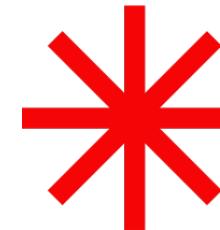


PROBLEM FRAMING CANVAS

Making Sense of Problems for Better Responses



Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation

PROBLEM FRAMING CANVAS

"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions".
Albert Einstein



First-cut problem statement:

Whose problem is it?
(a human view)
What is the need?
Why is this a problem?

Is there a problem behind the problem?

Any insights from the 5 whys?

Draw out the problem - create a rich picture

What is the story of this problem?
How does the problem 'work'?

What does this picture reveal about how you 'see' the problem?

Problem framed as an opportunity question -

How Might We.....?

Question that has the potential to spark at least 10 ideas about potential responses

Framing the problem in three different ways:

Who cares about the problem enough to act on it?

Who has a stake in the problem or its resolution?

Does anyone benefit from the problem as a problem?

What type of problem is this?

COMPLEX COMPLICATED

CHAOTIC CLEAR

Source: thecynefin.co/

Any changes to your first cut problem statement?

Based on my knowledge + experience, my top of mind three 'best guess' answers / solutions to the problem are:

Assumptions:

Assumptions:

Assumptions:

Low Cost Test:

Low Cost Test:

Low Cost Test:

What does success look like for responding to this problem?

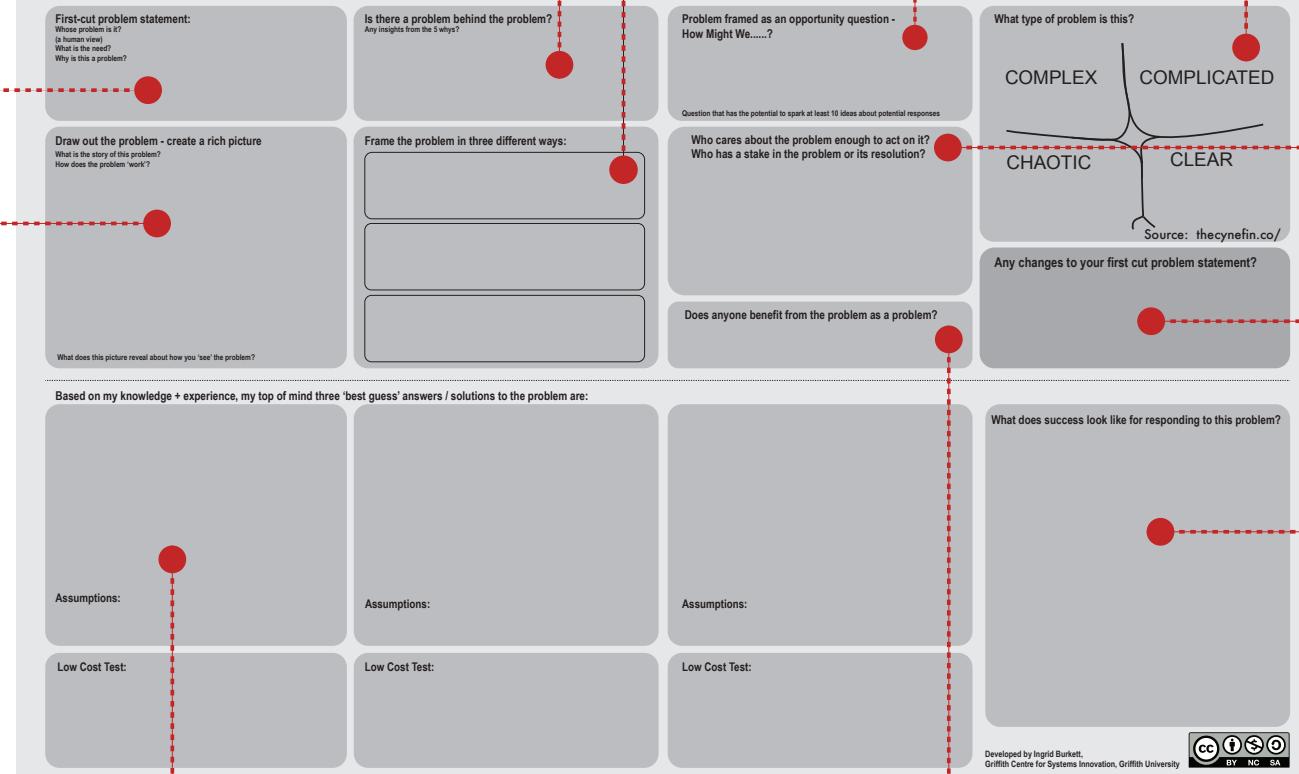
Articulating your shared understanding of the problem, including whose problem it is, whether there is a need underneath the problem (or an opportunity!) and what your understanding is of why this is actually a problem.

We find that creating a visual representation of the problem (a rich picture) can help everyone 'see' problems and this can build either shared or diverse ways of understanding the nature and effects of a problem. This is not an 'artistic' representation - it can be very basic, but it helps everyone to get a picture of things that otherwise can exist in our heads.

This is the heartland of reframing problems - to get a different perspective on a problem, see it from a different angle, with a different frame of reference. This can help us see not just problems differently, but see potentially different responses too.

Getting behind the presenting problems - either to understand some of the underlying root causes, or to get a sense of the many contributing factors that sit underneath the presenting problem.

PROBLEM FRAMING CANVAS



Many of the problems we work with and on are complex - they can't be 'solved' with either formulas, or by expert advice. They require experimental and learning approaches. One way of starting to think more experimentally is to surface the 'best guesses' people have in their minds about solutions and then unpack the assumptions these are built on. We can then develop quick, low cost tests that could help either validate or challenge these assumptions, meaning we can move on to more sophisticated understandings of the problem - and to more rigorous learning tests to help us learn forward.

Problems are not all equal - and therefore the way we respond cannot be universal. The Cynefin Framework, developed by Dave Snowden, can help us make sense of problems, and understand how different domains of problems require different patterns of responses.

Thinking through the layers of both actors and stakeholders of a problem (and of any potential responses) can help unlock multiple sites of action and also help us to understand how we might resource responses.

After we have reflected on all these questions and thought through the nature, form and structure of our problem and potential responses we might have a different viewpoint on the problem statement we started off with. Restating the problem can help unlock some of our potential responses or point to how our assumptions about the problem may have shifted.

Exploring what 'success' looks like means examining what the context would be, look, feel like without the problem, and how things would be different if the problem was resolved. It may also involve thinking about criteria for making progress towards an outcome in relation to the problem.

Exploring who benefits from the problem as a problem can help us to unpack some of the factors that are keeping a problem in place, and to explore some of the stakeholders who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. This can also help us to prepare for any push-back to responses that may challenge the status quo.

Developed by Ingrid Burkett,
Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation, Griffith University

Why this workbook?

This canvas and workbook were borne out of frustration and a sense of possibility. We've worked in various tricky and complex contexts where we were confronted with a raft of responses ranging from: 'quick fixes', 'off-the-shelf solutions', 'transplanted solutions', to 'we're stuck'. We've seen the effects of analysis paralysis, diving down wombat holes (the Australian alternative to rabbit holes!), and getting lost in problems that were not really the problem.

So, we started to explore ways in which we could work with people to 'zoom out' and focus on how they could frame and name problems more effectively, recognise different types of problems, and start to 'learn' their way into responding. We developed some of our own ways of helping people, and we borrowed some of the great tools and frameworks others have used to support better framings and responses to problems. We drew these together in a canvas to help people spend more time framing problems rather than jumping headlong into problem 'solving'.

We found that this approach helped people to develop better skills to analyse problems and to reflect, test, and learn about possible responses more effectively. The response from teams we've worked with has been very positive – and we've refined the canvas via feedback and testing.

In 2022 we shared the canvas in one of our social media posts and were inundated with requests for deeper explanations of each of the segments.

In response, in 2023 we are making our Problem Framing Canvas workshop materials open source through this workbook.

Spending time understanding + making sense of your problem increases your capacity to respond effectively. It is not the same as 'falling in love with your problem' and it means you're less likely to fall down a wombat hole of analysis paralysis.



Why focus on problems?

In the problem framing canvas we are focused on problems - we could equally focus on opportunities or challenges - but we want to focus on problems because that is the dominant way the world currently classifies things that need to or could change. Also, we are focused on 'innovation', and from this perspective, 'problems' are very often the starting point for exploring potential alternatives.

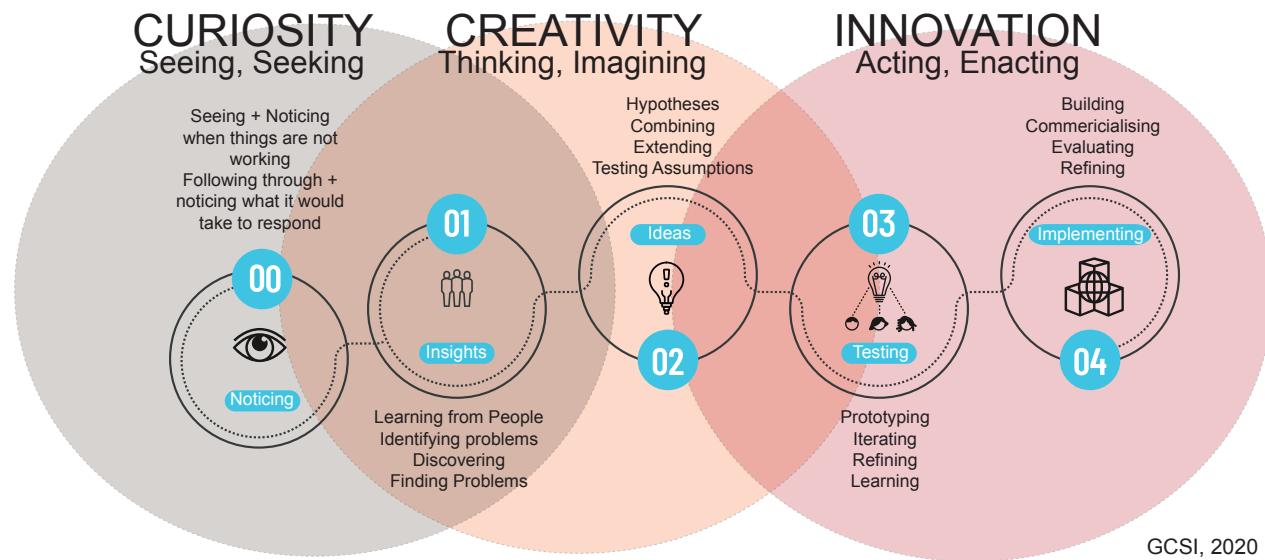
Too often, though, we find that the automatic assumption is that innovators are inherently 'problem solvers' or that the process of innovation starts with dreaming up new ways to solve problems. That's not the case. All good innovation starts with FINDING and FRAMING problems...and it's only after we have unpacked problems to really understand them and define them that good responses (and therefore innovation) can actually happen. In fact, we think there's far too much focus on 'problem solving' in the world without first questioning or understanding '**what is the problem we are actually solving for?**' That is the realm of curiosity - we are seeking new ways of seeing what it is that is happening, and what the nature of the problems are which we are concerned with.

It is this question that led Albert Einstein to argue that:

"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions."

Our experience too aligns with Einstein's other insight - that the quality of the responses people are able to generate is often in direct proportion to their ability to actually **identify** the problem they are hoping to solve.

Innovation starts with finding problems – things we can't stop thinking about, that annoy us or our colleagues or customers intensely, that we can't let go of. It is the noticing, finding, exploring, discovering, understanding and ultimately framing problems that are at the core of this canvas. We want to offer some kind of scaffolding for the early stages of innovation where we are directing our response to the question we posed above.



Why is this important?

There are four key consequences if we don't spend time framing problems.

- We focus on 'solving' the wrong problems** How many times have you seen so-called 'solutions' that are actually focused on the wrong problem? Sometimes we focus on symptoms rather than problems. Other times we knowingly draw attention away from deeper issues towards those problems that are easier, even if that means we are just continuing to put bandaids on a much more fundamental wound. Framing problems can help us not only focus on problems that are worth 'solving', but can ensure that if we're going to opt for an easy fix, we are at least transparent about this.
- We keep using 'solutions' that we know are not working** - there is copious evidence about the complex array of things that will help reduce congestion on our roads, and yet, despite this, we keep building more lanes on highways - one of the 'solutions' we know doesn't actually create real impact. Framing problems - and growing the evidence that either supports or refutes our assumptions can at least help us be honest about

"It is in fact the discovery and creation of problems rather than any superior knowledge, technical skill, or craftsmanship that often sets the creative person apart."

Getzels and Jackson, 2011

"The goal of the definition stage is to target the right problem to solve, and then to frame the problem in a way that invites creative solutions".

Dziersk, 2008

whether this is a political ‘quick fix’ or will actually go some way towards lasting and impactful responses.

3. In many organisations and industries we have a cultural bias towards execution rather than rigorous problem definition (Taylor, 2017). Ideas and plans + action - are much more highly valued by most workplaces than raising the hard questions or getting curious about what’s not working. Paradoxically, we have a tendency to either ‘fall in love’ with problems, or solutions, rather than developing a deep relationship with sense-making as a foundation for responses that could actually help us address real problems with action that has the best kind of potential for impact.

4. Too often we have a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to problems - so we don’t acknowledge that there are different types of problem domains - which require different approaches (for example, a complex problem requires a different approach to a complicated or a clear problem - see our review of Dave Snowden’s Cynefin framework later on).

We are seeing far too much performative problem ‘solving’ - investing vast amount of resources, energy and time, without any of the fundamentals changing. Sharing our learnings about how to better frame problems is one way in which we are challenging this scenario. It’s not the only thing that needs to change - but its an important start!



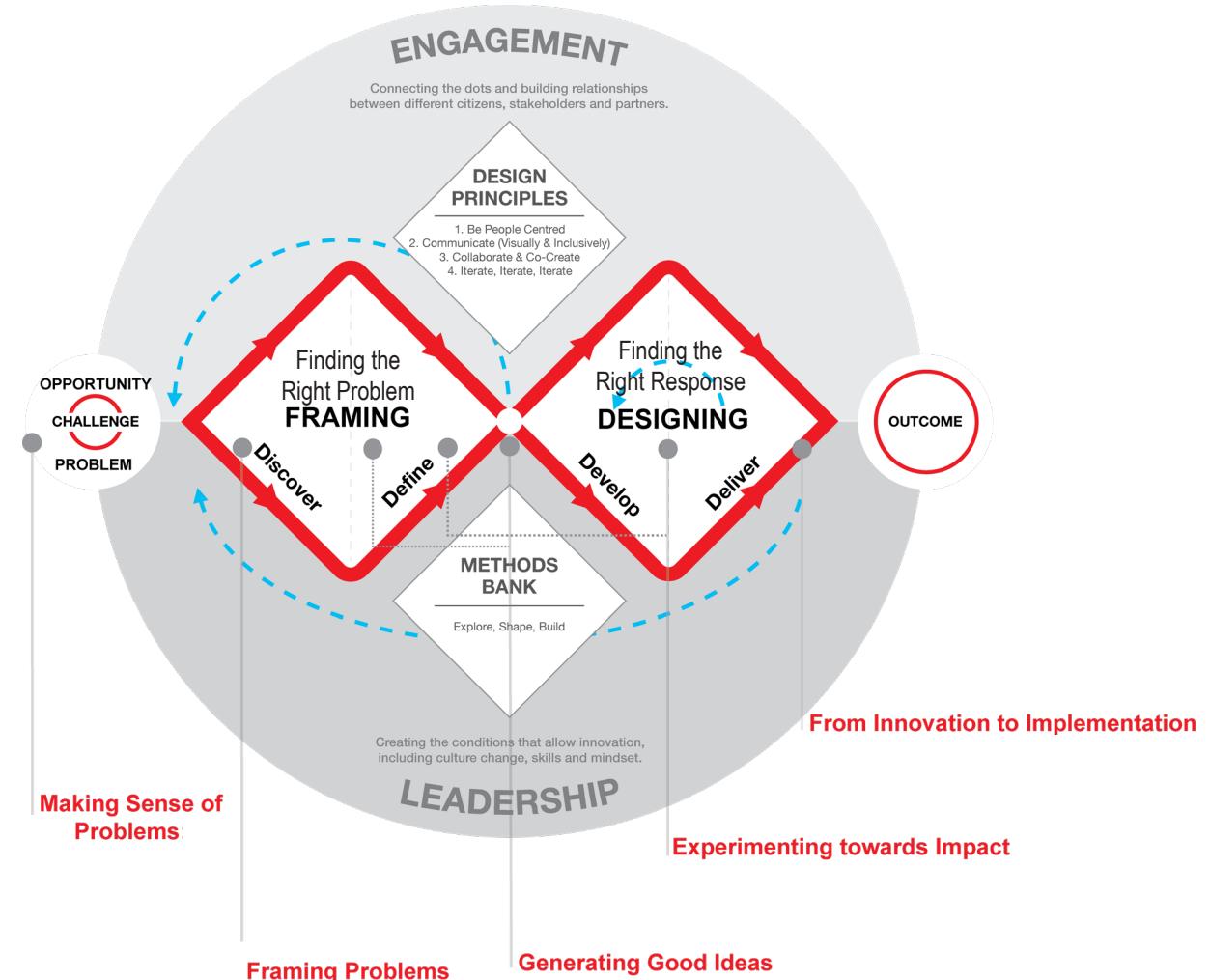
A great resource for exploring the need for problem reframing

- Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (2020) **What's Your Problem: To Solve Your Toughest Problems, Change the Problems You Solve**

“This is the very problem we face – and why we see so much innovation theatre rather than genuine impact. Initiatives and projects come with an over simplification of the problem statement. If indeed such a statement exists at all. There’s a lack of penetration into the root causes of problems. We don’t understand our world half as well as we think we do.”

Most of our organisations have a cultural bias for execution over thorough problem definition. We simply want to get the product on the street. Even if it’s the wrong product (or the wrong street). To have the most impact, it’s simple. Just ask the right questions.”

Taylor, 2017



Problem Framing should constitute the first half of any design or innovation process - it enables us to actually define the problem we are designing for, and helps us to really make sense of the problem we are focusing our innovation on. Source: Based on Design Council UK (2019) Double Diamond Design Framework.

Diving into the Canvas

The Problem Statement

The problem statement provides a starting point for moving the problem out of our heads and onto a page. It can also give us some clues about what assumptions we are making in framing the problem.

The five Ws (who, what, where, when and why) can help you with your first cut problem statement and you can use these to frame your problem.

Aim for a short, clear statement of the problem, who it impacts, what needs to change (or what the need is), and why this is a problem.

First-Cut Problem Statement

Whose problem is it? (a human view)

What is the need for change?

Why is this a problem?

You could frame it like this:

The problem is....(what).....

It affects....(who, where and when).

This... needs to change (what needs to change)

because ... (why).

CONSIDERATIONS

WHAT

*What is the focus of the problem?
What supporting evidence is there
about this problem?*

WHO

*Who is affected by the problem? How
do we know? How are their voices
present in the problem statement?*

WHERE

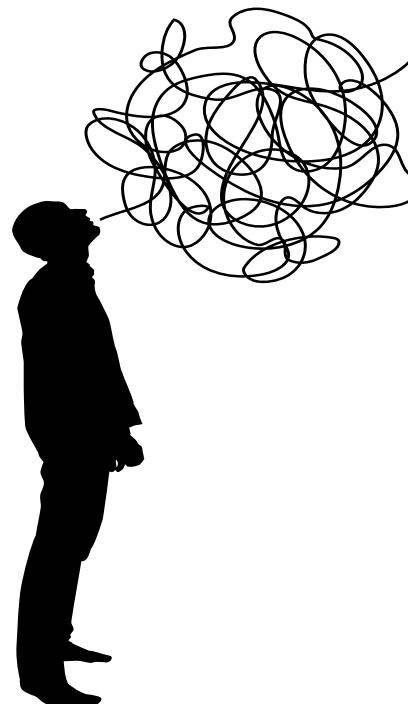
*Where does this problem occur?
How does the context of the
problem impact its expression?*

WHEN

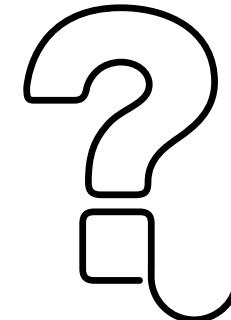
*When does the problem occur - and
what is the timeframe in which it
has developed?*

WHY

*Why is this problem worth
addressing? What impact will
addressing it have?*



You can also refine your problem by asking yourself some key questions about the statement.



- What is the ‘evidence’ that this is actually a problem?
- Is your problem statement clear and understandable (particularly to those who have a stake in the problem?)
- Is this really a **problem** statement (rather than a **solution** statement in the guise of a problem statement)?

The last question here is important - many a problem statement is disguised as a solution...so make sure you are not locking yourself into a narrow solution space from the start!

An example of this might be:

Better social media campaigns are needed to educate young people about the potential health impacts of vaping and reduce the rates of illness and injury from this new health crisis.

While there is a critical problem in this statement - health impacts of vaping - it is already assuming education is the answer, and further, social media campaigns are the means to create this education!

The key thing to remember is that this is just a starting point problem statement. You will have plenty of opportunity to refine, reframe, rethink and redesign your problem statement as we work through the problem framing canvas.

A pre-requisite for getting value out of this process is to be open to shifting your thinking about your first cut problem statement and being prepared to revisit this as you reframe assumptions.

Drawing out the problem can make assumptions visible

Sometimes words are just not enough to help us make sense of a problem - we need to map it out or draw it out in order to make sense of it, shape it, unpack it or understand what it is that makes it a problem. Creating 'rich pictures' or visual representations of the layers of the problem can help us to 'see' the problem from a new perspective.

If you are working collaboratively with others to explore a problem and there are either different interpretations of what the problem actually is, or there are power differentials between people, then spending some time 'drawing out' the problem can help to surface different perspectives and to make assumptions visible.

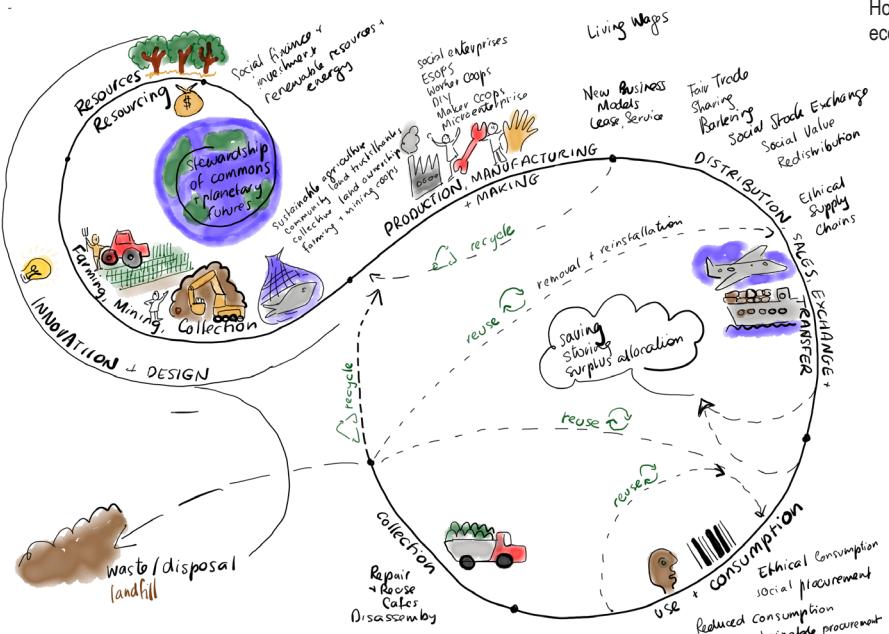
Drawing rich pictures does not require any artistic ability - it is a way of thinking about, sharing, making sense of a problem. You can use very simple icons,

write words, use symbols, connect elements with arrows or lines, and ‘frame’ elements that belong together in some ways. If you need to develop some confidence in ‘drawing out’ problems, then practice with creating your own bank of simple icons (see those provided here for starters). But remember, rich pictures are not about art - concentrate on the sense-making rather than ‘making it pretty’.

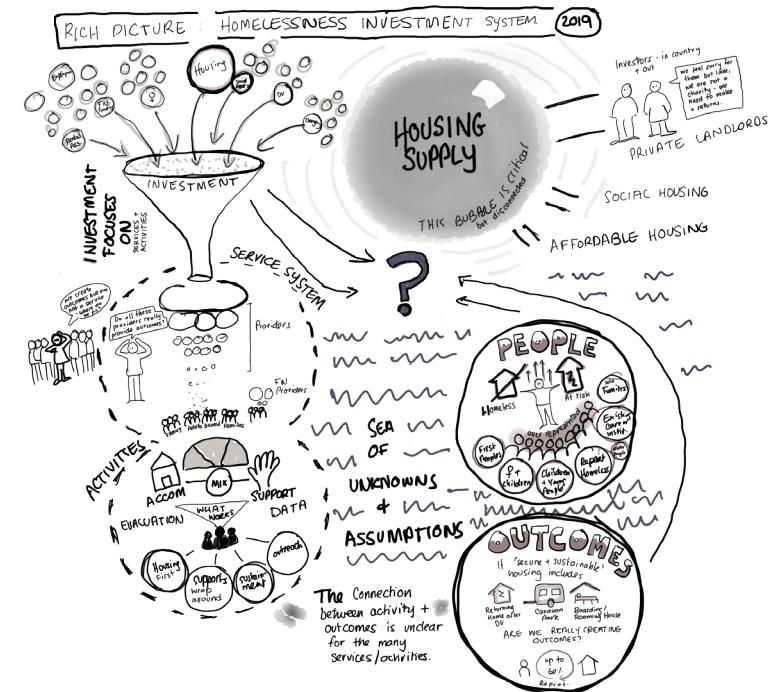
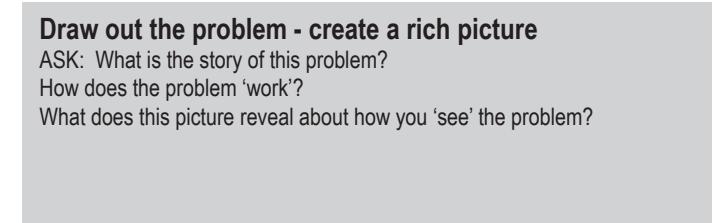
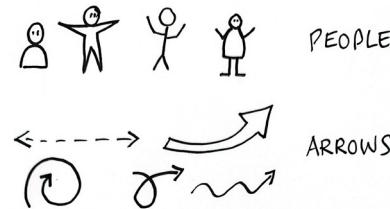
Rich pictures can be done in colour or in black and white - on small paper, large, shared pads, or on electronic notebooks. You can speak through the drawing as the group progresses, or have everyone draw their own version and then talk through each in turn to pick up differences and similarities.

You may even use rich pictures to document how your framing of problems shifts over time!

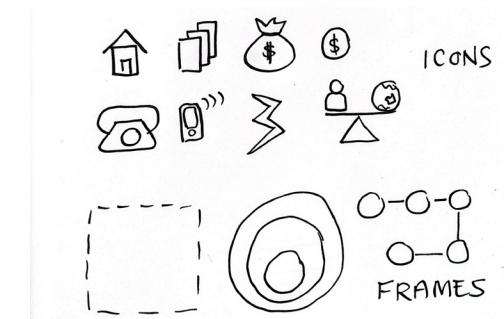
Rich Picture 2020, GCSI: How does impact economy link to circular economy?



Icon Ideas



Rich Picture 2019, GCSI:
What does the investment system look like in relation
to the homelessness service sector?



Is there a problem behind the problem?

Sometimes the presenting problem is really just a symptom for something much deeper that sits behind what is evident on the surface. Getting behind the presenting problem can not only help you address the causes rather than the symptoms, it can also open up many more options for how you can actually address a problem.

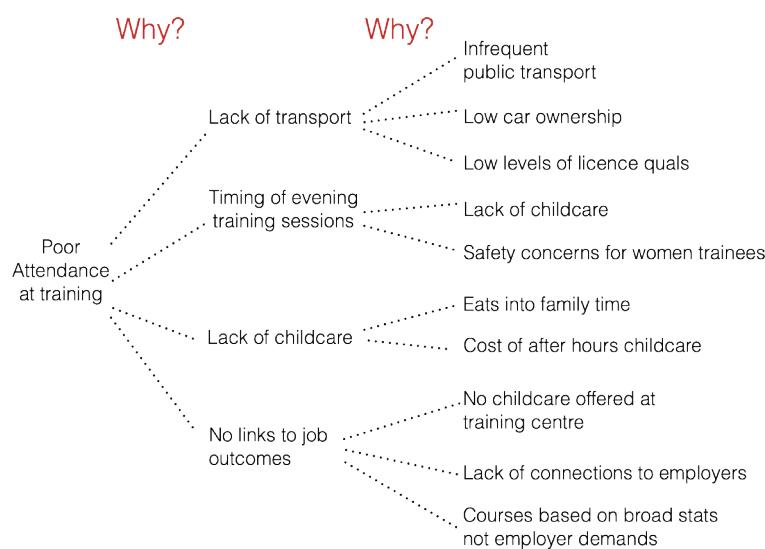
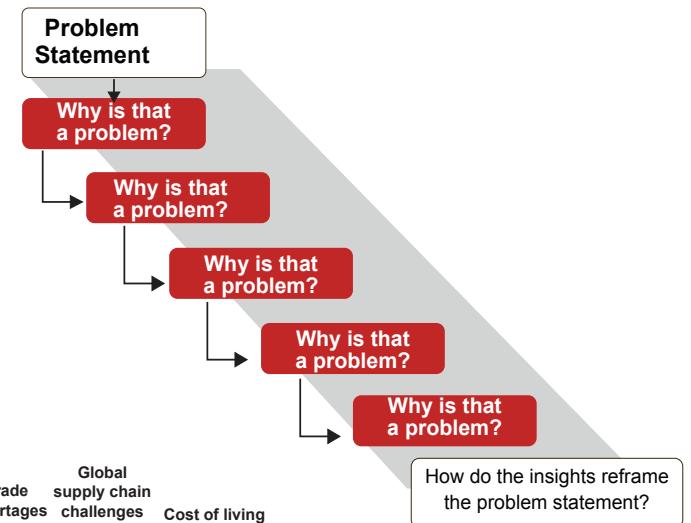
The 'Five Whys' is a technique that was developed by Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of Toyota, who used it as a root cause analysis technique. However, it is not always the case that you will find a singular 'root cause' of a problem - particularly if the problem is complex.

The two illustrations here indicate that even a relatively simple problem, (like recognising that young people in an employment program were not attending training

regularly), can quickly expand out to multiple potential 'whys' when we start to explore the 'causes' more carefully. In complex domains, the 'causes' are often interconnected, overlapping, reinforcing, unclear and even confused.

However, spending time getting under the skin of the presenting problem can help you to develop an appreciation of the many layers that can sit underneath a problem and it can help you to open up further discussions about the assumptions you are making about a problem. It can even be helpful in opening up different frames through which to explore different perspectives on problems and find 'better' problems to solve!

Is there a problem/s behind the problem? Any insights from the 5 whys?



Example One: a clear problem - young people in an employment training are not attending training regularly



Example Two: a complex problem - homelessness amongst young people across the city is increasing

Framing problems differently

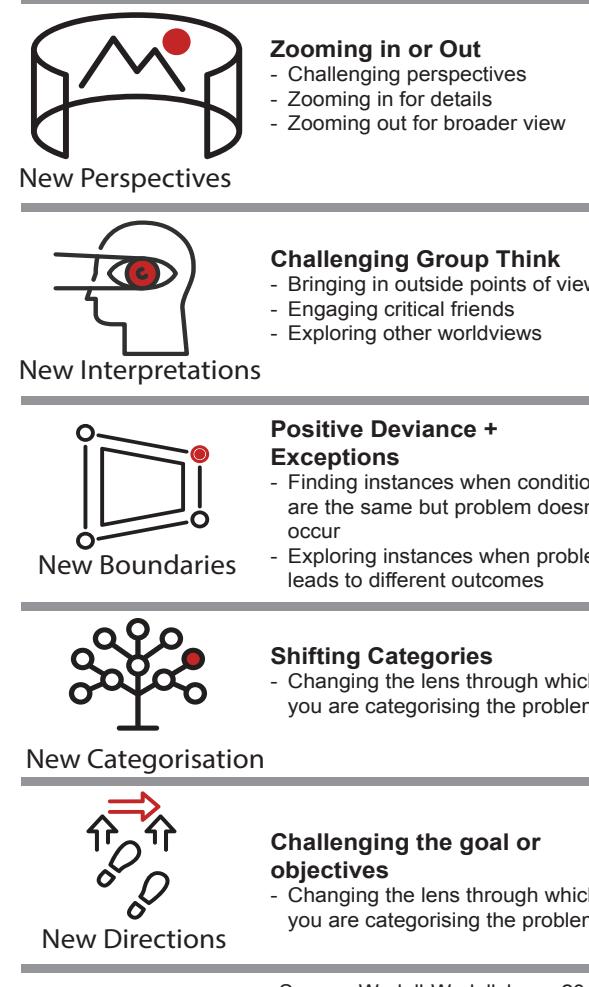
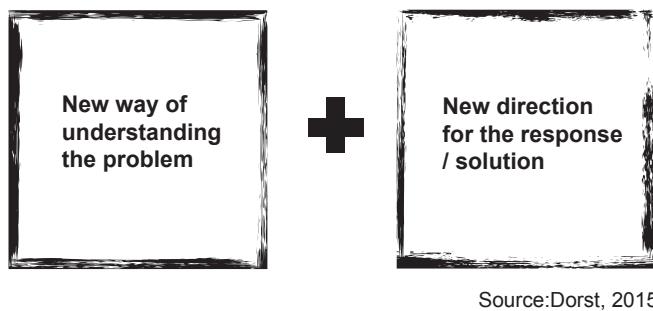
'Frames' are interpretations, perspectives, boundaries that we put around our worlds in order to make sense of them. They are shaped by our cultural contexts, experiences, training, and by our inherent mindsets. They can either limit or expand our perspectives of problems - and we can either accept them as 'givens' or use them intentionally to challenge our own and others' views of a problem.

Understanding frames and framing is key to the Problem Framing Canvas - and many of the parts of this canvas represent ways in which we can understand and expand our framings of problems. In this specific part of the Canvas we look to intentionally frame our problem in three different ways. You could keep going and look to reframe it in ten different ways if you are inspired, but three ways will at least give you a sense of what is involved and it will help you understand the value of reframing as a way of opening up possibilities for responding to problems.

You can see here five different ways of reframing your problem (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2017) - but there are many other ways out there to explore! The main thing to think about when exploring how you might reframe your problem is how it helps you 'see' the problem from a different perspective and therefore how it helps you to stretch out possibilities for responding.

"The more radically we shift the frame, the more unique the ideas we generate. Reframing is thus a powerful tool for identifying opportunities."

Seeling, 2019



An example

Let's say we have the following problem statement: **there is a growing rate of Type 2 diabetes in this region, related to lack of knowledge about healthy food and poor engagement with physical exercise - our problem is adherence to diet and exercise.**

Now think about the frame here. It focuses on the illness - Type 2 diabetes - and there is a frame of 'blame' and of 'deficit' centring the cause on individuals in the region lacking knowledge and motivation.

Here are 3 different ways to frame this problem

Positive Deviance: Fifty eight percent of the region's population eat well and exercise regularly. Our challenge is to examine 'what causes wellness' and what factors contribute to health across the region's population. This reframes the 'problem' from a deficit approach to a strengths approach - which could open up approaches focused on 'what works' rather than what is 'wrong'.

Zooming Out: The region has tracts of 'food deserts' where there is no access to healthy food options. How could we grow food and health corridors and oases across the region that are accessible and affordable to local people? This reframes the 'problem' by zooming out and looking at the structural realities of the region and reframes 'healthy food' away from individual knowledge to look at geographical and structural access.

Challenging the Frame: Health and wellbeing are culturally and collectively defined. How can we grow an understanding of the social and cultural understandings of health in this region and shift our approach to wellness in the process? This reframes the 'problem' by challenging dominant frames that define what wellness, illness and health are, and opens up cultural opportunities and approaches to growing more effective wellbeing outcomes.

We can reduce creativity (and even curiosity!) by getting trapped in certain frames that limit the way we see or understand a particular situation or problem. By expanding our frames, honing the skill of reframing, pushing frame boundaries and challenging 'stuck' frames we can open up a much broader solution space, but also start to see situations differently, and that in itself enables a different approach to problems.

Opening up opportunities for action: How Might We?

This box explores one way to reframe problems so that they expand opportunities for action or responses by flipping it to examine opportunities. The 'how might we?' question is a method that has been used extensively by designers and innovators in challenging assumptions and frames that are baked into so many problems and solutions. It was first developed in the corporate sector and then popularised by IDEO and the Stanford d.school.

The method frames a problem statement as a question - one that is intentionally tentative and could be answered in a multitude of different ways, thereby emphasising possibility rather than certainty. A good How Might We (HMW) question should elicit at least 10 ideas about potential responses (and hopefully many more!).

The challenge of creating a good HMW question lies in what happens before you get to the method. Yes, you can just loosely apply the method, but a much more

HOW

- 'How' suggests that we do not yet have the answer.
- 'How' helps us set aside prescriptive briefs.
- 'How' helps us open up a myriad of possibilities instead of merely executing on what we 'think' the solution should be.

MIGHT

- 'Might' emphasises that our responses may only be possible solutions, not the only solution.
- 'Might' allows for exploration of multiple possible solutions, not settling for the first that comes to mind.

WE....

- 'We' immediately brings in the element of a collaborative effort.
- 'We' suggests that the idea for the solution lies in our collective teamwork.

Source: Interaction Design Foundation: [Interaction-Design.org](https://interaction-design.org)

effective way to use HMW is to build the questions out of evidence and insights from reality, people, and contexts.

If you are able to do some basic research about your problem first, then you can analyse the results and use the insights to create much more grounded and effective HMW questions.

Here are four good questions to ask of your HMW questions which make them more powerful as openers of good response generators.



We have positioned the HMW later in the canvas with the hope you have had an opportunity now to test and shape your problem statement more carefully.

HMW questions are more effective when they are outcomes oriented - so keep the opportunity for outcomes at the front of your mind when shaping them.

They should also be broad enough, and both inspiring and compelling in order to spark multiple ideas for action!

Problem framed as an opportunity question -
How Might We.....?

Question that has the potential to spark at least 10 ideas about potential responses

Let's think about the problem of microplastics in the ocean. Perhaps our problem statement is focused on cleaning oceans of microplastics by reducing and preventing microplastics from entering the ocean. There are many possible How Might We (HMW) questions that could help us frame this problem. Here are a few ideas:



Amplify the Good

HMW use microplastics in the ocean to create underwater habitats?



Explore the Opposite

HMW make microplastics resources rather than waste?



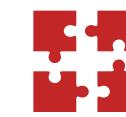
Remove the Bad

HMW isolate microplastics before they reach the ocean?



Question an Assumption

HMW eliminate the possibility of microplastics by designing them out?



Identify an Unexpected Resource

HMW create a lucrative market from recovering microplastics?



Change the Status Quo

HMW treat plastic as a service rather than a product?

These options for creating impactful HMW questions were developed by Stanford d.school: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/>

Actors, Stakeholders + Beneficiaries

All problems are ultimately going to affect people - and all problems involve a variety of people and ecosystems who have a stake in them (either in maintaining them or in responding to them in order to shift them). There are also people and institutions who can or should act on, or respond to problems.

Mapping out or otherwise depicting those who have a stake in problems, those who are directly affected by them and those who could or need to act on them, can provide a range of different perspectives on the problems themselves. It can also help us to reframe the problems and ultimately respond to them.

Who cares about the problem enough to act on it?

Who has a stake in the problem or its resolution?

Let's stay with the problem statement about microplastics in Oceans. In broad terms, the actors + stakeholders are listed below. You may wish to do much more detailed mapping + thinking about this when it comes to your problem, but here we are merely illustrating possibilities!

Actors:

- Plastics Producers
- National Governments + multilateral bodies like the UN
- Fishing industry - individual companies + conglomerates
- Fisherfolk (who fish for livelihoods + sustenance)
- Consumers + Consumer health advocates
- Environmental groups + lobbies

Both lists could go on and on - but you get the picture! Actually you could create maps or pictures of actors and stakeholders too!

Stakeholders:

- Plastics Producers (incl raw materials producers)
- National Government + nations whose economies rely on fishing + ocean resources
- Local fisherfolk, recreational fishers + consumers
- Tourism operators
- Ocean wildlife + ecosystems
- Ecologists, environmentalists

Does anyone benefit from the problem as a problem?

In terms of beneficiaries of the problem, they would include the following:

- oil producers and plastics producers who currently benefit from not having to be responsible for their products across the lifecycles of these products nor pay for clean-ups or, in most cases, pay for the waste that is created from these products.
- National governments currently also benefit to some extent as so much of the 'problem' exists in the commons, for which they don't have to take sole responsibility and this can accrue cost savings to them over time (though it will no doubt catch up with them eventually!)



GCSI, 2023

Although they are frequently used interchangeably, actors, stakeholders and beneficiaries are quite different and understanding the differences and the roles they play can help us to expand our concept of the sort of ecosystem that is needed to respond effectively to problems.

Actors: those people, groups, organisations + institutions that will or need to actively participate in responding to this problem if that response is to be effective. Some of these actors may not have a 'stake' in the outcomes but may still wield influence over any action undertaken or be influenced by the resolution of the problem.

Stakeholders: those people, groups, organisations + institutions that have an interest in either problem or its resolution (but may not act to change it)

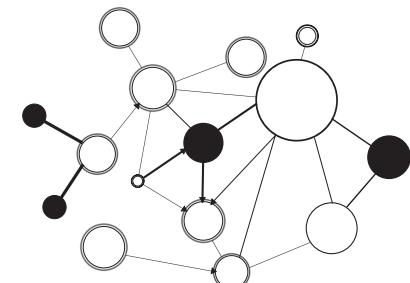
- they may:
 - have experienced or been affected by the problem directly;
 - they may have some kind of interest in the problem and/or its resolution (a financial, cultural or social interest for example); or
 - they may have the ability to use their stake in the problem to be able to affect change.

Beneficiaries of the problem: people, organisations + institutions that benefit from the status quo and/or the problem remaining 'a problem' + who may therefore resist or counter any response or change.

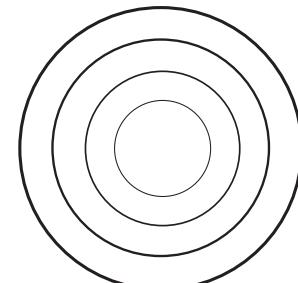
Of course there are also beneficiaries of resolving the problem, but they should be listed with the stakeholders above and could potentially become actors!

Mapping + Depicting Actors + Stakeholders

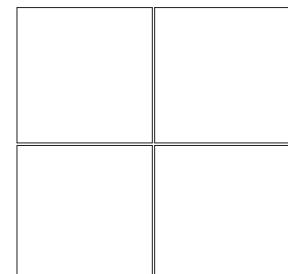
There are three typical frameworks for mapping actors + stakeholders illustrated below.



Network maps can depict the size, nature of relationships, direction of influence + density of an ecosystem of actors around a problem. In actor maps the nature + density of relationships between actors is important in shaping responses.



Concentric circle diagrams are often used for mapping stakeholders, with the centre representing the core group, with the greatest 'stake' in the problem + then levels out from there depicting levels of interest or influence.



Matrix frameworks are also often used for mapping stakeholders, with the two axes frequently used to depict power + interest, providing some insights into how to engage with different types of stakeholders through the course of responding to a problem.

Types and Domains of problems - problems are different!

Traditional models of problem solving can be very deceptive - they treat all problems as basically the same, and propose the same rhythm of action to address them. Problem framing requires a much more nuanced approach to problems - one which recognises that there are different types of problems and that problems sit in different kinds of domains, and that this in turn means that our responses need to be different.

Dave Snowden's Cynefin Framework helps us to explore the nature of the problems we are facing, and understand how this shapes decisions about how to respond. We include it here because we have found it invaluable as a way to help us shape decision-making as we move from problem framing to responding.

Basically problems tend towards one of two domains.

1. Ordered domain, where problems are knowable, predictable, and where there is a

clear connection between cause and effect; and

2. Unordered domain, where problems are messy, and therefore less knowable, predictable, and where there is no clear linkage between cause and effect.

Difficulties arise when we try to respond to problems in unordered domains using approaches from an ordered domain. This is most often seen when we are faced with complex issues (requiring emergent, experimental responses) receiving responses that worked well for complicated problems (where 'experts' unpack, analyse and recommend appropriate solutions).

Spending time making sense of the type of problem you're facing can help you make better decisions about how to respond. On the following page we outline some key response patterns for the different problem domains.

Complex problems have some key characteristics that distinguish them from complicated and clear problems. This means that responding to complex problems needs to be different.



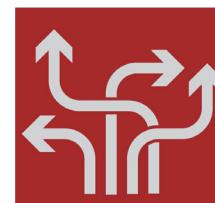
Data is uncertain, contradictory or incomplete



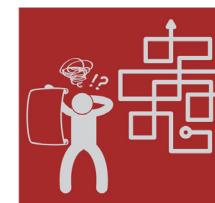
Multiple stakeholders + sites of responsibility + multiple potential starting points



Problem/s are difficult to define - dependent on context + perspective



Interconnected problems with no clear cause + effect



Solution can't be planned without testing it in practice - + consequences are hard to imagine



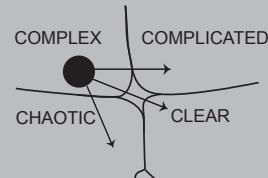
'Solutions' are not technical + they often involve behaviour + mindset shifts

What type of problem is this?

Let's say we are working on reducing homelessness in a region. Our exploration of the problem will likely lead us to see that this problem has many inter-related features, and understand that at a population level, it is difficult to pinpoint singular cause-effect relationships because of the interconnected factors that underpin homelessness.

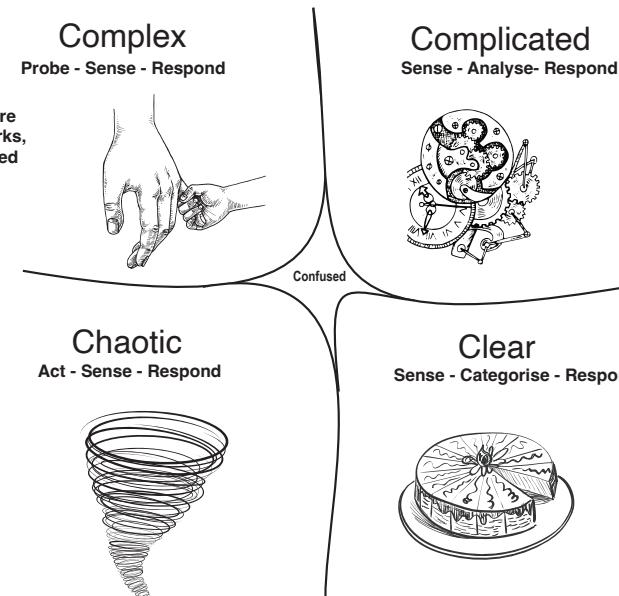
So, this is a complex issue. That does not mean that we can't respond and make progress in addressing homelessness, but it does mean that our responses may well require a different mode of action than say if we were dealing with a purely technical or a complicated challenge like just increasing the supply of housing.

In a complex domain we need a 'probe, sense, respond' rhythm to our response, meaning we may want to explore and experiment in different parts of the system, then look for patterns, reframe, experiment again.



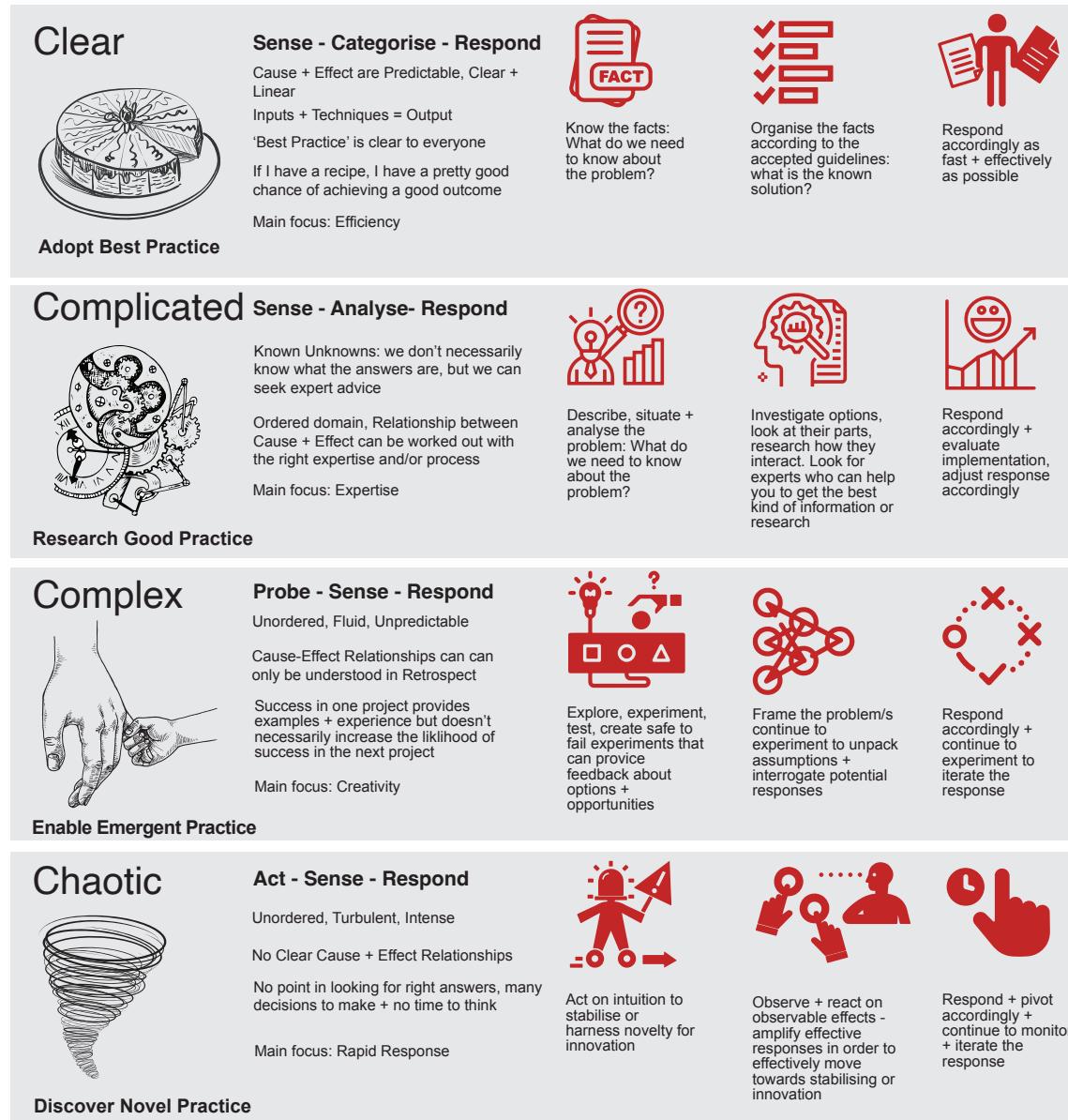
We need to keep learning and iterating when we are working with complex problems. As we deepen our exploration we may find that aspects of the problem are actually more complicated than complex, so we can start to make sense of the problem across the different domains of the Cynefin framework.

Remember, Cynefin is a sensemaking framework - it is not, as Dave Snowden says, a 'categorisation' framework - so problems don't just 'fit and stay' in one domain. Further, in a problem as messy and complex as increasing rates of homelessness, it is likely that our sense-making will help us to see that which elements are complex, which are complicated and which are clear, or even chaotic, and then respond accordingly.



Based on Dave Snowden's Cynefin Model

Below are some of the rhythms of responding to different problem types and domains - they are not recipes! They are patterns or rhythms of response that are characteristic of how responses are framed across the different problem domains. They are much more like sense-making response frames and should be interpreted as such.



Has exploring reframing shifted your original problem statement?

At this stage you may like to revisit your first cut problem statement and ask yourself some questions:

- Did you 'see' anything in your rich picture which could add nuance or perspective to your problem statement?
- Did you uncover some deeper problems or root causes which have shifted where you think your response should focus?
- Did you identify any assumptions in your framing of the problem which reframing the problem statement could help to address?
- Did framing your problem as an opportunity open up any potentials for shifting your problem statement?
- Have you opened up any perspectives from examining the actors and stakeholders of the problem that are important to capture in your problem statement?
- Has exploring and making sense of the domain/s in which your problem is contextualised provided any insights into the nature of the problem - and should this be reflected in your problem statement?

The last box in the top half of the Problem Framing Canvas gives you an opportunity to revisit your first cut problem statement and rework it if necessary.

Any changes to your first cut problem statement?

Switching from Problem Framing to Idea Testing

Reframing problems does not just happen in theory nor in isolation from action. Particularly when we are exploring complex problems, it is important to learn IN and FROM action as part of the process of finding and progressing possible responses. Too often we either plan without action, or we continue to act without learning. For this reason, when we have complex problems, it is important to test our ideas in practice, and name and test the assumptions we are making in framing both problems and responses.

We are not talking here about 'pilots' or long, expensive testing process - rather, we are speaking of low cost, experimental cycles that help us learn from practice, refine and iterate our ideas. This helps us to reframe responses in action.

So the next part of this process is to name our assumptions and think of a low cost test to help us learn about the idea and assumptions.

Example: Let's say we're working with a problem statement like this:

"Young people at the fringes of a capital city are four times more likely to be disconnected from employment and education. In this region employers believe that local young people don't want to work and they are increasingly recruiting people from neighbouring regions. The growing gap between local employers and local young people needs to be addressed if the region is to thrive both economically and socially."

Based on my knowledge + experience, my top of mind three 'best guess' answers / solutions to the problem are:

Close the distance between young people looking for work and local employers by hosting a 'speed meeting' (think speed dating meets employment). Employers identify key jobs they have that are vacant, and young people are prepared so that they can identify their interests and skills.

Assumptions:

- Employers + young people want to attend
- There are jobs that match young people's skills / experience / interests
- Short meetings will provide confidence to employers that lead to job offers
- Young people have the capacity + resources to get to jobs (eg. transport) if they are offered

Transport in the region is not good and few of the young people have cars. Our hunch is that transport could be a big barrier for young people in terms of getting employment - even in local firms. A 'job bus' that picks up young people + takes them to interviews and/or to their jobs could work to create a bridge between young people + employers.

Assumptions:

- Young people in the region don't have access to private vehicles or public transport that links to job sites
- Young people would use a 'job bus'
- A 'job bus' would be supported by employers
- A 'job bus' is financially viable + could support different start / finish times in the region

Profiling young locals who are excelling at their jobs - both to inspire other young people in the region with the message that they can succeed and also challenge the growing stereotypes of young people that seem to be held by some local employers.

Assumptions:

- Focusing on successful young people will actually inspire other young people (rather than shame them)
- Employers will be able to translate some successful example of young people to their overall impressions of young people

Low Cost Test:

A prototype 'job speed meet' with follow up tracking of employers and young people to glean learnings. Tracking job offers, acceptances, and interviewing both employers and young people to understand what worked and what could be improved

Low Cost Test:

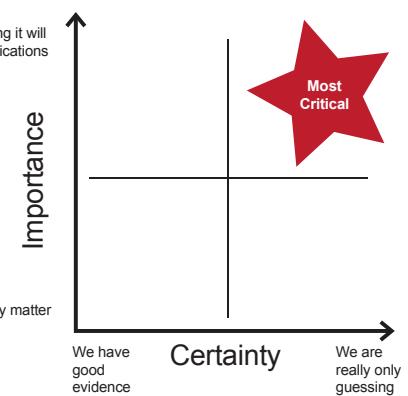
Run a one-month trial 'job bus' using the council bus and with support from the three largest employers, that provides an 'on-demand' bus service to any job-seeker attending interviews or trial job periods. Track attendance, collect insights from the employers and young people

Low Cost Test:

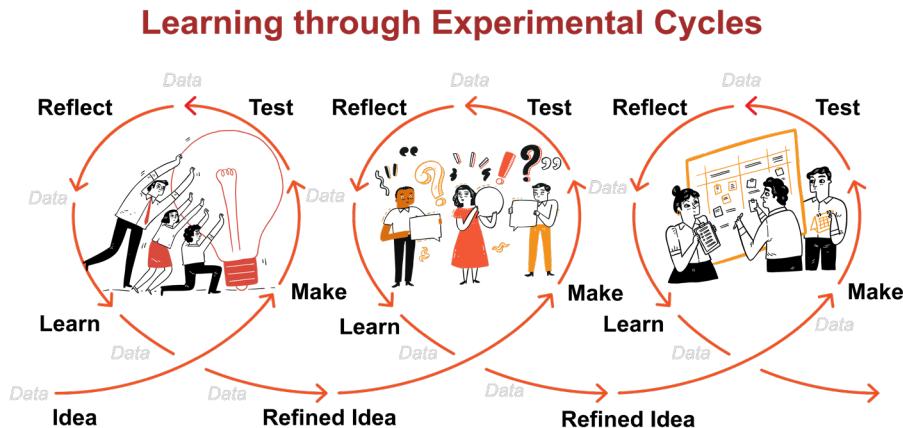
Test a 'Young People of XXX region' on the council's social media profiles, which focuses on successful young people who are locally employed. Track responses, collect insights from young people and employers.

Some assumptions are more critical than others, so it can be good to think about how important our assumptions are, and how much evidence we actually have to support or refute their 'truth' in relation to our idea. We can support our thinking about this with the 'critical assumptions matrix' (see Bland + Osterwalder, 2020).

If we get this wrong it will have serious implications



This matrix can help us to focus our low cost tests on exploring and learning about those assumptions that are really critical, about which we know little, rather than spending too much time on either those that don't matter, or those we already have good existing evidence about.



What if the problem was resolved? What does success look like?

At some point in the problem framing process we need to stop and ask ourselves some questions about how we are imagining a world without this problem - and this in turn can help us examine a different kind of framing for the problem.

There are technical ways in which we can frame and track our progress towards success - such as goals and targets which can be measured over time. However this doesn't work for all types of problems. For example, for complex problems we can explore success through a directional goal, however we don't treat this as a destination, rather we use it to navigate towards promising opportunities.

So, thinking about success can be either tight, with some measurable destinations, or it can be loose, whereby we set our imaginations free and then probe forward in that broad direction. Many of the problems we face require both radical imagination of possible futures AND humble hypotheses, robust testing and searching for promising possibilities if we are truly to move forward to responding effectively.

"We're suffering from an 'imaginary crisis'. By this, I don't mean that the various crises around us aren't real, but rather than there's a deep malaise affecting our capacity for imagination, whether social or political. We can more easily imagine the end of the world than a better future"

Mulgan, 2022

Five Ways to Imagine + Frame 'Success'



Imagining a world without this problem

What if the problem was completely resolved - or it wasn't a problem in the first place. How would the world be different? What would look, feel, be different? Describe or draw a world without the problem.



Framing up a Directional Goal

People speak of the 'north star' as providing a navigational focus when they are aiming for big changes. In the same way, setting a 'directional' goal, helps us to think about not only the ultimate destination, but more importantly, the direction of travel towards that point. In complex contexts we need to think of the direction as exactly that - something that gives us a sense of direction but enables us to remain open to novel learnings.



Flipping the problem towards what is working

In complex contexts, sometimes we need to look not only at the problem, but towards patterns of what is working, where the 'positive deviance' instances are, and then amplify the 'success' that is demonstrated in those instances. In complex contexts, it is less about 'what works' and more about 'what's possible'.



Radical Imagination

It may sound glib, but imagining how things could be profoundly different or imagining futures and how to create them could help us to envisage what success looks like. Authors such as Geoff Mulgan from the UK argue that we need to cultivate our imaginary muscles at this point in history.



Developing + Testing a Hypothesis of Change

Sometimes it is hard to just imagine what 'success' could look like without hypothesising how we might get there. Creating a hypothesis of change towards a directional goal (and then iterating as you learn about what works) can be a way to build not only a vision of success, but a learning pathway toward it.

This last part of the Canvas focuses on asking, if responding to this problem actually 'works' then what would be different? In other words, what does success look like in relation to this problem? This can help us to think through what we are actually working towards - what is our goal, what are we wanting to change? This in turn can provide us with a direction of travel for action.

What does success look like for responding to this problem?

Think about your directional goal, what could it look like if you were successful in resolving the problem. If we think about the problem of microplastics in the ocean...

Perhaps you can think of it as a vision statement - the oceans are flourishing, fish stocks are healthy, the ecosystem is thriving, and plastics are no longer entering or proliferating in the ocean. The Pacific garbage pile has been cleared.

Or you could think about specific targets (like the SDG targets for 'Life Below Water').

Or we could draw a series of 'rich pictures' of what we think might look different from different perspectives.

How you shape your vision of success is less important than thinking through what success actually means to you and those who are impacted by the problem.

"If destination is a known fixed point in time/space, direction is the act of riding flows we have no control over with intent".

Richard, 2021

Conclusion

Problems are always opportunities to create better futures.

No matter whether they can be solved through human ingenuity, or whether they are so complex and wicked that we can only inch our way forward through experimentation, we need develop our critical thinking skills to seek out promising spaces.

We need to practice how to grapple with ways of understanding and responding to problems with imagination, grit and determination. Over the coming years and decades we will, no doubt, need to cultivate not only individual imaginations, but collective, cultural and social imaginations.

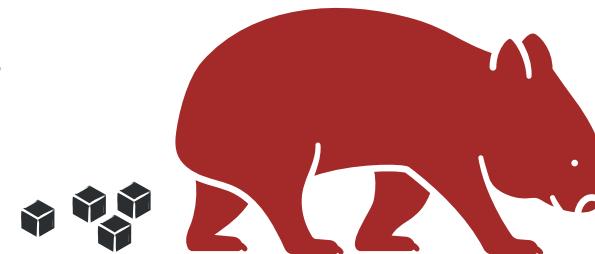
We will need to really learn about how we can expand our frame horizons to tackle intersecting, overlapping and entangled sets of problems that make up what many are starting to refer to as an emerging polycrisis.

We started with a wombat...and will finish the same way. A group of wombats is referred to as a 'wisdom'. We were inspired by this recognition of the collective intelligence of a group of beings (so aptly reflected in the name!). As we reflected on this we also reflected on this as a broader lesson. There is extraordinary power in acting collectively to explore, engage in sense-making, frame, act and learn our way to making contributions to better futures for people, places, the planet (and for wombats too!). May a wisdom of wombats inspire your further exploration of problem framing! And yes, wombats really do poop cubes!

At the same time, there will continue to be the types of ordinary problems we face on a more regular basis - many of which can also benefit from an exploration of the frames and reframing exercises we have explored here.

Framing and reframing approaches are not 'problem-solving' methods as such. Instead, they help us with sense-making - making and remaking sense of the problems so we can better understand and respond. We hope the problem-framing canvas will help you to discover what it means to engage in making sense and sense-making, at least as a starting point to grappling with problems in your life, work and in facing the collective problems we are and will continue to encounter.

We would love to hear how you use it, apply it, change and adapt it. Please let us know! Send us an email: gcsi@griffith.edu.au



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