Problem Statements

What is a problem statement?
A problem statement is a short, clear explanation of an issue or challenge that sums up what you want to change. It helps you, team members, and other stakeholders to **focus on the problem**, why it's important, and who it impacts.

As humans, we're wired to jump past the problem and go directly to the solution stage. In emergencies, this behaviour can be lifesaving.

When dealing with longer-range issues in the workplace, this can lead to bad decisions or half-baked solutions.

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Writing a Problem Statement When the Audience Is Unknown

Neutral Tone and Clarity
- Use a neutral tone that avoids assumptions about the reader's background or expertise.
- Focus on clarity and simplicity.

Broad Context
- Begin with a brief context or introduction to the problem area.
- Explain the general area of concern without diving into technical details

Identify the Problem
- Clearly state the problem you intend to address.
- Avoid assuming prior knowledge; provide necessary background information

Importance and Impact
- Highlight why solving this problem matters.
- Emphasise potential benefits or consequences.

Measurable Objectives
- Define measurable goals or outcomes.
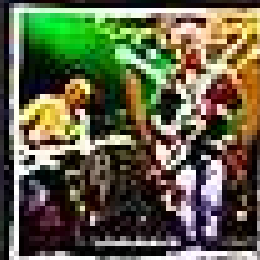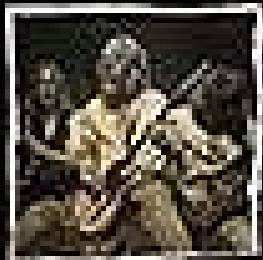- Specify what success looks like without assuming the reader's preferences.

Avoid Specific Jargon
- Refrain from using industry-specific terms or acronyms.
- Opt for plain language that anyone can understand.

The Status Quo Problem Statement

Example:
The average customer service on-hold time for Example company exceeds five minutes during both its busy and slow seasons.

This can be used to describe a current pain point within an organisation that may need to be addressed. Note that the statement specifies that the issue occurs during the company's slow time as well as the busy season. This is helpful in performing the root cause analysis and determining how this problem can be solved.

Problem:

The average customer service on-hold time for Example company exceeds five minutes during both its busy and slow seasons and the company is currently understaffed.

Background:

Example company is facing a significant challenge in managing their customer service on-hold times. In the past, the company had been known for its efficient and timely customer service, but due to a combination of factors, including understaffing and increased customer demand, the on-hold times have exceeded five minutes consistently. This has resulted in frustration and dissatisfaction among customers, negatively impacting the company's reputation and customer loyalty.

Relevance:

Reducing the on-hold times for customer service callers is crucial for Example company to remain in a competitive position in the market, improve customer experience and maintain a positive brand image.

The Destination Problem Statement

Example:
Leaders at Example company want to increase net revenue for its premium product line of widgets by 5% for the next fiscal year.

This approach can be used to describe where an organisation wants to be in the future. This type of problem statement is useful for launching initiatives to help an organisation achieve its desired state.

Problem:

Leaders at Example company aim to increase net revenue for its premium product line of widgets by 5% for the next fiscal year.

Background:

Example company faces the challenge of generating a 5% increase in net revenue for its premium product line of widgets in the upcoming fiscal year. Currently, the company lacks the required workforce to drive this growth. Without adequate staff in the marketing, PR, and product development departments, the company's ability to effectively promote, position, and innovate its premium product line will be hindered.

Relevance:

Increasing net revenue for the premium product line is crucial for Example company's overall business success. Failure to achieve the targeted growth rate can lead to missed revenue opportunities and stagnation in the market. Additionally, expanding the product development teams will enable the company to introduce new features and innovations, further enticing existing and potential customers.

The Stakeholder Problem Statement

Example:
In the last three quarterly [employee engagement surveys](#), less than 30% of employees at Example company stated that they feel valued by the company. This represents a 20% decline compared to the same period in the year prior.

This strategy can be used to describe how a specific stakeholder group views the organisation. It can be useful for exploring issues and potential solutions that impact specific groups of people.

Problem:
In the last three quarterly employee engagement surveys, less than 30% of employees at the Example company stated that they feel valued by the company. This indicates a significant decline of 20% compared to the same period in the previous .

Background:
Example company is facing a pressing issue regarding employee engagement and perceived value within the company. Over the past year, there has been a notable decline in the percentage of employees who feel valued. This decline is evident in the results of the quarterly employee engagement surveys, which consistently show less than 30% of employees reporting a sense of value by the company. This decline of 20% compared to the previous year's data signifies a concerning trend.

Relevance:
Employee engagement and a sense of value are crucial for organisational success. When employees feel valued, they tend to be more productive, committed, and motivated. Conversely, a lack of perceived value can lead to decreased morale, increased turnover rates, and diminished overall performance. Halting this decline and solving this issue is essential to restore a positive work environment and build a culture of appreciation and respect.

If you have embarked on a proposed solution, it's also important to understand that solutions are malleable. There may be no single best solution.

FIXED-MINDSET

GROWTH-MINDSET

My solution is the best one and we need to stick to it – it's too late to change now

The problem hasn't changed but we need to adapt the solution based on feedback

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What
(descriptive stage)
Identify the situation or problem without judgement – avoid feelings and opinions

So What
(interpretive stage)
Analyse and interpret the situation

Now What
(action planning stage)
Plan how to achieve your objectives

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DO'S & DON'TS
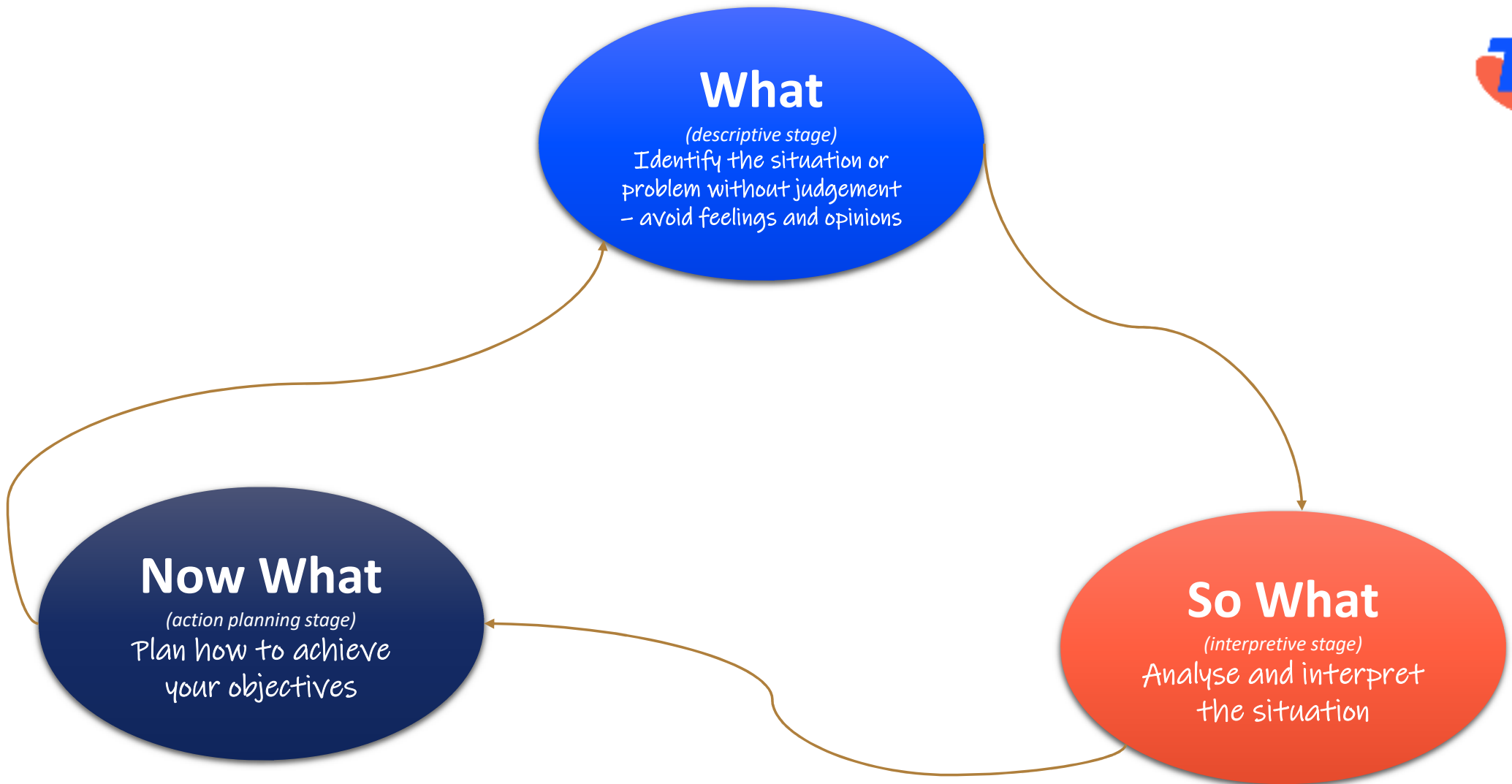
Vagueness	Overemphasis on Symptoms	Lack of Input	Inadequate Research	Jargon
Don't be unclear or ambiguous about the issue	Don't focus too much on symptoms	Don't ignore input from relevant stakeholders	Don't skimp on gathering enough evidence to support claims	Don't use specialised terms that others outside your field may not understand
Do be specific about the problem, its impact, and who it affects, Avoid leaving room for interpretation	Do dig deeper to identify the underlying issue – address the core problem, not just its surface manifestations	Do involve key player early on – understand their perspectives and needs to create a comprehensive problem statement	Do provide data or examples that demonstrate the problem's scope and impact. Quantify and qualify measurable effects.	Do opt for plain language and that the statement is accessible to a diverse audience.

Ask yourself

Q. Does the problem appear to have only one sensible solution?	→	A. Look for ways to rephrase it to open up more possibilities
Q. Does the statement describe a symptom instead of the problem?	→	A. Dig deeper for the root cause
Q. Does the statement suggest the problem is that you don't have enough time, money or people?	→	A. Find a way to pose the problem that will lead to more creative solutions
Q. Does the problem statement lack an obvious solution?	→	A. Great!! You are probably ready to start exploring solutions
Q. Does the statement stimulate brainstorming and discussion?	→	A. Great job! Keep the discuss going by asking why