insync

Success. Mapped.

Guidelines for Developing a Meaningful

Problem Statement

A *clear* and *meaningful* problem statement is crucial

insync

A 'problem statement' is a question, or a set of questions, that the sponsoring organisation (the decision maker) sets for the deliberation. It is usually developed by the sponsoring organisation with advice from the Insync team. A clearly defined problem statement benefits the sponsoring organisation, the facilitation team, and most importantly, the deliberation group. It describes the dilemma or the key question the deliberation group must respond to, providing a focus and reference point for all discussions.

The problem statement is presented to the deliberating group right from the outset of the engagement. Even before that though, it can benefit the recruitment process to generate interest, and is central to the background information that is provided to participants.

Here are some of the key advantages of having a clearly defined problem statement from the outset of a deliberative process:

- **Defines purpose:** By clearly articulating the specific challenge and the purpose for the deliberative engagement, it can create deeper meaning, relevancy and alignment to the needs and concerns of the community.

- **Targeted engagement plan:** The project team can confidently step into the micro design of the deliberative engagement, applying the most appropriate methodologies and developing materials.

- **Clarity:** The statement sets the boundaries and objectives of the deliberative engagement, providing a framework for participants to focus their discussions.

- **Diversity of thinking:** A clear problem statement allows participants to consider a diverse range of viewpoints and broader community concerns, leading to more representative outcomes.

- **Promotes transparency:** A clear problem statement promotes transparency in the process, for participants and the broader community.

- **Better decision making:** It demonstrates that the group has a high value in the solution and can lead to more thoughtful and informed decision making for both the deliberating group and the sponsoring organisation.

- **Community acceptance:** When people can see that the process is well defined and addresses relevant issues, they are more likely to support the outcomes, even if they do not agree with the recommendations of the group.

- **Shares the dilemma:** By sharing the decision making with the deliberating group they will understand the difficult decision-making process that is required by the sponsor organisation.

Guidelines for developing a problem statement

insync

By following these guidelines, you can develop a clear problem statement that empowers the deliberating group to want to engage in meaningful discussions and contribute to positive change.

Here are some practical recommendations and important guidelines for crafting a clear problem statement.

1 Frame the statement as a question.

2 Phrase the question as open-ended (not one that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' response).

3 The problem statement should be concise (20 words or less).

4 Sometimes it might be useful to include a framing or explanatory statement to provide important context.

5 It should be written in clear and plain English.

6 Avoid bland language.

7 Avoid using 'corporate jargon' or organisational terminology.

8 Avoid compound questions (two questions in one). If there needs to be more than one question, keep each question separate.

9 Avoid words that convey something is being suggested (like 'should'), unless you have a good reason for using them.

10 It includes what is negotiable, what the group can influence such as the main trade offs or challenges (either in the question or the framing).

11 Share any related decisions (informed by the sponsoring organisation's policies, State Government planning policy or legislation) that have already been made and cannot be influenced by the group.

Checklist for testing your problem statement

The problem statement cannot be altered once the engagement has commenced. This is because participants have committed to the problem statement presented to them in the recruitment process, and any changes could lead to frustration.

- [ ] **Have you involved a range of stakeholders in the process of defining the problem statement? This includes members of the public or customers, experts, organisational leaders, and other important stakeholders.**

- [ ] **Have you 'tested' your problem statement with people outside of your organisation or sector? Does it make sense to everyone who reads it?**

- [ ] **Does the problem statement get to the core of the issue and provide a platform for open discussion about the trade-offs involved?**

- [ ] **Does the problem statement effectively tackle the central issue, or does it overlook crucial public concerns?**

- [ ] **Does the problem statement get to the heart of what the sponsoring organisation will ultimately need to decide?**

- [ ] **Is the problem statement leading? Does it hint at a pre-determined or preferred outcome or give that perception?**

- [ ] **Are the outputs of the deliberative discussion clear? Is everyone clear on what you're working towards?**

Examples of a problem statement

The following examples are extracted from New Democracy's Research and Development note on 'framing the remit' by Lyn Carson, 2018.

This example for the City of Melbourne 10-year participatory budget demonstrates the importance of analysing trade-offs:

> **"Melbourne is growing & changing & the next decade will bring increased demand on our services, as well as new challenges & opportunities. How can Melbourne remain one of the most liveable cities in the world while maintaining a strong financial position into the future?"**

This example for Yarra Valley Water is good because it includes the trade-off, expressed as a need to find balance between service and price:

> **"We need to find a balance between price & service which is fair for everyone. How should we do this?"**

This example for Darebin City Council is brief and extremely specific, which rated well for both scope and clarity:

> **"How should we best spend $2m to improve our community through the use of infrastructure spending?"**

This example for the City of Greater Geelong includes a framing statement, explaining the background, in only four words. Note the use of *want* in this statement. This is a good alternative to *could* or *should*. The question is precise and concise:

> **"Our council was dismissed. How do we want to be democratically represented by a future council?"**

This problem statement for Noosa Council is an example of one which caused unnecessary confusion for being too narrow. The question that Council really wanted to answer was whether the organisation should take on management of the river. This underlying question is not evident from the statement:

> **"How are we to manage the Noosa River better? What role should Council play and what resources should Council apply?"**