



Problem Statements

How to Write One for a Clearly Defined Outcome

What Is It?

On the surface, problem statements sound just like what they are: statements of a problem. The exercise, however, of actually drafting a problem statement both reveals a level of clarity that enables better outcomes and makes it easier for others to quickly grasp the complexity of an issue.

How It Works

The goal of the problem statement is to identify and explain the problem. It can set a vision for a solution as well. A common issue that often arises during this process is that the statement implies a hidden solution. For example, a first draft of a problem statement could be simply “Lack of communication.” The implied thought is that if you just have better communication, you’ll be able to solve the problem. But when peeled back, frustrations with communications may reveal themselves simply as a symptom of the root issue – perhaps the need to address a change in process, meeting structures, technology, reporting structure, etc.

When the following words start to appear in meetings or discussions, further exploration may be necessary:

- “Lack of”
- “Inability to”
- “Better”
- “Improved”



How to Use It

- 1 Start by using the “5 Whys” process. The primary goal here is to determine the base cause of the problem by repeating the question ‘why?’, with each answer forming the foundation for the following question. Each question will reveal more and more about the root of the issue.
- 2 Using the 5 “Ws” (Who, what, where, why, when) can be another helpful approach in creating a good problem statement.
- 3 As you’re crafting your statement, remember to keep it concise and focused while allowing for creativity in finding a solution.



Conclusion

A problem that is well-stated is one that's half solved. The more clarity around the issue that the team is attempting to fix, the more efficient they'll be in solving the problem and ultimately getting back to business.

There are tons of resources online (and people who do this for a living!) on how to make a good problem statement - this is just to get you started.

Example of a Problem Statement

Note that problem statements can vary in length, depending on the complexity of the problem. The following is an example of a problem statement by a company regarding the creation of a single sign-on capability:

Problem Statement

Ideally, our users would be able to sign into their laptops and then automatically have access to all of the applications they need to use. In reality, we use at least three applications every day to accomplish our work.

Considering the Consequence

Each application is protected by a password with different requirements for username and password length. Passwords also expire at different times. Users waste approximately two minutes per day logging into multiple applications: $500 \text{ users} \times 2 \text{ minutes per day} = 1000 \text{ minutes in lost productivity}$; $1000 \text{ minutes} = 16.67 \text{ hrs per day} \times \$75/\text{hr} = \$1250 \text{ per day}$. Helpdesk resolves approximately 6000 calls per year to reset forgotten passwords and unlock accounts. Security risk increases as users will continue to write usernames and passwords on sticky notes at their desks.

Resulting Proposal

After crunching the numbers, it's clear that the next step is to have Software Development, Network Administration and business stakeholders collaborate to evaluate potential solutions for a single sign-on capability.



We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.



— Albert Einstein