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Identify The Problem



a way of working that works

the collaborative
operating system

The Collaborative Operating System, Element 1:

Identify the Problem



The primary work of organizations is problem solving.*

Once a goal has been set, problem solving commences to close the gap between the current state and the goal. There are both art and science involved in being a good problem-solver, especially if you want to solve problems in groups.

The first step in any collaborative effort should focus on identifying the problem and stating it clearly and succinctly in the form of a coherent problem statement. Identifying the problem is important because unless a group can agree on the problem, they'll never agree on the solution, and collaboration becomes impossible. You can look to the Middle East, Washington D.C. or anywhere that futile fighting prevails to see this truth - the fighting is

*Definition: A problem is any situation that you want to change.

over solutions, and the stakeholders have never aligned around the problem they want to solve. Aligning around the problem creates instant alignment around the solution. Thus, collaborative work begins by grappling with the question, “what problem are we trying to solve?”

Unfortunately, groups routinely engage in activities without a clear sense of what situation they want to change, i.e., what problem they are trying to solve. In our experience, 99% of the time, examining the problem they are trying to solve reveals one or more of the following serious issues:

- ❖ The problem is not worth solving. (For example, the problem centers on one group member’s personal agenda.)
- ❖ It is not the highest order problem and thus, not the most strategic starting point. (For example, a team with a downturn in sales begin imposing new sales goals, when in fact, the higher order problem is one of customer satisfaction.)
- ❖ The activity they intend to do will not actually solve the problem. (For example, empowerment training won’t empower people living in a dictatorship.)
- ❖ They are engaging in an activity with no idea why they are doing it. (For example, a start-up develops a new product because they think it’ll be really cool without understanding what need it serves in the marketplace.)

“In a crisis if I had only an hour I’d spend the first 50 minutes defining the problem and the last 10 minutes solving it.” ~Albert Einstein

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In a large number of cases, developing a problem statement reveals to a group that their work will actually serve to entrench the very problem they seek to solve (for example, giving money to drug-addicted pan-handlers). A group may need to spend hours or days up front in order to create a clear, succinct and accurate problem statement. Although sometimes challenging for people new to this front-loaded approach to working, time spent on the problem statement will save countless hours and dollars down the road.

It is common for problem statements to evolve over time as the group’s understanding of the problem increases. In dealing with highly complex problems, for example, a group should expect that the problem statement they start with will not be the final one; in fact, it is only the act of trying to solve the “starter” problem that allows the real problem to be revealed.

Below are suggestions and techniques to help you work toward a problem statement.

- ❖ Have the person or group describe the “current state” in order to gain clues about the problem, e.g., “Sales are down, customers are disgruntled, the reps seem unmotivated, we’re currently the top performer in our segment, though the competition seems to be more on their game, etc...”
- ❖ Make sure that the problem is, in fact, being stated as a problem. It should properly complete the sentence, “The problem we’re trying to solve is _____.”
- ❖ Notice when you are being given something other than a problem, such as an activity,

a solution or a goal (e.g. “to increase sales” or, “to upgrade the servers”). These are not problem statements. When given one of these statements, ask, “Why do we need to increase sales/upgrade the servers?” This will lead the group back to the problem.

- ❖ When you have a problem statement, try asking open-ended exploratory questions as many times as necessary to get to the root, most fundamental problem. Questions such as:
 - Why is that a problem? (Caveat: this could cause someone to prematurely jump to the symptoms of the problem, in an attempt to describe why it’s a valid problem.)
 - Why _____? (Fill in what the person just said. For example, “Our sales are down over last year” prompts the question, “Why are your sales down?”
 - What are the root causes of this problem?
 - What underlying forces give rise to this problem?
 - What’s behind this problem?

You may be done when one of the following happens:

- ❖ The person or group concludes that it is not a problem after all.
- ❖ The person or group starts repeating the same problem statement disguised in different language.
- ❖ The person or group cannot think of any problem more fundamental than the one they just articulated.
- ❖ The person or group starts to list all the negative impacts of the previous problem statement.

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“It isn’t that they can’t see the solution, it is that they cannot see the problem.”

Here's an example of why a group needs alignment on a clear, concise problem statement before they begin working:

A company has many employees who are disgruntled with the compensation plan. Some of the employees feel it is too complex and others feel it doesn't pay well enough. In this example, the two factions would start with very different goals for their problem solving process and never succeed in resolving the issue. Only by aligning first on a problem statement would the group be able to align around their intent and the plan that follows.

Examples of clear and succinct problem statements:

The problem we're trying to solve is:

1. Our sales team and our service delivery practices are misaligned.
2. Our competitors are taking our best clients from us.
3. We have no plan for how to meet our new sales goal.
4. The management team is not aligned around the hiring criteria for the new VP of Sales.
5. We don't have a technology platform that enables us to address the world's most intractable problems.
6. Our current approach to healthcare does not serve the needs of the majority of the stakeholders.
7. We lack a comprehensive plan designed to ensure the vitality of our Edenton/Chowan community.
8. The Child Support Court is inefficient and destructive to key stakeholders.

Ultimately, the right problem statement is the one that everyone unanimously 1) owns and is aligned with one another around, 2) agrees is a problem worth solving, 3) agrees is the right problem to solve (i.e., the highest order, most strategic problem given the circumstances), and 4) believes can be solved (or is worth attempting to address).

In the Collaborative Operating System, we use a tool called the Problem Solving Template (PST) to help groups identify and align around the problem. The PST goes beyond just identifying the problem by enabling a group to fully "scope" their work at a high level. The PST provides the structure necessary to keep a group together in each phase of problem solving while simultaneously helping forge unprecedented levels of ownership and alignment.

Because decision making and problem solving are the most fundamental and empowering work a group of people can do together, the value of such an effective tool and process cannot be underestimated.

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