Problem/Opportunity Definition

5Ws & H – the six questions technique

A structured method that examines a problem/opportunity from multiple viewpoints. The process is as follows:

1. State the problem/opportunity using the description ‘In what ways might…?’
2. Write down separate lists of who?, what?, when?, where?, why?, and how? questions that are relevant to the problem/opportunity.
3. Examine the response to each question and use them to stimulate new problem/opportunity redefinitions.
4. Write down any redefinitions suggested.
5. Select one redefinition that best captures the problem/opportunity you are trying to resolve.

Because it is structured, some intuitive thinkers find the approach too rigorous. It is relatively simple to use and can be used in one-on-one situations or with groups.

Outcome checklist

When you want to concentrate on the outcome of a problem, this checklist may help. It also allows you to discover week links. The process is as follows:

1. Think of the outcome you would like to have. Write it down in the form, ‘I really want to x…’
2. Run through the checklist that follows and observe how the outcome changes. When you have completed the exercise, re-write the outcome in the form, ‘I really really want to y…’

Stated positively, that is what I really really want rather than what I do not want. For example, if someone states, “I want less product defects” ask them, “What would you rather have?”

Owned, that is what part does the individual play in achieving the outcome? For example, if someone states, “We have to improve the business’s performance”, ask them, “What part will you play in this?”

As specific as possible, that is how exactly am I to achieve this? For example, if someone states, “I need an improvement”, ask them, “Who, where when, what and how specifically?”

Assessable, that is how will I know when I have succeeded? This requires the development of some measurable and meaningful criteria for success. For example, if
someone states, “I want a successful production line” as them, “What will you see, hear or feel when you have success?”

**Achievable**, that is do I have all the resources at my disposal to achieve a result? For example, if someone states, “We’ll start the project tomorrow” ask them “What resources do you need to achieve this outcome?”

**Sized right**, that is is the outcome too big to manage or too small to bother with? If it is too large, for example if someone states, “I want to change the business but I can’t” ask them, “What part of the business could you change?” If it is too small to be motivating ask them, “If you got this outcome, what would it do for you?”

The checklist can be applied to a wide variety of problems/opportunities. By defining the outcome precisely it is common to find some solutions along the way.

**Cognitive mapping**

Mapping techniques are useful for handling complexity. A technique that uses “Post-it” notes:

1. Collect relevant information relating to the problem/opportunity definition by writing each separate piece of information on a Post-it note.
2. Spread all the Post-it notes out and group those that seem to belong to each other.
3. Label the groups with a “theme”. Put any remaining Post-it notes into a separate group.
4. Examine the themes. Look for linkages between them. Look also for importance and hierarchy of problem/opportunity definitions, so that you may make a choice for the idea generation phase.

Cognitive mapping can be used for both problem/opportunity definition and solution finding. There are many variations on this theme.