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## Problem Solving - Problem or Symptom?

“A problem well-defined is a problem half solved.”

~Anonymous

Describing a problem may well be the most important step in the entire problem solving process. Without an accurate problem description, all other steps will be useless. An accurate problem description leads to the discovery of one root cause and one corrective action for a problem. Failure to develop an accurate problem description can lead to three difficulties:

- Problem is undefined, can't fix anything
- Multiple root causes
- Multiple corrective actions

Many problems linger and recur because only the Symptom is addressed. The terms *Problem* and *Symptom* are often used, mistakenly, to mean the same thing. One of the major obstacles to solving your problems is your tendency to refer to a Symptom as a Problem. If you think that the loss of customers is a problem, think again. Losing customers is a symptom of a problem somewhere in the process. In other words, a Problem occurring in a process, if left uncorrected, will eventually produce a detectable Symptom.

Developing the habit of using the proper terminology when referring to problems will go a long way to helping you and your people become effective problem solvers.

How do you accurately describe a problem?

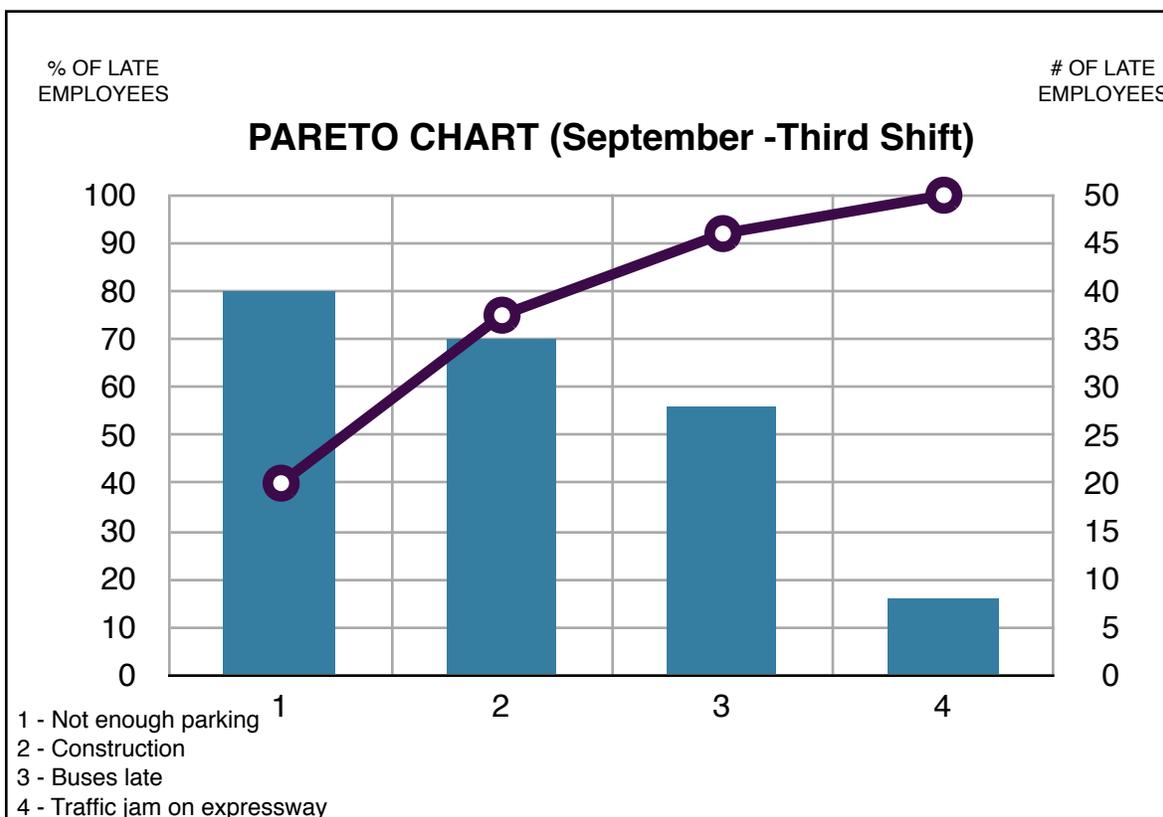


First, understand that there are three elements that must be included in the problem description. they answer the questions, “What’s wrong with what?”, “How big?”, and “How much?”:

- **Object:** the component (thing) or situation
- **Concern:** the specific defect or issue
- **Quantification:** the numerical information that describes how many components with that particular defect have been identified, including the date the initial Symptom was detected.

Second, use the simple tool of ‘Repeated Whys’ to drill down to the problem. Repeated Whys are asked until, eventually, I level of problem definition is reached that can be acted upon. This involves asking, “Do you know why?”. All responses should then be questioned again with “Do you know why?” until the response “I don’t know why?” is given. At this point both the *Object* and *Concern* have been identified. Only *Quantification* remains to be defined. *Quantification* involves finding out when the Symptom first occurred and how many defects are involved.

The tool to use to quantify the problem is typically the Pareto Chart. Named after its creator, it provides a visual representation of the number of occurrences of each potential problem from the data gathered during your investigation (see example).



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Imagine what you'll be able to accomplish when you spend most of your time inventing new ways to delight your customers with new products and services instead of dealing with recurring problems!

Take the first step and invest a little extra time and effort in fully and accurately describing your problems... and reap rich dividends in the long run!

