

The Problem with Problems

"Deficit thinking" sees organizations focusing on what's wrong and problems that need to be solved. In doing so, they often overlook real opportunities

By [Fred Collopy](#)

Innovation & Design

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It is practically a mantra of modern management that the first task in dealing with a situation is to define the problem accurately. Only after managers have done that can they hope to get all team members "on the same page." It's widely felt that without agreement on the problem we will be unable to succeed.

But there are problems with the way managers and groups approach problems. The first is that we rush to identify the problem so that we can get on with the real work of solving it, which can lead down a costly or disruptive path. There is seldom a single correct formulation for the interesting issues that face managers. Yet the particular path chosen affects the solution produced.

For instance, for a time the downloading of music from the Internet was viewed as a problem of young people stealing from the music industry. Advertisements and lawsuits aimed at curbing the practice were not particularly effective. With the problem reframed as a channel management problem, [iTunes](#) provided a more satisfying result.

Repairing and Fixing

A somewhat subtler problem with the de facto emphasis on problems is the long-term effect it has on how managers think about our jobs. By focusing so often and so consistently on

problems, we come to adopt a kind of deficit thinking. Plans of action that flow from it are concerned with repairing, fixing, and compensating. We spend so much time considering what is wrong with our organizations that we overlook what is right.

An alternative to Deficit Thinking is Appreciative Inquiry. When we engage in appreciative inquiries, we focus on what makes us feel most alive, on our successes and their determinants, and on the strengths of our organization. Instead of emphasizing repairs, we shift our concern to creating more opportunities for success.

I witnessed the difference between these two modes of inquiry in my own organization. My university, Case Western Reserve, conducted a routine job audit designed to solve misallocation and inefficient use of time. The process consisted of surveying clerical and administrative employees to find out how they spend their time. Many of those who participated in the review found it an ambiguous exercise that made them feel anxious and even defensive. It was not clear that the process produced any improvements, but if it did they were marginal.

Shortly after that process, many of the same people engaged in a strategic planning process which brought together faculty, staff, and students for an Appreciative Inquiry summit. For two days, participants were asked to share stories about their most exciting contributions to the school. One of the women in my group, an administrator who had particularly disliked the work audit, told us about a time when a young faculty member was explaining his research to a group of people informally gathered in her office. As she listened, it reminded her of some ideas she'd heard from her husband, who worked in a lab across campus. She made some introductions and felt thrilled that a resulting grant could be attributed in some small part to her contribution.

Harvesting the Riches

The discussion that followed focused on how all the people who work at the school bring capabilities and connections that are not captured in either their résumé or their job description. The group considered how we could encourage such communication by designing the school to benefit from the richness people bring to work. Solving the problem of ineffective staff by eliminating unnecessary activity yielded little benefit. But appreciating the multiple contributions they offer had a profound effect on the productivity and morale of the school.

Several tactics can help to address the problems with problems. First, it is important to consider alternative framings. For large, important problems, it is a good idea to work with several descriptions of the situation. Second, because every important problem exists in a context, it is connected to other problems. The process of defining problems and breaking them down into parts can easily blind us to the importance of these connections. So, keep returning to the broader context while bounding and defining the problems to be solved.

Finally, by regularly investing at least a portion of your energy in more appreciative inquiries, you may discover, as we have, that more attention to positive opportunities may actually result in fewer problems to solve.

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