
Problem Framing:

Turning Systems Insight into a Focused Challenge

January 27, 2026



Learning Objectives for Today

1. Identify key system conditions shaping your issue
 2. Distinguish symptoms from underlying causes
 3. Draft a precise, user-centered problem statement
 4. Build a concrete observation plan (where, what, why).
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Warm-Up: Where is the System “Stuck”?

Look at your systems map (individually)

What part of the system seems most responsible for keeping the problem in place?

Pick one condition:

- » Policy or practice
- » Resource flow
- » Relationships or power
- » Mental models

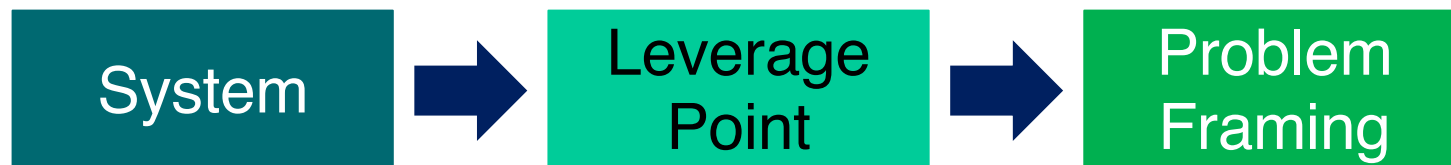


Picking a Tractable “Piece”

Systems maps show many problems

Social entrepreneurs pick one tractable “piece” to address

Today... We move from:



The Three Levels of Systems Change

Level 1: Structural Change (Explicit)

Level 1 is visible, formal, and measurable

1. **Policies:** Formal rules, laws, and guidelines that shape what is allowed
2. **Practices:** Day-to-day routines and informal norms in how work gets done
3. **Resource flows:** How money, time, information, and people move (or get blocked)

This is the level where most philanthropy operates

The Three Levels of Systems Change

Level 2: Relational Change (Semi-Explicit)

Level 2 is less visible but highly influential

1. **Relationships & connections:** Trust, coordination, and communication across actors
2. **Power dynamics:** Who makes decisions, who is heard, and who is excluded

Level 2 determines whether policies and programs actually work

The Three Levels of Systems Change

Level 3: Transformative Change (Implicit)

Level 3 is the deepest and most powerful

1. **Mental models:** Beliefs, assumptions, and narratives that shape behavior

Mental models shape:

- What problems we see
 - Which solutions feel legitimate
 - Whose voices matter
 - What kinds of change feel “possible”
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Interpreting Your Map

Key questions...

- » Which factors are structural?
- » Which are relational?
- » Which are about perceptions and mindsets?

The strongest problem statements typically connect to one of these conditions

What Makes a Good Problem Statement?

Symptoms are NOT problems!

Example

- » **Symptom:** “Attendance at the neighborhood food pantry is low.”
 - » **Deeper problem:** “Families avoid the pantry because past experiences were stigmatizing and confusing, so they do not trust the process.”
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What Makes a Good Problem Statement?

Strong problem statements are...

- » Specific and observable
- » Grounded in system dynamics
- » Clear about who is affected
- » Focused on a root/systemic cause
- » Small enough to investigate soon



Problem Statement Template

In [setting], [stakeholder] experience(s)
[problem] because [root/systemic cause].

Examples

- » In ***school***, ***parents*** experience ***confusion about program value*** because ***staff turnover disrupts communication***.
 - » In ***clinic***, ***patients*** experience ***missed follow-ups*** because ***intake practices do not build trust***.
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Activity 1 (P.1): Draft Your Problem Statement

- » Use your systems map and the Six Conditions lens
 - » **Common pitfalls to avoid:**
 - » The problem is too big
 - » The statement describes a solution
 - » The cause is individual behavior, not system conditions
 - » The problem is not observable
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Activity 1 (P.2): Share and Refine

In groups of 3-4

Give feedback by drawing on the following questions:

- » Does it name a clear stakeholder?
 - » Is the cause a system condition?
 - » Is it narrow enough to observe?
 - » Does it align with your systems map?
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Activity 2: Problem Statement to Observation Plan

— Prompts to Guide You —

- » Where in the system could you observe this problem?
- » What behaviors, interactions, or structures matter?
- » Who might you see? What artifacts/signs?
- » When would it show up most clearly?
- » Is the setting public and ethical to observe?

— Observation Plan Checklist —

- » Location
- » What you will watch for
- » Why it matters for the system condition
- » Ethical considerations

**Keep your plan
specific and doable!**

Exit Ticket

By 11:59PM tonight...

Instructions in Canvas!

By 11:59PM tonight (1/27) please submit your "[Exit Ticket](#)" for this class session. Exit ticket submissions are a significant part of your Process & Engagement (Process Deliverables) grade.

Overview

This assignment is designed to help you solidify your problem framing and create a concrete plan for your initial field observation. Complete both parts based on our in-class activities.

Part 1: Your "How Might We..." Problem Statement

Goal: To frame your chosen problem in an open-ended, optimistic way that invites creative solutions.

Instructions: Your task is to select the single "How Might We..." (HMW) statement that you believe offers the most promising and impactful avenue for your venture, based on our in-class problem framing exercise.

Example: If the original problem was about seniors lacking access to groceries, your chosen HMW statement might be: > "How Might We create a sense of community and shared purpose among seniors through the process of accessing fresh, healthy food?"

Part 2: Your Observation Plan

Goal: To create a concrete, actionable, and ethical plan for your initial field observation.

Instructions: Write a short paragraph (3-5 sentences) that outlines your plan for observing the problem in the real world. Your plan should be specific and feasible. Address the following points:

- **Where?** The specific, physical location you will go to observe.
- **What?** The specific behaviors, interactions, or artifacts you will be looking for.
- **Why?** How this observation will help you better understand the systemic causes of the problem you've framed in your HMW statement.
- **Ethical Check:** Briefly mention why this is an appropriate and ethical setting for observation.

Example: "To better understand our HMW statement, I plan to visit the main lobby of the Evanston Senior Center on Tuesday between 3:00 PM and 4:00 PM. I will be observing how seniors interact with the transportation board, what kinds of flyers or resources they pick up, and whether they discuss grocery shopping or meals with staff or each other. This will help me see the existing systems seniors use and identify gaps in information or resources related to food access. This is an ethical public space where observation of general comings-and-goings is expected and does not interfere with individuals' privacy."

Submission

[Please submit your HMW statement and your observation plan paragraph as a text entry or by uploading a single file PDF or Word document.](#)

Next Class...

Field Observation for Problem Understanding

