

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT

Objectives:

- To gain a vision of the service project and begin to select an issue participants want to address
- To help participants get at the root of issues facing their community which will enable them to address the problem successfully



1 Hour

Materials Needed:

- Flip Charts
- Markers
- Sticky Dots
- Handouts

LECTURE:

Introduction:

In Community Mapping we started to look at some of the issues facing our community. Then we looked at the major components of leadership. Who can tell me what those four components are? (VISION, EMPOWERMENT, COMMUNICATION and ACTION.) Great! In this section we are going to use information about the needs we identified in Community Mapping to begin creating a VISION for our service project.

During this session, we're going to brainstorm some community issues we want to work on, look at how we initially define the issues, and then try to look at that issue from multiple perspectives. We will use a process to answer questions about the issues, which will lead to a specific statement defining the problem. This process is called Forming a Problem Statement. The reason we do this is because sometimes people mistake a symptom for the actual problem. We know that to truly solve a problem you need to treat the root of the issue, not just the symptoms. By looking at a problem from different perspectives and dissecting the problem we can make sure we're actually solving the correct problem.

Sample Issue to Learn From:

Before we actually start working on forming problem statements for community issues, I want to read you a little story that demonstrates how restating a problem can be very beneficial. (Read Vernon Williams story to participants.)

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT

'Inmate is Giant of a Problem' – New York, 1985 (UPI)

“A giant inmate who prison guards claim can break his handcuffs at will has Rikers Island prison in a state of terror, a spokesman for the guards' union said Friday. Correction officials admitted that they don't know what to do with Vernon Williams, who stands 6'3” and weighs 375 pounds. Williams, who is in jail waiting trial for four different charges, including assault and robbery, has been charged with assaulting six prison officials and two nurses during his stay at Rikers Island. After Williams was charged with assaulting the nurses in October, prison officials ordered that he be handcuffed whenever leaving his cell, and accompanied at all times by no fewer than five guards.

“It would be funny if it wasn't so serious,” said one corrections official. On Friday, Williams allegedly attacked officer Jose Aponte, breaking his nose. After that incident, Phil Seelig, president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, announced that his men would not go near Williams any longer.”

Corrections officials had defined their problem as: ‘We wish we knew how to restrain Vernon Williams.’ But that wasn't working was it? They needed to redefine their problem.

So they went and looked at some background information about Vernon Williams. What they found out was that Vernon had been abused as a child, and one of the ways that he was abused was that he was handcuffed to his bed whenever he was at home...not allowed to move to go to the bathroom, to eat, to talk on the phone, not allowed to move from the bed. So when the guards put handcuffs on Vernon, it reminded Vernon of those very bad times in his childhood when he was handcuffed to his bed, and Vernon would go berserk.

After some thinking about the problem, the correction officials redefined their problem as: “We wish we knew how to make Vernon a helpful, contributing member of this community as long as he has to be here.”

By experimenting with different approaches to that problem, they found that Vernon would accept and follow through on instructions with no restraint at all. In fact, Vernon became the designated leader of his cell block, earned his high school equivalency while he was in prison, and was eventually released early from prison for good behavior.

(End of Vernon Williams story.) (Get participants to react to story.)

As you can see, how you define a problem really makes a difference as to how you solve that problem. We, I'm sure, got the short version of the story and the prison guards had to do some work around restating their problem. Let's work through an example of what we want to do with an issue that is relevant to our work here.

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT

Listing of Issues:

Before we can look at an example with an issue specific to our community we need to think about what issues we are interested in addressing. What I would like us to do is something similar to the information we generated during the Community Mapping Exercise. Let's brainstorm different issues that you are interested in addressing for your Community Service Project. What are some of the issues that our community is facing that you have some interest in working on?



(Record responses on flip chart paper. You are looking for one word/phrase issues like drugs, hunger, homelessness, environmental issues, HIV/AIDS, child abuse/neglect, illiteracy, etc. Once the list is finished, post it where everyone can see it.) (They can use the same issues they came up with for Community Mapping, if they are interested in working on those issues in their community. If this is the case then the same small groups may want to form a problem statement for the same issue they used in Mind Mapping.)

Formation of Problem Statements:

(You can use the following example about drugs whether or not it is listed during the brainstorm, or create one of your own. If drugs is one of the issues the participants list and want to focus on, a group can still work on restating this issue but encourage them to come up with as many new answers as possible.)



Great, you have come up with some really good issues. The issue I'd like us to use as an example is drug use amongst youth in the community. The first step in forming a problem statement is to state the problem using the sentence beginning with "I (or we) wish we knew how to...." I'm going to state this problem as:

"I wish I knew how to eliminate drug use amongst youth in the community."

Now to eliminate drug use in the community I may think I need to eliminate drug dealers. No drugs, no use, right? Well, I think I better look a little more deeply at this problem before I instigate a huge effort requiring lots of resources to eliminate drug dealers because I'm going to be very disappointed if that's not the solution.

Answering the following questions will help me look at my problem more deeply, and will help me get at the root causes.

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT



“I wish I knew how to eliminate drug use amongst youth in the community.”
who.....
when.....
where.....
what.....
why.....

(on the flipchart, go through and answer each one of those questions.)

“I wish I knew how to eliminate drug use amongst youth in the community.”



who... anyone under the age of 18 who is using drugs in my community
when... after school, sometimes during school, on the weekends
where... in the parks, in parking lots, at shopping malls, at home when
parents are gone
what... marijuana, stimulants, ecstasy, sniffing glue
why... bored, everyone else is doing it, makes me feel better, gives me
energy, it's no big deal, it doesn't hurt

The answers generated make me reconsider the problem. After I look more closely at the issue, it appears that having access to drugs is not one of the reasons drugs are being used. This makes me think that eliminating drug dealers will not stop drug use because if young people are using drugs for another reason then they will find another source from which to get their drugs. I think the problem can be found in the where and the why. If they are hanging out in parks and in parking lots, a part of the problem may be that they don't have anywhere to go or anything to do, this may also be why they are bored. The answers also indicate that they are unaware of how dangerous drugs are, that maybe they are being pressured into doing them, and that something is not making them feel good about themselves.

It is possible that one problem has multiple roots. This will cause us to consider which and how many we want to address. To decide, we may have to consider which solutions will make the greatest difference overall. Fortunately, we don't have to make that decision just yet. The information we are getting at right now will prepare us for our Fact-Finding Field Trip later on. After we have gathered additional information is when we will decide what to do and how.



Now I am almost done forming my problem statement. There is one step left, and that is creating one statement that addresses my problem, incorporating the information I have just been given. While my last problem statement was this:

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT

“I wish I knew how to eliminate drug use amongst youth in the community.”

My new problem statement will be:



“I wish young people in my community were more aware of the dangers of drugs and had some place to go after school and on weekends that offered beneficial recreation to keep them feeling energetic and good about themselves which, when combined may decrease the use of drugs amongst them and their peers.”

My new problem statement will help me come up with solutions that address the root of the cause not just the symptoms.

Now let's go back to the issues we brainstormed on our flip chart and turn each issue into a general problem statement. Remember to do this we start each statement with “We wish we knew how to...”

(Turn to pre-made flip chart with “We wish we knew how to...” written at the top. For each of the issues listed on the flip chart, the group is going to write a general problem statement using that sentence starter. Create one statement for all of the issues. You will want to leave enough space in the margin or beneath each statement for sticky dots.)

(Your flip chart may look like the following:

We wish we knew how to....

.....stop hunger in *your community*

.....keep our parks and fields clean

.....improve the literacy rate in *your community*

Now that we have a general problem statement for each issue we want to narrow this list down to issues we think we may want to address for our project. I am going to give each of you 4-5 sticky dots, place one dot next to each issue you would like to address. (you want to give as many sticky dots as issues you want, so if you want to narrow it down to 4 issues give each 4 sticky dots.)

FORMING A PROBLEM STATEMENT

(Once they have placed their sticky dots next to the issues, run a tally and select out the issues that received the most sticky dots. Divide them into smaller groups, one issue per group.)

Now we've narrowed down our issues and for each of these issues we need to form a problem statement just like I did for drugs. Each small group is going to form a problem statement for one issue. When we are done we're going to share what we learned with each other.



(Hand out Forming a Problem Statement.)

This worksheet will guide you through the process. (Assign each group an issue, give them 15-20 minutes to work through the worksheet with their issue, then have each group report out what they did and what their final problem statement is with the rest of the group. Record the final problem statements on a flip chart for everyone to see.)



(Based on the issues and problem statements discussed in this session, the facilitators should be forming some ideas where/what agencies in the community would be good sites for the Fact Finding Field Trips.)



- The ability to state key problems is an important source of power
- How the problem is stated often determines its solution
- Improving your problem statement skills helps you arrive at more interesting solutions
- Messing around with the problem statement keeps you from overlooking the obvious or committing to a course of action that won't work



Write in your general statement here

We wish.. _____
_____.

Answer the following questions about your general statement.

Who: _____

When: _____

Where: _____

What: _____

Why: _____

Using the information from your answers, restate your problem

We wish.. _____
