

Tool: Problem Statement Readiness Check

Overview

By working through the problem-analysis stage of improvement science, your team has spent time exploring your school's problem focus area from multiple perspectives and developed a common understanding of it. The goal of this analysis is to deeply understand the larger problem so that you can focus on a part of the problem that is within your power to address. Every problem is different, and there is no rule for how much investigation is required to get to the point when your team is ready to shift from analysis to crafting solutions. For this reason, this *Problem Statement Readiness Check* tool allows your team to ask itself whether it is ready to move on, or if it is better to engage in another round of analysis.

Objective

- Consolidate the learning from your team's problem analysis and capture any remaining questions.
- Check your team's readiness to move on from investigation to crafting solutions.
- Draft and finalize your problem statement.

Participants

- Some combination of school leadership, improvement team leaders, and members of the improvement team.

Materials

- Documents and data produced and collected during the analysis of the problem focus area.

Guiding Questions

- What has the team uncovered during the analysis of the problem focus area?
- In what ways do individual team members, stakeholders, and students see the problem focus area differently?
- What questions do you still have about the problem focus area?
- Do any parts of the problem focus area have the potential to become the focus of the improvement team's work?

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How to Use This Readiness Check

After concluding at least one tool from the problem-analysis chapter, or any complementary investigative step, this short exercise should be used as a prompt to ask your improvement team and/or leadership whether the most appropriate next step is to continue investigating or move on.

Problem Analysis Readiness Check

1. Introduction and Framing

- Welcome your team and review the objectives and guiding questions of the activity.

2. Review Your Team's Learning

- Spend a few moments reviewing the provided documentation of your problem analysis. Where helpful, have the primary investigators summarize. Allow time for clarifying questions, but remember that this should be a review, not a comprehensive presentation.

3. Initial Brainstorming

- Remind your team that this exercise involves separating the insights and questions that will have continued relevance from the ones that aren't worth pursuing. Tell them that they should feel free to bring up topics if they seem worth discussing, but should work as a group toward selecting the insights and questions that are worth recording.
- Work together to pull out the most important insights and questions that have arisen through this process.

What insights into your problem focus area are particularly helpful? What learning has the potential to lead you to effective solutions? Jot your team's notes here:

What questions remain to be answered? What do you still need to know? What new questions has the problem analysis revealed? Jot your team's notes here:

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4. Readiness Checklist

- Now, having just reviewed the learning that took place during your problem analysis, discuss each of the questions in the following checklist to decide how confident you feel about your readiness to move on. Given the premise that the challenges schools face are complex, we must recognize that our understanding of these challenges will always be imperfect. That said, you should feel at least somewhat confident you have made progress toward the criteria on the checklist.

Readiness Checklist

Write your problem focus area here:

Now, think about your team's investigation into the problem focus area and your school context and discuss your degree of confidence that your team has accomplished the following goals:

- Has your team investigated multiple perspectives on the problem focus area?
- Have you challenged assumptions your team held about why the problem occurs?
- Have you gained useful insight into why previous efforts haven't been as successful as desired?
- Has your team gained sufficient insight into student needs to give you confidence that you know which kinds of improvements will lead to improved student experience and outcomes?
- Have you identified existing school-based practices or processes connected to the problem that might be improved?

If you checked three or more boxes, move on to the next step and try to write a problem statement.

Draft Problem Statement

*A **problem statement** is a specific part of the **problem focus area**. It is the “corner of the problem” or the underlying cause that you are choosing to address. Write a draft problem statement here:*

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Final Check

- Has your team normed their understanding of the problem statement and the language they use to talk about it?
- Does the problem statement generate consensus?
- Do you have some idea what effective solutions to this problem statement could look like? These can be from your team's expertise, other practitioner examples, or research.
- Can a sufficient percentage of your team impact the problem statement through their daily work?

If you have checked all of these, congratulations! You are ready to move on. If not, don't despair. Problems worth solving are rarely simple. Continue to next steps below.

5. Next Steps

- If you crafted a problem statement and are pleased with it, move on to the *Crafting an Aim Statement* tool in Chapter 2 of the handbook and start building a driver diagram. If you are feeling uncomfortable with your team's progress in these four areas, consider:
 - engaging in another round of investigation. Using another tool from *this chapter* may be helpful.
 - consulting an outside expert or reading about the approaches others have taken to solve this problem. If your investigation leads you to a place where members of your team aren't experts, you should feel free to call on others with more experience.
 - using the final check items that you couldn't satisfy as a starting point for any further investigation, team discussion, or refining of the problem statement. Resolving these specific issues may be what you need to move forward with confidence.