



# Problem-Solving & Critical Thinking Activities

Employers say they need workers who are fully equipped with skills beyond the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic to grow their businesses. These skills include critical thinking and problem-solving, according to a 2010 Critical Skills Survey by the American Management Association and others.

## Problem–Solving and Critical Thinking

Everyone experiences problems from time to time. Some of our problems are big and complicated, while others may be more easily solved. There is no shortage of challenges or issues that can arise on the job. Whether in an office or a construction site, whether experiencing difficulties with tasks or with coworkers, the workplace presents ongoing challenges on a daily basis. Large or small, problems need to be dealt with constructively and fairly. Having the skills to identify problems—and solutions—is one of the skills that employers look for in employees.

Problem-solving and critical thinking refer to the ability to use knowledge, facts and data to solve problems effectively. This doesn't mean you need to have an immediate answer, it means you have to be able to think on your feet, assess problems and find solutions. The ability to develop a well-thought-out solution within a reasonable time frame, however, is a skill that employers value greatly.

Employers want employees who can work through problems on their own or as an effective member of a team. Ideal employees can think critically and creatively, share thoughts and opinions, use good judgment and make decisions. As a new employee, you may question why an organization follows certain steps to complete a task. It may seem to you that one of the steps could be eliminated, saving time, effort and money—but you may be hesitant to voice your opinion. Don't be. Employers are usually appreciative when new employees offer insight, fresh perspectives and better and more efficient ways of doing things. It is important to remember, however, that as someone new to the organization, you may not always have the full picture and, thus, may be unaware of factors that dictate that things be done in a particular way. Another important thing to remember is that when you are tasked with solving a problem, you don't always need to answer immediately.

The activities in this section focus on learning how to solve problems in a variety of ways in the workplace. Participants will hear about how to tell the difference between criticism, praise and feedback and how to react appropriately. The section will also review strategies for making ethical decisions, solving problems as part of a team and learning how to take into account others' perceptions when assessing actions or statements in the workplace.

**Note to facilitators:** *Building self-determination skills, such as goal setting, decision-making, self-advocacy and problem-solving should be included in career planning for all youth. Youth with disabilities or other (perceived) barriers to employment and disconnected youth tend to have a resiliency not always experienced by their peers—and not always easily seen or understood by themselves or by adults. You are encouraged to use the activities in this section to help young people explore how the obstacles they (or those they know) may face in life can offer an opportunity for developing and demonstrating maturity, responsibility and wisdom. Providing young people with safe opportunities to explore how their personal resiliency can be used to develop enhanced problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills is an opportunity many adults may shy away from, but one that may ultimately be a gift.*

## 21. Praise, Criticism or Feedback

**JUST THE FACTS:** In a work setting, we give and receive many different types of information. The purpose of this activity is to help participants determine the differences between criticism, praise and feedback—not not only how to offer it, but how to receive it as well.



### Time

20 minutes



### Materials

- One set of “Praise | Criticism | Feedback” cards for each group. Alternatively, you can hang three pieces of chart paper, each with one of the words written on it. Slips of paper can be made with the statements below.



### Directions

Discuss the difference between praise, criticism and feedback and ask participants for examples of each.

- **Praise:** an expression of approval
- **Criticism:** an expression of disapproval based on perceived mistakes or faults
- **Feedback:** information about a person’s performance of a task, used primarily as a basis for improvement

Divide the group into pairs. Read the following statements aloud, one at a time. It is suggested that the facilitator use different tones of voice to help participants differentiate the intended meaning of each sentence (which can certainly vary depending on their delivery). After each statement, give each pair 10 seconds to decide whether the statement is criticism, praise or feedback. Someone from each team should hold up the card that represents their collective decision. If chart paper and sentence strips were used, participants can move to the sign that matches each statement.

- Mr. Jones told me how much he appreciated your thank you note after the job interview. He thought it was a great personal touch.
- Your desk is such a mess. Are you sure you are not trying to grow your own paper?
- I noticed that you’ve been coming in late the last couple of days.
- How many times do I have to tell you how to file these documents?
- Your comments in the meeting today were helpful.
- It would work better for me if I could explain my version of the story out loud before you ask questions.
- You’ve improved a lot this week.
- I found it difficult to evaluate this resume because it was messy.
- I liked it much better when we got to choose the projects instead of being assigned to one.

With the larger group, discuss the different ways people may react or respond differently to praise, criticism and feedback. It is inevitable that we will all receive criticism at some point on the job, and the way in which we respond can impact our own attitude and the attitudes of those with whom we work. Discuss with the group how they, personally, respond differently to praise, feedback and criticism.



### Conclusion

Take the opportunity to rephrase the way in which any of the above statements were made. How might rephrasing get a different response or reaction? If you had to make a rule for how you would like to receive feedback and criticism, what would that rule be?



### Journaling Activity

How does it make you feel when others criticize the work you do? Are you able to respond to feedback differently? Think about a time when you criticized someone else. What happened? How did that situation ultimately make you feel?



### Extension Activity

Oftentimes, the inability to give or receive criticism and feedback might cause conflict in the workplace. Reach out to the National Conflict Resolution Center ([ncrconline.com](http://ncrconline.com)) to find local training opportunities or workshops. You might also try your state or county's mediation center (often connected to juvenile services)

# Activity 21.

Praise, Criticism  
or Feedback

PRAISE

CRITICISM

FEEDBACK

## 22. Workplace Ethics

**JUST THE FACTS:** We all have our own set of values or standards of behavior that we operate by. However, we may not always feel we can apply these same principles or standards while at work. The purpose of this lesson is to help participants learn some of the steps necessary to make ethical decisions on the job.



### Time

30 minutes



### Materials

- One copy of Activity 22 for each participant or group. (These materials were adapted from *Lesson Planet: Tools for Success: A Study in Employer/Personnel Issues, Ethics, and Professional Behavior*, Alabama Learning Exchange.)



### Directions

Ask participants the following questions and discuss answers with the group:

- How do you make decisions?
- Is decision-making a skill that was taught to you?
- Do you have personal rules for decision-making? If so, do these rules change if you are making decisions at home, at school, with friends or at work?

Now, let's discuss ethics. What are ethics? One possible answer to be discussed: Ethics are a set of often-unspoken and generally understood moral principles relating to a specified group, field or form of conduct (e.g., a group of moral principles, standards of behavior, or set of values regarding proper conduct in the workplace).

Ethics on the job often deal with a code of conduct or a set of principles for both the employer and the employee. Ask for and offer some examples of workplace ethics from both the employer and the employee. For example:

A list of work ethics for an employer or a company might be:

- To provide a safe work environment for staff and employees
- To treat employees with dignity and respect
- To provide a fair wage for the services rendered
- To handle all business transactions with integrity and honesty

A list of work ethics for an employee might include:

- To show up on time
- To tend exclusively to company business during work hours
- To treat the company's resources, equipment and products with care
- To give respect to the company; that means honesty and integrity Ask the group what types of ethical issues might come up at work?

Choose one of the scenarios in Activity 22 for group discussion (be sure to read the introduction first). Read the scenario aloud and have copies available for those who would like to read along. With the group, walk through a basic process for ethical decision-making.

**Four-Step Process for Making Ethical Decisions at Work:**

1. Define the problem (or ethical situation).
2. List the facts that appear to be most significant to the decision (and consider who is affected).
3. List two or three possible solutions (and how these solutions could impact each person).
4. Decide on a plan of action.

Divide the group into four smaller groups and have each group choose one of the remaining scenarios. Each group should take no more than 10 minutes to read, discuss and put a plan in place for discussion.



**Conclusion**

Do you think these situations really happen on the job or in real life? Share how the decision-making process worked for each group. Were these easy problems to solve?



**Journaling Activity**

When it comes to decision-making, some people like to make decisions by themselves, while others like to talk things through with someone else. Which type of person are you? Give an example or two. What are some of the pros and cons associated with each type of decision-making?



**Extension Activity**

Have the group create additional “case studies” to share with each other for problem-solving practice. Participants might ask an adult they know to offer a real-life example of an ethical dilemma they have faced. These should be shared with the group. You might also consider expanding the discussion to include more examples of sexual harassment on the job. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon issue for teens to encounter at the workplace.

# Activity 22a.

## Workplace Ethics: Case Studies

For each of the following case studies, assume that you are employed by a large computer company, with approximately 1,000 employees. The company is located in your town. Read each case study and follow the four steps for making ethical decisions. You will be discussing your decision-making process (and your ultimate decision) with the group.

**Case 1:** LaKeisha is an administrative assistant in the human resources department. Her good friend Michael is applying for a job with the company and she has agreed to be a reference for him. Michael asks for advice on preparing for the interview. LaKeisha has the actual interview questions asked of all applicants and considers making him a copy of the list so he can prepare.

**Case 2:** Emily works in the quality control department. Once a year, her supervisor gives away the company's used computers to the local elementary school. The company does not keep records of these computer donations. Emily really needs a computer. Her supervisor asks her to deliver 12 computers to the school.

**Case 3:** Marvin is an assistant in the building services department. He has just received a new work computer and is excited to try it out. His supervisor has a strict policy about computer usage (i.e., for business purposes only), but Marvin wants to learn the email software. He figures one good way to do this is to send emails to his friends and relatives until he gets the hang of it. He has finished all of his work for the day and has 30 minutes left until his shift is over. His supervisor left early.

**Case 4:** Jennie was recently hired to work as a receptionist for the front lobby. As receptionist, she is responsible for making copies for the people in her office. Her son, Jason, comes in and needs some copies for a school project. He brought his own paper and needs 300 copies for his class. If he doesn't bring the copies with him, he will fail the project. The company copier does not require a security key, nor do they keep track of copies made by departments.

**Case 5:** Nonye works in the customer service support department and spends a lot of his day responding to email. One day he got a message from an email address he didn't recognize. It said, "I'd like to get to know you better, outside of work." Nonye had no idea who sent it, so he deleted it. A few days later, he received another message from the same source. Nonye ignored the message again, thinking they would stop. He mentioned these emails to one of his coworkers, who responded, "You're lucky to have a fan." The messages continue to come every few days and he's feeling pretty weirded out.

# Activity 22b.

## Workplace Ethics: Steps to Solving Ethical Dilemmas

**Identify the problem or ethical issue:**

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**What are the facts?**

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**What are some possible solutions?**

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**What are you going to do?**

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**Also consider how you will know if your decision was the right one.**

## 23. Problem–Solving on a Team

**JUST THE FACTS:** Working together to solve problems is not always easy. The purpose of this activity is to have participants explore how effectively teams might address problems that occur among its members.



### Time

30 minutes



### Materials

- Activity 23



### Directions

There are times when getting a team of people to work together successfully on a job or at school can be a challenge. Occasionally, one person’s bad attitude can cause the entire team to be less than productive. Activity 23 presents 10 different situations where the action of one team member interferes with the team’s success.

Divide the group into smaller groups. Have participants act out or create a skit for each situation providing both positive and negative alternatives for working through and solving each problem. Participants should take turns being the “difficult” team member. Participants can compare skits and responses and, ultimately, decide (as a larger group) on the best way(s) to handle each situation.



### Conclusion

Should each person on the team be “dealt” with in the same way? Are there ever any exceptions? Explain.



### Journaling Activity

Think about a time when you were on a team and one member of the team wasn’t contributing. How was the situation handled? What might you have done differently? If you are a team leader, what can you do to help all team members contribute?



### Extension Activity

Using the problems listed in Activity 23, invite employers to talk about how these situations are handled at their place of work.

# Activity 23.

## Problem-Solving on a Team

It's hard work to keep a team working well together. What would you say to or do about a team member who displays the following behaviors?

**1. Is always late**

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**2. Whispers to others or starts side conversations during discussions**

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**3. Gets upset when their recommendations are not followed**

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**4. Hogs the conversation/discussion**

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**5. Leaves before the job/work is done**

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**6. Constantly tells jokes and gets people off track**

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**7. Refuses to work with another "certain" team member**

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**8. Refuses to share in the leadership role**

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**9. Falls asleep**

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**10. Just sits there and doesn't participate**

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## 24. Perception vs. Reality

**JUST THE FACTS:** Perception is one’s ability to see, hear or become aware of something through our senses. It is a way of understanding or interpreting something. Sometimes the way we perceive the actions or statements of those around us may or may not reflect what is actually intended. This is generally due to our previous life experiences or our beliefs. The purpose of this activity is to get participants to reflect on and consider different perceptions and how to be proactive in making decisions based on those perceptions.



### Time

15 minutes



### Materials

- Activity 24
- Flip chart, markers (optional)



### Directions

Write the following on a flip chart or provide one copy of the sentence to each participant:

**FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF YEARS.**

Ask the group to count the number of Fs in the sentence (allow 15 seconds). On average, most people will spot three or four instances of the letter F in the sentence. It actually appears six times. (The brain tends to skip the word *of* or perceive it as “versus”). Point: One’s perception may not always be correct.

**Read the following short paragraphs aloud, or ask a youth participant to volunteer to read:**

1. Bob’s daughter is on the basketball team, but she doesn’t get to play much. His daughter works hard and never complains, but Bob believes that her benching is yet another injustice in his life and that his daughter is not getting a fair shake. Bob becomes annoyed and irritated. He angrily confronts the coach, embarrassing his daughter.
2. John’s daughter is on the basketball team, but she doesn’t get to play much. His daughter works hard and never complains. John believes that the coach wants to win and most likely plays the girls that will help him reach that goal. John feels proud of his daughter’s commitment to the team despite not getting to play very much. John offers to help his daughter improve her basketball skills.

Is there any difference in the events as they were described? What is the critical factor in the different ways each person reacted? Perception! Bob believed the coach’s actions were totally unfair, while John believed the coach was generally acting fairly. Why might each person perceive the situation differently?

Now, discuss the four situations listed in Activity 24. How might different people react to these situations? What might their reactions be based on? If a friend found him or herself in one of these situations, what advice would you offer?



### Conclusion

As a group, discuss some of the strategies you might use when faced with situations similar to those in Activity 24. Is there always a right or wrong way to respond? Are there certain things you should always try to do? If so, what are they?



### Journaling Activity

Think about how you perceive yourself and how others perceive you. Do you think both are the same? Explain. What are some things you can do to change others' perception of you?



### Extension Activity

Search online for posters or illustrations depicting the idea of perception vs. reality. Print them out and offer reasoning as to why perceptions and realities might not always be the same.

# Activity 24.

## Perception vs. Reality

### WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

1. Your boss is talking to another employee as you walk into work. You have reason to believe they are talking about you. This makes you feel uncomfortable and upset.
2. You and a close friend get to go on a senior trip. You are jealous that this friend does not have to pay a dime of their own money—their parents are footing the entire bill. You consider not going because you have to pay for part of your trip and do not think it is fair.
3. At work, you developed a new way to organize the filing system that makes it easier for the office staff to find documents. You think your supervisor is going to take all the credit.
4. You are a nurse. The patient you are working with is ungrateful and rude, is always finding fault in everything you do and is making your life miserable.

## 25. Tell Me About a Time When...

**JUST THE FACTS:** Thinking on your feet is an important part of getting and keeping a job. Interviewers will often ask “behavioral” questions in addition to technical questions about actual job skills. Oftentimes, these open-ended questions will begin with, “Tell me about a time when you...” Being prepared for these types of questions—and having a plan for answering them—is an important skill. The purpose of this lesson is to introduce a strategy that participants can use to answer these types of questions calmly and effectively.



### Time

30 minutes



### Materials

- One copy of Activity 25 for each participant



### Directions

Ask participants the following questions:

- Who has been on a job interview?
- What types of questions were you asked?
- Were you ever asked questions that started with, “Tell me about a time when you...”?

Discuss with participants that many employers ask certain types of questions to see how well people can think on their feet. Sometimes these questions are easy to answer and other times, not so much. There is a strategy called STAR that can guide you through the process of answering these questions in a clear and complete way. Use Activity 25 to help participants see the STAR method in action.

Before asking participants to work on their own answers, use the following as an example of how the method works.

**Question: Tell me about a time when you provided customer service to an upset client.**

**Answer using the STAR method:**

#### **S (Situation/Task)**

I was volunteering as an office assistant in the payroll department of a local nonprofit organization. An angry employee came to my desk complaining that his check amount was incorrect—too low—and that he wasn’t able to pay rent on time because of the mistake.

#### **A (Action)**

I promised the employee that I would work with him to figure out what had happened and what could be done. I compared the payroll records in the logbook with the computer payroll database. I discovered a data error, which explained the incorrect amount. I explained what

had happened and was able to put in a request to issue the employee a check for his missing balance.

**R (Result)**

The employee thanked me and even asked to speak with my supervisor to let them know how helpful I was.

Offer participants the opportunity to work with one or a few peers. Encourage them to practice answering these questions and learning from each other. The more these types of questions are practiced, the easier they will be in an actual work or college interview.



**Conclusion**

What was the easiest part of this activity? What was the most difficult part of this activity? How might you practice the STAR technique? Do you think it would be worth practicing? Why or why not?



**Journaling Activity**

Part of learning how to answer behavioral questions using the STAR method is recognizing your own skills and the areas where you have improved. Do you feel comfortable talking about your skills? If yes, how did you reach this level of comfort? If no, how can you learn to develop this level of comfort?



**Extension Activity**

Arrange for participants to meet with a series of employers for mock interviews. Ask employers to use a sampling of the behavioral interview questions they use most frequently when interviewing potential candidates. Part of self-improvement is self- reflection. How can you use this activity to improve your soft skills overall?

# Activity 25.

## Tell Me About a Time When...

Use the STAR strategy below to guide you in answering the sample interview questions, “Tell me about a time when you...”

**Situation/task:** Describe the situation you were in or the task that needed to be accomplished. Be specific and give enough relevant detail so the interviewer understands the circumstance. The situation could be from a previous job, a volunteer experience, school or another similar environment.

**Action you took:** Describe the action you took. Be sure to keep the focus on you! Even if you’re discussing a group project or effort, talk about what you did—not the efforts of the entire team. Don’t say what you might do or what you might have done. Say what you did.

**Results you achieved:** What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

### TELL ME ABOUT A TIME WHEN YOU...

- ...did not agree with a teacher or supervisor? How did you handle the situation?
- ...were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- ...were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- ...used good judgment and logic to solve a problem.
- ...set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- ...had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- ...had too many things to do and were required to prioritize your tasks.
- ...were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- ...tried to accomplish something and failed.
- ...had to deal with a very upset customer or coworker.
- ...motivated others.