# **Defining and Analyzing the Problem**

*Learn how to determine the nature of the problem, clarify the problem, decide to solve the problem, and analyze the problem with our process.*

We've all had our share of problems - more than enough, if you come right down to it. So it's easy to think that this section, on defining and analyzing the problem, is unnecessary. "I *know* what the problem is," you think. "I just don't know what to *do* about it."

Not so fast! A poorly defined problem - or a problem whose nuances you don't completely understand - is much more difficult to solve than a problem you have clearly defined and analyzed. The way a problem is worded and understood has a huge impact on the number, quality, and type of proposed solutions.

We'll begin with the basics, focusing primarily on four things: First, we'll consider the nature of problems in general, and then, more specifically, on clarifying and defining the problem you are working on. Then, we'll talk about whether or not you really *want* to solve the problem, or whether you are better off leaving it alone. Finally, we'll talk about how to do an in-depth analysis of the problem.

THE NATURE OF PROBLEMS

So, what is a problem? It can be a lot of things. We know in our gut when there is a problem, whether or not we can easily put it into words. Maybe you feel uncomfortable in a given place, but you're not sure why. A problem might be just the feeling that something is wrong and should be corrected. You might feel some sense of distress, or of injustice.

Stated most simply, a problem is the difference between what *is*, and what *might or should be*. "No child should go to bed hungry, but one-quarter of all children do in this country," is a clear, potent problem statement. Another example might be, "Communication in our office is not very clear." In this instance, the explanation of "what might or should be" is simply alluded to.

As these problems illustrate, some problems are more serious than others; the problem of child hunger is a much more severe problem than the fact that the new youth center has no exercise equipment, although both are problems that can and should be addressed. Generally, problems that affect groups of people - children, teenage mothers, the mentally ill, the poor - can at least be addressed and in many cases lessened using the process outlined in this Chapter.

Although your organization may have chosen to tackle a seemingly insurmountable problem, the process you will use to solve it is not complex. It does, however, take time, both to formulate and to fully analyze the problem. Most people underestimate the work they need to do here and the time they'll need to spend. But this is the legwork, the foundation on which you'll lay effective solutions. This isn't the time to take shortcuts.

Three basic concepts make up the core of this chapter: clarifying, deciding, and analyzing. Let's look at each in turn.

CLARIFYING THE PROBLEM

If you are having a problem-solving meeting, then you already understand that something isn't quite right - or maybe it's bigger than that; you understand that something is very, very wrong. This is your beginning, and of course, it makes most sense to...

* **Start with what you know**. When group members walk through the door at the beginning of the meeting, what do they think about the situation? There are a variety of different ways to garner this information. People can be asked in advance to write down what they know about the problem. Or the facilitator can lead a brainstorming session to try to bring out the greatest number of ideas. Remember that a good facilitator will draw out everyone's opinions, not only those of the more vocal participants.
* **Decide what information is missing**. Information is the key to effective decision making. If you are fighting child hunger, do you know which children are hungry? *When* are they hungry - all the time, or especially at the end of the month, when the money has run out? If that's the case, your problem statement might be, "Children in our community are often hungry at the end of the month because their parents' paychecks are used up too early."
* **Gather information on the problem**. You might collect any of several types of information available. Most commonly, what you hear or read will fall into one of the following categories:
  + Facts (15% of the children in our community don't get enough to eat.)
  + Inference (A significant percentage of children in our community are probably malnourished/significantly underweight.)
  + Speculation (Many of the hungry children probably live in the poorer neighborhoods in town.)
  + Opinion (I think the reason children go hungry is because their parents spend all of their money on cigarettes.)

When you are gathering information, you will probably hear all four types of information, and all can be important. Speculation and opinion can be especially important in gauging public opinion. If public opinion on your issue is based on faulty assumptions, part of your solution strategy will probably include some sort of informational campaign.

For example, perhaps your coalition is campaigning against the death penalty, and you find that most people incorrectly believe that the death penalty deters violent crime. As part of your campaign, therefore, you will probably want to make it clear to the public that it simply isn't true.

Where and how do you find this information? It depends on what you want to know. You can review surveys, interviews, the library and the internet.

* *Define the problem*. With the information in front of you, you're ready to write down a "problem statement" - a comprehensive definition of the problem. Before you do, remember two general principles:
  + Define the problem in terms of needs, and not solutions. If you define the problem in terms of possible solutions, you're closing the door to other, possibly more effective solutions. "Violent crime in our neighborhood is unacceptably high," offers space for many more possible solutions than, "We need more police patrols," or, "More citizens should have guns to protect themselves."
  + Define the problem as one everyone shares; avoid assigning blame for the problem. This is particularly important if different people (or groups) with a history of bad relations need to be working together to solve the problem. Teachers may be frustrated with high truancy rates, but blaming students uniquely for problems at school is sure to alienate students from helping to solve the problem.

You can define the problem in several ways; The facilitator can write a problem statement on the board, and everyone can give feedback on it, until the statement has developed into something everyone is pleased with, or you can accept someone else's definition of the problem, or use it as a starting point, modifying it to fit your needs.

After you have defined the problem, ask if everyone understands the terminology being used. Define the key terms of your problem statement, even if you think everyone understands them.

The Hispanic Health Coalition, has come up with the problem statement "Teen pregnancy is a problem in our community." That seems pretty clear, doesn't it? But let's examine the word "community" for a moment. You may have one person who defines community as "the city you live in," a second who defines it as, "this neighborhood" and a third who considers "our community" to mean Hispanics.

DECIDING TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

At this point, you have already spent a fair amount of time on the problem at hand, and naturally, you want to see it taken care of. Before you go any further, however, it's important to look critically at the problem and decide if you really want to focus your efforts on it. You might decide that right now isn't the best time to try to fix it. Maybe your coalition has been weakened by bad press, and chance of success right now is slim. Or perhaps solving the problem right now would force you to neglect another important agency goal. Or perhaps this problem would be more appropriately handled by another existing agency or organization.

You and your group need to make a conscious choice that you really do want to attack the problem. Many different factors should be a part of your decision. These include:

*Importance*. In judging the importance of the issue, keep in mind the f*easibility*. Even if you have decided that the problem really is important, and worth solving, will you be able to solve it, or at least significantly improve the situation? The bottom line: Decide if the good you can do will be worth the effort it takes. *Are you the best people to solve the problem?* Is someone else better suited to the task?

For example, perhaps your organization is interested in youth issues, and you have recently come to understand that teens aren't participating in community events mostly because they don't know about them. A monthly newsletter, given out at the high schools, could take care of this fairly easily.

Unfortunately, you don't have much publishing equipment. You do have an old computer and a desktop printer, and you could type something up, but it's really not your forte.

A better solution might be to work to find writing, design and/or printing professionals who would donate their time and/or equipment to create a newsletter that is more exciting, and that students would be more likely to want to read.

*Negative impacts*. If you do succeed in bringing about the solution you are working on, what are the possible consequences? If you succeed in having safety measures implemented at a local factory, how much will it cost? Where will the factory get that money? Will they cut salaries, or lay off some of their workers?

Even if there are some unwanted results, you may well decide that the benefits outweigh the negatives. As when you're taking medication, you'll put up with the side effects to cure the disease. But be sure you go into the process with your eyes open to the real costs of solving the problem at hand.

**CHOOSING AMONG PROBLEMS**

You might have many obstacles you'd like to see removed. In fact, it's probably a pretty rare community group that doesn't have a laundry list of problems they would like to resolve, given enough time and resources. So how do you decide which to start with?

A simple suggestion might be to list all of the problems you are facing, and whether or not they meet the criteria listed above (importance, feasibility, et cetera). It's hard to assign numerical values for something like this, because for each situation, one of the criteria may strongly outweigh the others. However, just having all of the information in front of the group can help the actual decision making a much easier task.

The following table can be used or adapted to help you decide which problem you want to try to solve if you have several on your plate at the same time. By answering each question, you can get a clearer idea of all of the aspects of solving a problem, and should be able to choose more easily and effectively. For a completed example of this chart, see the Examples section above.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Problem 1 | Problem 2 |
| How frequently does the problem occur? |  |  |
| How many people are affected? |  |  |
| For what amount of time are they affected? |  |  |
| How severe is the effect? |  |  |
| How important do group members perceive the problem to be? |  |  |
| How important is the problem perceived to be by others? |  |  |
| How likely is it that we can solve/significantly improve the problem? |  |  |
| Are there any negative impacts? |  |  |

ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

Now that the group has defined the problem and agreed that they want to work towards a solution, it's time to thoroughly analyze the problem. You started to do this when you gathered information to define the problem, but now, it's time to pay more attention to details and make sure everyone fully understands the problem.

**ANSWER ALL OF THE QUESTION WORDS.**

The facilitator can take group members through a process of understanding every aspect of the problem by answering the "question words" - what, why, who, when, and how much. This process might include the following types of questions:

***What* is the problem?** You already have your problem statement, so this part is more or less done. But it's important to review your work at this point.

***Why* does the problem exist?** There should be agreement among meeting participants as to why the problem exists to begin with. If there isn't, consider trying one of the following techniques.

* The "but why" technique. This simple exercise can be done easily with a large group, or even on your own. Write the problem statement, and ask participants, "Why does this problem exist?" Write down the answer given, and ask, "But why does (the answer) occur?"

"Children often fall asleep in class,"

*But why?*

"Because they have no energy."

*But why?*

"Because they don't eat breakfast."

*But why?*

Continue down the line until participants can comfortably agree on the [root cause of the problem](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/analyze/analyze-community-problems-and-solutions/root-causes/main). Agreement is essential here; if people don't even agree about the source of the problem, an effective solution may well be out of reach.

* "Force field analysis." The "but why" technique asks you to dig deep to find the cause of the problem. With force field analysis, you will be looking more broadly at the issue and the forces surrounding it.
  + Start with the definition you penned above.
  + Draw a line down the center of the paper. Or, if you are working with a large group of people who cannot easily see what you are writing, use two pieces.
  + On the top of one sheet/side, write "Restraining Forces."
  + On the other sheet/side, write, "Driving Forces."
  + Under "Restraining Forces," list all of the reasons you can think of that keep the situation the same; why the status quo is the way it is. As with all brainstorming sessions, this should be a "free for all;" no idea is too "far out" to be suggested and written down.
  + In the same manner, under "Driving Forces," list all of the forces that are pushing the situation to change.
  + When all of the ideas have been written down, group members can edit them as they see fit and compile a list of the important factors that are causing the situation.

Clearly, these two exercises are meant for different times. The "but why" technique is most effective when the facilitator (or the group as a whole) decides that the problem hasn't been looked at deeply enough and that the group's understanding is somewhat superficial. The force field analysis, on the other hand, can be used when people are worried that important elements of the problem haven't been noticed -- that you're not looking at the whole picture.

***Who* is causing the problem, and who is affected by it?** A simple [brainstorming session](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/community-tool-box-toc/analyzing-community-problems-and-designing-and-adapting-community-23) is an excellent way to determine this.

***When* did the problem first occur, or when did it become significant?**Is this a new problem or an old one? Knowing this can give you added understanding of why the problem is occurring now. Also, the longer a problem has existed, the more entrenched it has become, and the more difficult it will be to solve. People often get used to things the way they are and resist change, even when it's a change for the better.

***How much*, or to what extent, is this problem occurring?** How many people are affected by the problem? How significant is it? Here, you should revisit the questions on importance you looked at when you were defining the problem. This serves as a brief refresher and gives you a complete analysis from which you can work.

If time permits, you might want to summarize your analysis on a single sheet of paper for participants before moving on to generating solutions, the next step in the process. That way, members will have something to refer back to during later stages in the work.

Also, after you have finished this analysis, the facilitator should ask for agreement from the group. Have people's perceptions of the problem changed significantly? At this point, check back and make sure that everyone still wants to work together to solve the problem.