

Solving the Emotional Problem

by Ben Rawal

As an accountant, your ability to make decisions often relies on how effectively you can deal with problems and find a possible solution. Ben Rawal explains how those with higher levels of emotional intelligence cope with problems, irrespective of whether they are work or non-work related.

When assessing the variety of emotional intelligence skills that are required to be an effective accountant, problem solving frequently tops the list.

But how can solving problems be relevant to our emotions? After all, when faced with a challenge or difficult decision, we use information, logic and analysis to help reach a conclusion. Despite this approach, our emotions remain highly relevant to how we perceive a problem and our response when things don't go to plan.

Figuring it out

Of the 25,000 - 30,000 decisions we make every day, some are easier than others. Many of our decisions are made automatically, through our array of habits or at times through a reflex or self-protective response. When faced with more complex problems however, we widen our scope – we frequently seek more information, challenge the validity of data, and also seek out the facts. Accountants are often at the front of the queue when we consider occupations that rely on facts to be effective in their role. In reality however, sound decision making and problem solving relies on our ability to identify information that is factual, regardless of your career choice.

A variety of problem-solving approaches exist, often involving a process that should be followed. These frequently include activities such as:

- Articulating the problem(s) that exist(s);
- 'Brainstorming' possible solutions and evaluating the options;
- Choosing an option, based on a variety of factors, including risk, time involved and cost;

- Delivering the chosen solution; and
- Evaluating the effectiveness of your chosen solution and if required (and possible), adapting the solution accordingly.

The above process can be learned, applied in practice, and repeated. With such a logical approach, how could emotion ever be relevant or cause a problem?

“We make around 30,000 decisions every day. Many are easier than others, whereas some decisions require a more careful and considered approach”.

Balancing the emotional books

Presenting others with an identical complex problem will frequently lead to a range of outcomes. Our abilities to cope, think logically, challenge ourselves, and visualise possible solutions all depend on our level of emotional intelligence.

Resilience and Stress

Solving complex problems will often involve a combination of trial and error, failure and time. Some of you may remember dealing with problems where different solutions failed to provide the required outcome. Your ability to cope with these 'failures', to reassess the situation in a calm, logical manner, and to attempt something different all highlight your level of personal resilience. A lack of time and / or knowledge, plus additional stress also play an important part in your ability to solve the problem.

Emotional intelligence in problem solving doesn't simply cover whether you are prepared to persevere if your solutions miss the mark. It also involves your willingness to ask others for help or support.

This can prove difficult for some people, often due to the self-perception that asking for help indicates weakness or failure. Clearly, there is a balance to achieve here between giving in too early and leaving it too late before requesting assistance – unfortunately, there are no



rules on when you should or should not continue to persist alone on solving a problem. However, it may prove useful to create a wider 'plan' on the conditions required before you will seek support from others.

Beliefs

One of the main differences in how we solve problems, deal with setbacks, and cope with stress is the variation across our individual beliefs. These come in a multitude of guises but are often based on assumptions that we make about ourselves, others or the problem itself.

As a critical influencer on our behaviour, our internal beliefs can motivate us into taking or avoiding action, whilst ignoring evidence that suggests we might have it wrong. This might sound bizarre, but in reality, all of us suffer from a variety of unconscious biases from time to time. Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence will generally:

- Challenge their own assumptions, beliefs and any negative 'self-talk' when they are faced with a problem – professional or otherwise;
- Seek feedback from others as a method for self-development and raising awareness of any potential biases; and
- Avoid the use of generalist statements, which often restrict possibilities. These commonly include the word 'Should' and include examples such as "I should be able...", or "They should be able to do that". When such statements arise, it can be helpful to challenge yourself or others by asking the question "Who says I should?"

"How frequently do you challenge your beliefs when attempting to solve a complex problem? Are you quick to make assumptions about what can and cannot be achieved, or are you prepared to adopt an alternative perspective?"

Gut v Heart v Head

Despite having the ability to make logical decisions and consider problems in a rational manner, it is not uncommon for all of us to make emotional choices. Emotionally intelligent individuals recognise when this is the case and are able to challenge whether this is the right approach.

But are decisions based on emotion always the 'wrong' way of dealing with a problem?

The emotional areas of our brain operate much faster than the parts responsible for rational and logical thought. This is critical to maintain our survival as in a life-or-death situation, there is rarely time available to 'think things through'.

When attempting to solve a problem, any information gathered will always be considered by the emotional parts of our brain first. This is the primary reason why you may have a feeling that something is right or wrong based on limited data. At this stage, assumptions are made, and your internal beliefs and unconscious biases lead the way on what appears to be happening. Sometimes this approach to

problem solving is appropriate, but is it consistently accurate?

The research indicates that applying logic and rational thought is a more successful way of solving problems and making the 'right' decision. Relying on our 'gut feel' or our emotions is faster, but generally less accurate. It would be foolish however to totally dismiss the conclusions obtained via our emotional response – sometimes, we do get it right.

Conversely, there are also times after extensive logical analysis, when we make the wrong decision! Therefore, comparing the decisions made through your gut, heart and head can be a very helpful method for solving problems.

Beware however - your unconscious biases will work hard in attempting to convince your logic that your first conclusion was the right one all along! If you frequently find yourself using logical arguments to explain why your emotional decision making was accurate, ask someone else to challenge your assumptions and beliefs on your behalf. From time-to-time, most of us engage in 'post-rationalisation' – finding logical reasons for our emotional decisions.

Emotional problem solving can be helpful in the right situation. In most instances, it is helpful to compare the differences between your initial reaction (gut), how you feel (heart), and a careful logical analysis of the information (head)".



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Seeing the future

We generally find it easier to undertake a task, make important decisions, and solve complex problems when we can 'see' what we are trying to achieve.

The majority of us rely on images to understand the problems we face and to learn new information. This is one of the reasons why simply explaining a complex problem to another individual often takes more effort and time, than using pictures and charts. Visual information forms a critical aspect of how we make sense of everything around us.

We can also use visual information to help inform our future and motivate us towards a particular goal or outcome. The key difference here, is that we need to create an image of what we want or what a successful outcome looks like.

When faced with a problem, the more images we can create, the better. These could include:

- Visualising the problem itself – what or who is in the picture?
- Seeing the approach that you / others will take in solving the problem; and
- Creating an image that represents the solution.

If you find it difficult to create such images, try looking up for 5-10 seconds. This will help you access the visual cortex, the part of your brain responsible for processing visual information. Watch what happens the next time you ask someone a question relating to a picture or image – their eyes will usually move upwards.

“Images are an important aspect of our ability to understand complex issues and make more timely decisions. Increase your visual inputs as part of solving problems and creating a solution”.

Summary

Our approach to solving problems can often be complicated through the impact and management of our emotions. Our resilience and stress management techniques are emotionally driven, often leading to unhelpful beliefs around our own capabilities or those of others.

Developing your emotional intelligence holds significant benefits for problem solving – despite its apparent reliance on logical thinking. As a pre-requisite for making many of our daily decisions, problem solving is an essential skill that all accountants can improve further throughout their careers.



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Top Tips:



Follow the process

At times, our emotions can overwhelm our problem solving abilities, leading to poor decisions or the likelihood of task abandonment.

Ensuring that you maintain awareness of a good problem solving process (Problem – Options – Selection – Evaluate) can ensure that you limit the chances of your emotions having a negative effect.

Ask for help

Seeking the help of others at the right time is generally associated with individuals that are emotionally aware and those that recognise that they cannot always achieve everything alone. If you find you are struggling with a problem for whatever reason, consider the support you have available.

Check the accuracy of your beliefs

Our beliefs are powerful drivers of how we act, regardless of whether evidence indicates an alternative course of action. Verbalise your beliefs with others, and be open to challenge on the accuracy of your perspective.

Listen to your heart (but test it out) – Emotion-based decision making has its risks, and is less accurate than careful, logical analysis. Consider your 'gut' reaction and feelings when faced with a problem, and compare these responses against a more carefully thought through approach.

Picture this

Our ability to learn and understand complex concepts can be vastly improved through the use of visual information, including pictures and charts. Creating pictures in your mind around possible solutions and the steps required, will help you stay motivated and provide clarity on the way forward.