

### **Introduction**

An ACC student is balancing a full-time job, the needs of their family, and ACC courses. Their job is always stressful at this time of year because of the seasonal nature of their work. In addition, they have taken on some overtime hours in order to help pay for their education. It is the last week of a class and the student is having difficulty finding the time to write their final paper. They find that they are spending more time driving the kids to soccer practice and piano lessons than on studying. Now on top of everything, they realize that one of their learning team members is not coming through with their part of the research for the final team presentation due in a few days. The student is worried because their grade in this class is already low and now they wonder if they will have to repeat the class. They need to make a decision. However, before this decision can be made, the problem must be framed. What exactly is the problem here?

### **Objective**

Defining the objective can actually assist in determining the problem itself. A series of questions is helpful. What is the situation now? How should the situation look once the problem is solved? What is the gap between the two? Determining how the situation should look once the problem has been solved gives the decision maker the objective. In the situation with our student, the situation at the moment is that their grades are low and in danger of getting worse. Once the problem is solved, their grades should be at an acceptable level. Their grades are the problem, not their job, their children, or their teammate. Goals will help keep the student on track while solving the problem can give them definable steps toward reaching their objective. One of their goals might be to produce high quality papers; another might be to deliver a professional learning team presentation. A parallel goal might be to maintain the academic standards of ACC. Criteria will give them measurable indicators of the objective and put constraints on the types of solutions they can consider. Criteria in this situation may include a time frame, a budget, and the level of acceptability in their grades.

Finally the effects of the problem must be considered. At this point it is important to consider what would happen if nothing were done about the problem. Brainstorming is a good tool to use to help identify possible effects. What are the effects of the problem right now? What further effects could the problem lead to in the future? The effects will assist the decision maker in determining the urgency of the decision. If the effects of the problem are inconsequential, the problem may not be worth solving at all.

### **Summary**

Problems and opportunities: both require decisions to be made. But framing the problem accurately must precede the decision. One common mistake in identifying the problem is that symptoms are sometimes mistaken for the problem itself. In the situation mentioned above, some of the symptoms would be a demanding job, active children, and a team member who isn't delivering. Although any one of these things may capture the attention of the student at any given moment, these are symptoms, not the problem itself. How do we know this? We know this because the removal of any one of the symptoms would not solve the problem. According to Golub (1997), "For purposes of decision analysis, a problem is operationally defined as the difference between a current and some preferred situation" (p. 27).

### **References:**

Golub, A.L. (1997). *Decision Analysis*. New York: Wiley.