

## BREAKING DOWN PROBLEMS ACTIVITY

A key part of problem-solving is breaking problems down into smaller parts so you can deal with each part separately instead of trying to do everything at once. If we don't break it down, a problem can overwhelm us, causing us to either avoid it (with our head in the sand) or attempt to eliminate it, usually along with everything else around it.

### Instructions

Practice helps us get better at breaking down problems down. This activity presents four scenarios. For each scenario, you will need to:

- a) state the problem
- b) list the individual sub-problems
- c) prioritise the sub-problems  
*(order them from most important to least important)*
- d) list solutions
- e) check that your solutions cover all the sub-problems

For example, let's say you work at a supermarket. One day, you overload a shelf with wine bottles because you can't be bothered to return the extras to the storeroom. As a result, the shelf breaks, causing more than 30 wine bottles to crash to the floor. Shattered glass and wine get everywhere.



Our first step is to state the problem: *There is a broken shelf, with broken glass and spilled wine on the floor.*

Next we list the individual sub-problems that we can see:

- *The broken glass, which is dangerous because someone could get cut by it.*
- *The spilled wine, on which someone could slip and possibly get hurt.*
- *The broken shelf, which can no longer be used to hold stock.*
- *The cost of the broken wine bottles, which the shop can no longer sell.*
- *The customers who want to buy wine but can't because the mess is blocking access.*
- *Your laziness, which was the cause of the problem in the first place.*

Then we identify possible solutions:

- *Ask any customers in the area to leave. Apologise to them for the inconvenience.*
- *Report the problem immediately to the supervisor.*
- *Get help to close off the area (using cones or tape as per store policy).*
- *Put on some gloves to minimise the risk of getting cuts while picking up the glass.*
- *Get a mop and bucket to clean the floor once all the glass is removed.*
- *Replace the broken shelf with a spare.*
- *Restock the shelf.*
- *Remove the safety barriers to allow customers access again.*
- *Explain to the supervisor what happened and why, apologise and make a commitment that it won't happen again.*

Lastly, we check that the solutions we came up with cover all the sub-problems we identified: We're dealing with the customers, cleaning up the glass and spilled wine, replacing the broken shelf and restocking it and then talking to our supervisor and accepting responsibility for our actions. Looks like we got it all covered! Ka pai!



Now it's your turn! Turn to the next page to get started on the first scenario.

## SCENARIO 1



You work in the forestry sector. It's your third day on the job, and you're beginning to realise that you're not as fit as you thought you were. Also, you're not so great with ladders ... or heights! You really need the job, but you're finding it very stressful.

It doesn't help that your supervisor has been giving you a tough time because your work output is lower than that of your workmates.

Upon arriving at the pruning site, you decide to work about 1km away from the rest of the crew. You don't have a cell phone. As you

climb the ladder, you twist your ankle. You can see it swelling in your boot. It hurts like hell!

**The problem is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The sub-problems are:**

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

4) \_\_\_\_\_

5) \_\_\_\_\_

**The possible solutions are:**

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

## SCENARIO 2



You are picking kiwifruit in Katikati. It's been a long day, and you're tired and sore from lugging around so many 15kg bags of fruit.

Toward the end of the day, you notice one of your workmates smoking. As you get closer, you realise it's marijuana.

Walking over to him, you tell him he's being stupid and that he'll be fired instantly if he gets caught.

Right at that moment, your supervisor comes around the corner into your row.

He smells the marijuana and comes marching straight toward the two of you, looking furious!

**The problem is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The sub-problems are:**

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

4) \_\_\_\_\_

5) \_\_\_\_\_

**The possible solutions are:**

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

### SCENARIO 3



You work in a hair salon. It's your third month, and you're enjoying the work.

Today, an older woman has come in to have her hair coloured, and your supervisor has given you the task of mixing the dye. You're feeling nervous because you've never done it before.

Although you're careful to follow the instructions, the phone rings while you're in the middle of mixing.

When you get back to the task, you can't remember what step you were up to, but

you feel sure you've got it right, so you hand the mix over to the stylist.

The woman had asked for a dark auburn colour. Unfortunately, what she gets is a shocking pink! The customer panics. She wants it fixed! She's threatening not to pay and not to ever come back. Your supervisor is furious. You start to cry.

**The problem is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The sub-problems are:**

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_

**The possible solutions are:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## SCENARIO 4



You work on a super yacht in the Mediterranean. Your job is a hostess, handing out drinks and food and making sure the guests are comfortable.

You have been instructed to be pleasant, helpful and friendly and to deal with all problems quietly and efficiently.

One of the male guests keeps patting you on the bottom each time you pass him. You try to keep away from him, but he follows you around the boat.

As the day passes, the man gets drunker, and he becomes pushier, wanting your attention more and more. At one point, as you leave the bathroom, he is standing at the door, not letting you past. He attempts to kiss you.

**The problem is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The sub-problems are:**

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_

**The possible solutions are:**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_