EXERCISE 1: WRITE THE PROBLEM DEFINITION

Write a one-paragraph problem definition. It should address the basics, including:

What is the problem?

When does it occur?

Where does it occur?

First, take care that the problem is not a solution in disguise.

Second, avoid complex jargon and technical terms.

Third, review the problem definition in a group as a collaborative exercise. The conversation may lead to identifying different problems

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EXERCISE 2: ROOT CAUSE IDENTIFICATION 5X WHY

The next step is to break down the problem into smaller units by diagnosing the situation: what are the root causes of the problem?

Now write down:

1. Why do you think the problem is happening?

2. Make a list of root causes.

3. Develop a hypothesis for the most likely root causes.

4. Repeat 5 times to create a likely list (the 5 Why's)

5. Prioritize those problems that are solvable by you working with others.

EXERCISE 3: IDENTIFYING THOSE MOST AFFECTED

Try to avoid generic statements like "the public" in favor of a more granular description of those immediately impacted.

1. Who is impacted by the problem?

2. What are their needs?

3. What are their incentives?

EXERCISE 4: REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

Before completing our problem definition, it is important to determine if the problem can be reframed rather than simply diagnosed. That is to say, are there alternative ways of looking at the issue – from different perspectives -- that yield new insights? Think of the slow elevator.

Another way to reframe the problem is to ask how to prevent the problem from arising in the first place. Can we solve the problem upstream? Think of helping pet owners afford to keep their dogs, rather than getting new owners to adopt them later.

1. Are there alternative ways of looking at the issue – from different perspectives -- that yield new insights?

L Have I *limited* the scope? In other words, narrow a large problem down to more readily definable smaller problems

A Have I described something *actionable*? Making the problem more specific makes it more actionable. What would render the challenge actionable?

S Have I described something *specific*?

S Have I described a problem that will be *supported*? In other words, is this a problem that my organization cares about enough to take action and invest in an evaluation process to determine is the solutions will work

O Have I identified a problem *owner*? Someone needs to be on-point to manage the problem-solving process and communicate back with collaborators. Thus, a well-authored problem definition is one where there is someone whose responsibility it can be to manage the solving process.