Problem solving

Lesson code: 117I-Q6C8-7IQH

UPPER INTERMEDIATE +

American English

1 Problems and solutions

In pairs, study the following sentences and complete the definitions below with the underlined terms.

If you have a problem with your computer, call Mike. He's very good at <u>troubleshooting</u>.

You could try emailing Kate. It's a bit of a <u>long shot</u>, though - she rarely replies.

After a slight <u>hiccup</u>, we managed to launch the product on time.

Taking out a loan to pay for your bills is just a <u>quick fix</u>. You will need to find a more permanent solution.

Lack of employee motivation is a serious <u>obstacle</u> to a company's financial success.

The television screen isn't very clear. I think there must be some sort of <u>defect</u>.

Scientists are studying <u>long-term solutions</u> to the problem of global warming.

1. _____ : a technical problem that prevents something from working properly
2. _____ : a problem which causes a delay but is not very serious
3. _____ : a solution that has little chance of being successful
4. _____ : something that prevents you from making progress
5. _____ : a fast and easy solution that solves a problem only for a short time
6. _____ : discovering and solving problems
7. _____ : solutions which solve a problem for an extended period of time

Can you think of any other examples of quick fixes or long-term solutions? Describe a hiccup or obstacle you've had to deal with in your work.

2 Describing problems

Study the following adjectives:

critical	insignificant	irrelevant	minor	ongoing
persistent	severe	trivial	unimportant	urgent

Which five adjectives describe problems or issues that usually need serious attention?

Now describe the following problems using the adjectives from this exercise:

1. You are stuck in traffic and will be a few minutes late for your English lesson.
2. Your computer suddenly breaks down.
3. You are making breakfast and you discover that you have run out of coffee.
4. One of your coworkers is late for work almost every day.
5. A financial crisis has seriously affected your company's profits.
6. You are in an important business meeting and it starts to rain outside.

3 Problem solving

Listen to two telephone dialogues and answer the questions with '1', '2', or 'both'.

1. Which dialogue involves a technical problem?
2. In which dialogue was the problem resolved?
3. In which dialogue was the problem considered very urgent?

Now listen again and complete the dialogues:

Dialogue 1

A: Technical support.

B: Hello Sam, it's Becky here.

A: Hello Becky. What seems to be the problem?

B: Well, _____ [1] sending emails.

A: _____ [2] ?

B: Well, when I click on the 'Send' button, the emails just remain in the outbox and don't get sent.

A: _____ [3] closing and opening the program?

B: Yes, I have. It didn't help at all.

A: _____ [4] restarting your computer?

B: I've done that too. No change either. Has something gone wrong with the server again?

A: I don't think so. Everything's working fine for me... Hmm... _____ [5] somehow altered the settings on your email program. Either that or _____ [6] your internet connection.

B: _____ [7] the connection. I have no problems accessing the internet.

A: Hmm. _____ [8] your settings. _____ [9] and try to sort it out.

B: Thanks.

Dialogue 2

A: Hi Daniel, _____ 10 . I'm at the conference and I've got my presentation on in 25 minutes but the damn laptop just crashed on me and I've lost all my PowerPoint slides!

B: Good grief! _____ 11 it won't even start up?

A: Yes, exactly.

B: OK, let's not panic. _____ 12 made a backup of the data?

A: Yes, I did actually. There should be a CD on my desk.

B: Yes, I can see it from here. Look, _____ 13 you get with the organizers and have them reschedule your presentation. _____ 14 my assistant with a replacement laptop.

A: _____ 15 . The conference center seems quite far from our office. How long will it take her to get here?

B: Only about 30 minutes, assuming the traffic doesn't hold her up. So, _____ 16 arrange your presentation for 3 o'clock.

A: _____ 17 . I'll go and sort it out right away.

Now put the underlined expressions from the dialogues in the following categories:

Declaring a problem: _____

Finding out more details: _____

Diagnosing a problem: _____

Making a suggestion: _____

Accepting a suggestion: _____

Rejecting a suggestion: _____

Taking action: _____

Add the following expressions to the above categories:

1. It looks like you've...[+ PAST PARTICPLE]
2. Why don't you try [+ verb -ing]?
3. Yes, that could work.
4. I can see one or two problems with that idea.
5. I'll get with our suppliers right away.

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4 Role play

In pairs, role-play the following situations using the expressions from this lesson. Take turns to be Coworker A and Coworker B.

Problem 1: You can't get hold of the sales director and you need to speak to her immediately because one of your clients has an urgent request.

Coworker A	Coworker B
Declare the problem. Provide details: She's not answering her calls. You've tried emailing her. Accept or reject suggestions. Take action.	You want to know more details: Is she not answering her calls? Has Coworker A tried emailing? Diagnose the problem and make suggestions.

Problem 2: You haven't received any payment from one of your clients.

Coworker A	Coworker B
Declare the problem. Provide details: The payment was due one month ago. You've sent the invoice twice. You've sent an email reminding the client. You haven't called the client about it. This is the first time you've had a problem with this client. Accept or reject suggestions. Take action.	You want to know more details: When was the payment due? Has the client received the invoice? Has Coworker A emailed the client? Has Coworker A called the client? Is this the first time? Diagnose the problem and make suggestions.

Problem 3: One of your best clients is thinking about switching to one of your competitors.

Coworker A	Coworker B
Declare the problem. Provide details: The competitor is offering a cheaper price. You have offered your client a 5 percent discount. Accept or reject suggestions. Take action.	You want to know more details: Why? Has Coworker A offered the client a discount? How much? Diagnose the problem and make suggestions.

Dialogue 1

A: Technical support.

B: Hello Sam, it's Becky here.

A: Hello Becky. What seems to be the problem?

B: Well, I'm having some trouble sending emails.

A: Can you be a bit more specific?

B: Well, when I click on the 'Send' button, the emails just remain in the outbox and don't get sent.

A: Have you tried closing and opening the program?

B: Yes, I have. It didn't help at all.

A: What about restarting your computer?

B: I've done that too. No change either. Has something gone wrong with the server again?

A: I don't think so. Everything's working fine for me... Hmm... sounds like you may have somehow altered the settings on your email program. Either that or it could have something to do with your internet connection.

B: I'm not sure it's the connection. I have no problems accessing the internet.

A: Hmm. In that case it's probably your settings. I'll come over and try to sort it out.

B: Thanks.

Dialogue 2

A: Hi Daniel, it looks like we have a serious problem. I'm at the conference and I've got my presentation on in 25 minutes but the damn laptop just crashed on me and I've lost all my PowerPoint slides!

B: Good grief! Are you saying it won't even start up?

A: Yes, exactly.

B: OK, let's not panic. I don't suppose you made a backup of the data?

A: Yes, I did actually. There should be a CD on my desk.

B: Yes, I can see it from here. Look, what I suggest is that you get with the organizers and have them reschedule your presentation. I'll send down my assistant with a replacement laptop.

A: I'm not sure about that idea. The conference center seems quite far from our office. How long will it take her to get here?

B: Only about 30 minutes, assuming the traffic doesn't hold her up. So, the best thing would be to arrange your presentation for 3 o'clock.

A: Right, that makes sense. I'll go and sort it out right away.

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1 Problems and solutions

1. defect
2. hiccup
3. long shot
4. obstacle
5. quick fix
6. troubleshooting
7. long-term solutions

2 Describing problems

Usually needing serious attention: urgent, ongoing, persistent, severe, critical

Answers may depend on the personal experience of the students. Problem 3, for example, would be described as 'irrelevant' by students who don't drink coffee. Possible answers:
1. minor, trivial, persistent, ongoing
2. urgent, severe, critical
3. minor, trivial, unimportant, insignificant, irrelevant
4. ongoing, persistent, severe
5. urgent, severe, critical
6. minor, trivial, irrelevant

3 Problem solving

Play the audio file or use your mobile device to scan the QR code (make sure you have installed a QR code reader app and can access the Internet on your device).

1. both
2. 2
3. 2

Dialogue 1:
1. I'm having some trouble
2. Can you be a bit more specific
3. Have you tried
4. What about
5. sounds like you may have
6. it could have something to do with
7. I'm not sure it's
8. In that case it's probably
9. I'll come over

Dialogue 2:
10. it looks like we have a serious problem
11. Are you saying
12. I don't suppose you
13. what I suggest is that
14. I'll send down
15. I'm not sure about that idea
16. the best thing would be to
17. Right, that makes sense

Note: 'Have you tried ....?'/'What about ...?' could be used for making suggestions as well as finding out more details about the problem, depending on the troubleshooter's intentions.

Declaring a problem: I'm having some trouble (1); it looks like we have a serious problem (10)
Finding out more details: Can you be a bit more specific? (2); Are you saying...? (11); Have you tried...? (3); What about...? (4); I don't suppose you...? (12)

Diagnosing a problem: sounds like you may have ... (5); It could have something to do with... (6); I'm not sure it's... (7); In that case it's probably... (8)
Making a suggestion: what I suggest is that...(13); The best thing would be to...(16)
Accepting a suggestion: Right, that makes sense. (17)
Rejecting a suggestion: I'm not sure about that idea. (15)
Taking action: I'll come over (9); I'll send down... (14)

Additional expressions:
1. Declaring a problem
2. Making a suggestion
3. Accepting a suggestion
4. Rejecting a suggestion
5. Taking action

4 Role play

Encourage the use of expressions from the lesson. The problem solving process should follow the scheme of the troubleshooting dialogues, i.e. Coworker A declares the problem without giving any details, Coworker B finds out more details (e.g. 'Are you saying she's not answering her calls?') and diagnoses the problem based on the information provided by Coworker A. Coworker B then makes suggestions. Encourage bad as well as good ideas so that Coworker A has a chance to practise rejecting suggestions before accepting a solution and taking action.

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