Problem Framing in Practice

As a practical example, consider the following challenge:

A company that specializes in manufacturing and selling high-end motorcycles has been trying to market its new line of cruisers with limited success.

In fact, it barely sells one or two per week.

The head of sales blames marketing for not delivering leads while marketing blames product development for not creating products that customers want.

Everyone blames sales for not creating revenue, and management is questioning the overall strategy.

What is the problem?

There are lots of theories about what might be causing the issue but the simple truth is that the problem for the business is a shortfall in projected revenue.

Who or what does the problem affect?

The problem will likely impact everyone in the company, including executives, managers, salespeople, engineers, designers, and marketing specialists.

Further, external stakeholders such as vendors and customers will be affected.

What is the impact?

The obvious impacts might include layoffs, lack of bonuses, pay cuts, or contract cancellations.

However, the impacts are likely greater than the initial estimates and may have far-reaching implications, such as kids going without braces, parents having to move in with their adult children, plant closures, and more.

Without overdramatizing the situation, it's important to understand that assessing impact is critical, and categorizing the types of impacts are helping in presenting the business case (without the hyperbole!).

A solid business case supports the prioritization of the problem and justifies the effort spent in solving the issue.

What would a solution look like?

In the short term, success can be defined as a shared understanding of the issues that cause the problem and mutual agreement on the theories that we intend to pursue.

Long term, success should be measured in business results.

For the shortsighted, success might mean firing the sales manager, but it's better to avoid personalizing blame and focus instead on the specific, tangible success that can be measured.

In this example case, success means selling at least 15 motorcycles per week within six months of launch.

It is critical to include specific and measurable success criteria.

That is, define the target for improvement and a specific goal date.

In addition to answering the questions above, it is also helpful to include assumptions, constraints, timelines, and dependencies.

Once you bring this together, you have a problem statement, which is simply a way to summarize the results of your brainstorming and research and capture the essence of the problem.

That is, what is the issue, who does it affect, what is the impact, and what does success look like if the issue were to be solved?