he received a glowing recommendation and assistance with finding a new job.

Example 2: A homeowner who hired a contractor to build a custom home threatened to sue the builder for many problems, including a “damaged” marble kitchen counter, and the inlaid stone patio and driveway were not completed before winter. The homeowner refused to pay for work completed and did not want the contractor to do any more work on the property. W-I-N analysis:

Want: Replace the entire 35 feet of marble kitchen counter, not pay for the work completed, and get another contractor to finish the job.

Is: “I was taken advantage of by the contractor who damaged the counter and dragged the project on past the original completion date.”

Needs: Recognition by having a spectacular home with custom kitchen; and being “right” and the contractor being “wrong” for not completing the project on time.

Once everyone sat down with a mediator and started to discuss the situation, several factors emerged, which helped getting the problem resolved. The contractor admitted that one of his workmen damaged a 12-inch square section of the counter. Instead of replacing the entire counter, the damaged area was cut out and replaced with intricate inlay of the owner's family crest. The project had not been completed on time, as the owner had made over 300 "change orders", which were the sole reason for the delay. Although the owner never acknowledged that he was the cause of the delays, the contractor apologized for the delays, and the owner allowed the contractor to complete the work. The owner also paid for all work and materials.

In these examples, the demands were replaced with defining the "problem" and focusing on sharing information, clarifying the circumstances, and allowing people to see the situation from more than just their perspective. The key was meeting basic human needs: acknowledgement, recognition, validation, economics, fairness, and the list goes on depending on the circumstances and individuals involved.

### **Conclusion**

When a problem is fully defined and resolved, invariably the original requested solution, the "I want", is often different from the actual final settlement. Try the W-I-N method and see how it helps clarify perspectives, define the problem or situation to be resolved or changed, and aids in finding more lasting solutions without having an elephant in the room.

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