

Arts Collaboration and Community Engagement

Problem Analysis and Finding Alternatives:

Public policies are intended to solve problems. The first step toward solving a problem is making sure you have properly identified the problem. This is not necessarily easy.

As an example, let’s say that your friend is upset about something. We might think that just by asking, your friend can easily identify the root problem. For example, your friend might say that he is upset because his boss thinks he isn’t doing his job. For the sake of this example, however, let’s say that your friend really is performing poorly at his job. So, we might ask: What really is the problem? Is it that his boss is unhappy with his work performance, or is the problem that he is not performing his job well?

The difference between these two possibilities is extremely important because the solutions we explore have to match the real problem.

If we believe the problem is that the boss is unhappy with your friend’s work performance, we will examine solutions that will address the boss's belief. It means that we don’t have to address your friend’s work performance. We have to, instead, seek ways to convince the boss that your friend’s work performance is just fine and that she is in error for believing otherwise.

If we believe the problem is that your friend really isn’t performing his job well, the appropriate solution will be to help him do her job better. Perhaps he needs additional training. Maybe he needs a clearer, or different job description. Maybe we will even discover that he is not well suited for his current job.

In sum, how we define the problem will make a great difference to the solution alternatives we explore, and ultimately, the policy solution we adopt.

Note: How we define the problem doesn’t change what the problem really is.

As another example, let’s say that you are caring for a very young child. Young children often cannot articulate what problem they are experiencing, and in fact, may not even know. Let’s say the child is crying. You think the child is tired, when in fact the child is hungry. You explore alternative solutions to alleviate the child’s tiredness. But, since the child is not at all tired, but instead hungry, all of your remedies are useless. No matter how convinced you are that you have defined the problem correctly, you actually haven’t. So, you can’t solve the problem, and the child continues to cry.

Sadly, this often leads to frustration, and even anger on your part. Why won't the child respond to the solution you have provided?

So it is with policy problems and solutions. You may believe you have done a very good job in defining the problem. Yet, in the case that you have poorly or incorrectly defined the problem, none of your proposed solutions will work. It may happen that you inappropriately become frustrated or angry, and blame others because your solution isn't working.

That's why careful research leading to proper problem definition is needed.