



Problem, what problem?

A more structured approach to getting things done

Rob Sheffield examines three techniques to help your team explore problems.

Organisations that are renowned for their innovative approaches try many things to ensure that their workplace encourages and maintains novel approaches. They may even make more mistakes because they're willing to experiment. One of the things they do is to train their people in group problem-solving methods. This may sound counter-intuitive. Can a structured approach to problem-solving be innovative? Well, if we measure success by the criteria of having more ideas than before, getting these implemented more quickly and seeing more of the ideas work successfully, then, yes!

In the next 3 issues of **Tex**, we will look at some techniques for solving problems in a more systematic and conscious way. We'll cover how to:

1. explore & define problems/opportunities;
2. generate ideas; and
3. implement these ideas.

Some of the benefits from having these skills can be:

- Shorter and more productive meetings.
- Better results: more ideas and a clearer sense of progress.
- More awareness and interest in what's going on.
- More energetic and motivated people who feel part of a team that makes things happen.
- A personal sense of learning.

Exploring and defining the problem/opportunity

What's the difference between these two? There's a semantic aspect here. Colloquially, when we think "problem" it means something that is pressing and can't be avoided any longer. It may be a concern for someone else, and therefore for us! An opportunity may be a future problem in the making, but still fuzzy around the edges.

Some of us seem more attuned to spotting opportunities – noticing future trends and patterns – and some of us seem to like the crisis management and adrenalin involved in putting out urgent organisational fires.

This first issue looks at the importance of agreeing the problem or opportunity. It sounds deceptively simple. And yet, in practice, my experience is that this is often bypassed and taken for granted.

One of the typical patterns in organisations I've seen is that people dive into action, and "action" = ideas for solutions. We often don't get to the root of the problem first. Ideas abound, the voices of the more influential usually prevail. Others have the internal foreboding voice: "What are we doing? This isn't going to work..." Time pressures, too, press upon us for a quick resolution. The result is that we half-heartedly agree to something that, later, doesn't work! The illusion of progress is fol-

“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and it looks like work”

THOMAS EDISON

lowed swiftly by frustration at seeing the same symptoms recur.

Here's an example of how the description of a school's problem evolved through discussion. The team consisted of people working in different faculties in a spilt-site school. All the faculties were working on a new school policy of rewards. Each faculty was independently striving to make sense of and implement the changes.

“How can we improve communication between the faculties?”

Through discussion, this became

“How can we learn about each others' personal skills and qualities so that we can use them?”

Then,

“To share information about ourselves and our faculties, we have to trust each other. How can we establish enough trust for this?”

And finally,

“We work too often in isolation. It's crucial that we

share our knowledge effectively between team members and faculties so that we can reduce repetition in our planning. We need to trust each other, as well as having efficient ways of getting relevant information to each other in a timely way”.

One of the principles is that the problem or opportunity should be written down where everyone can see it. After this, how do we know that time spent defining the problem is well spent?

Firstly, it'll probably look different at the end, after some discussion.

Secondly, it'll be more clearly agreed, and you'll have more confidence that there's a common understanding. This has another advantage. Once everyone can see the agreed problem, you'll get a feeling for the levels of commitment to solving it.

Thirdly, everyone will have had a chance to have their say. They'll feel better about that, and you'll know who's got interestingly different thoughts.

We're rarely short of opinions. Sometimes we even believe them:

“I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.”

THOMAS WATSON, CHAIRMAN OF IBM, 1943

Here are three techniques to help your group or team explore and define opportunities and problems

1. Boundary Examination

(Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking for Management*, 1982, Penguin)

With this technique, the problem boundary separates the relevant features from those less relevant. Different people's perspectives will reflect their own concerns, and may reveal their assumptions.

Stages of process

- Ask the group to describe the problem and write it on the flip-chart.
- Underline key words.
- Examine each word for hidden assumptions, and to clarify its meaning.
- Having explored the key words, redefine the problem.

Example: “How can we encourage

more **parents** to **attend** parents' evenings more **often**?”

Who is the we?

Must we encourage? What about rewarding for visiting or even 'punishing' for not visiting? Is the parent new to the school or have they had this opportunity already? Must they visit? What about a phone call? Can the evening come to them? How often? When? At key times?

2. Multiple Redefinitions

(Tudor Rickards, *Problem solving through Creative Analysis*, 1974, Gower Publishing)

These sentences can open up new perspectives on the issue, by challenging people to think about what they'd really like to happen.

Stages of process:

- Ask the group to describe the problem on the flip-chart.
Phrase it as a question:
“How can we...?” “Why can't we...?”
- Write the following sentences on a separate piece of flip chart paper.
Ask the people to think about each of the following questions, and write some notes to themselves.

“What I'd really like to do is...” “If I could break all the rules of reality I would...”
“The problem could be likened to...” “A strange way of looking at the problem would be...” “But the main point is...”

- Ask for thoughts on each question.
Keep things moving. If there are only a few ideas, move to the next question.
- Redraft the problem in the light of the exercise.

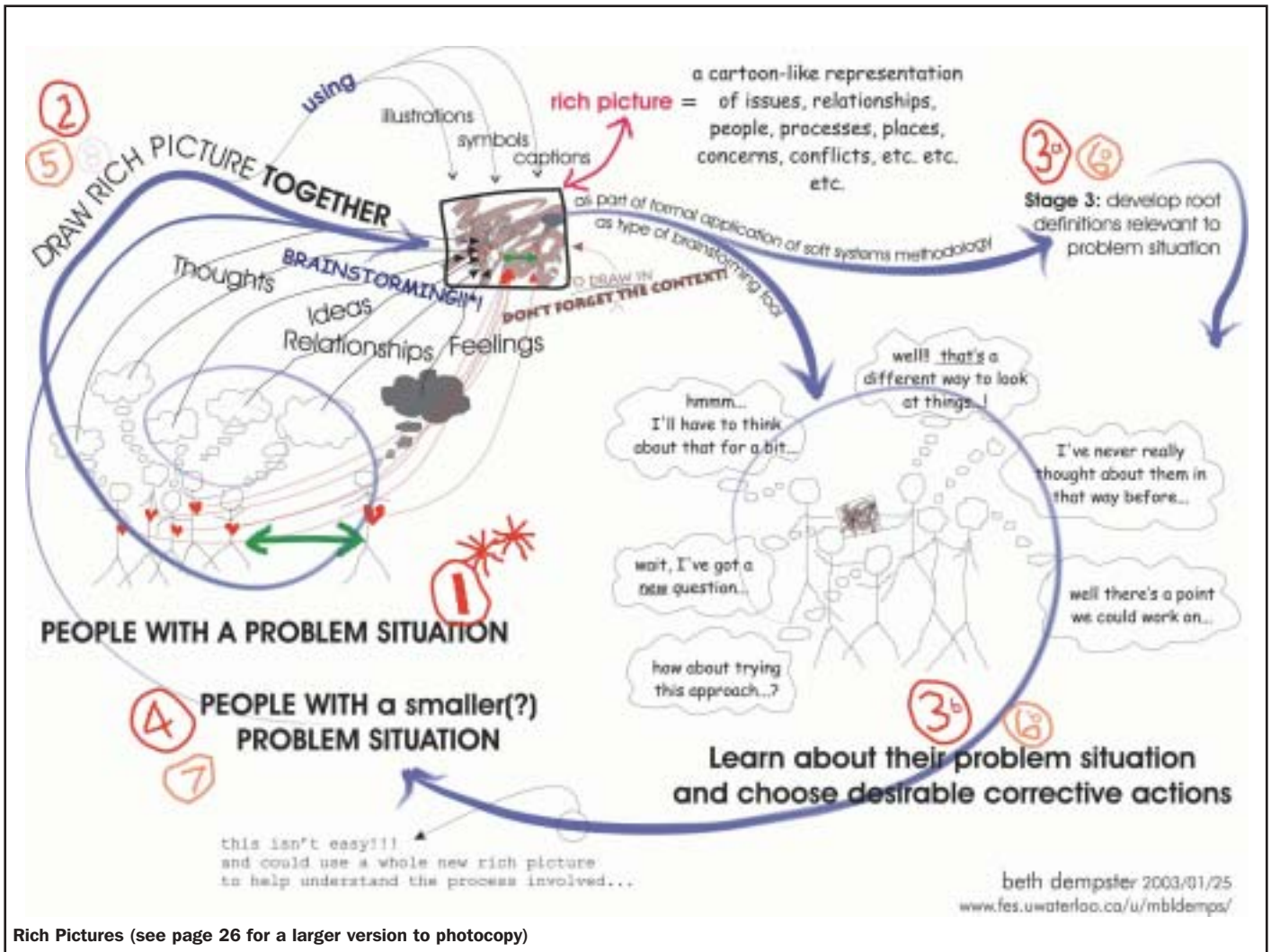
3. Rich Pictures (see opposite)

(Peter Checkland, *Systems thinking and practice*, 1992, Wiley)

The first two techniques are more verbal and useful for more clearly defined and 'containable' problems. Sometimes we have to deal with situations that are more 'messy'. These may be more complex, cross organisational boundaries, may involve people and their emotions, values and power and politics. The diagram that results, is a way of capturing this complexity much more succinctly & memorably than through words.

Stages of process:

- Draw all the elements of the situation onto paper, somewhere visible. (Tell people not to worry about the drawing quality).
- Look for elements of *physical structure* such as buildings, rooms, etc.
- Look for elements of *process* such as how people work together...in general, things that are in a state of change.
- Look at any important roles in the situation.
- Look at how these interact to create an organisational climate. Add in links/arrows.
- Use symbols, footnotes and give it a title if appropriate.



“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”

WESTERN UNION INTERNAL MEMO 1876

“40K [memory] ought to be enough for anybody”

1981: BILL GATES

These three techniques are helpful and can bring a bit of fun to the job. Some other good principles to bear in mind are:

- It helps to state who ‘owns’ this problem. Who is accountable for it? An individual, or is it shared? Once people know this, their responsibility is clearer. They may be there to generate ideas. You, as the owner, may have the casting vote on disagreements, since you have to go away and do something.
- People will think of solutions. Ask them to postpone these for now. They can write them down for the next step.
- Finally, we all have different styles of problem-solving. Dr. Michael Kirton’s work tells us how our style is enduring. Some people will prefer to solve problems by improving the current way things are done, but keeping the basic approach

intact; others will prefer to change the current approach completely, and implement a new one. Mutual understanding may be at a premium. Learning more about one’s own preferred approach can help hugely. **TEX**

Further reading:

www.kaicentre.com

Peter Checkland, *Systems thinking and practice*, 1992, Wiley

Tudor Rickards, *Problem solving through Creative Analysis*, 1974, Gower Publishing

Edward de Bono, *Lateral Thinking for Management*, 1982, Penguin

Open University MBA module notes: *Managing Creativity and Innovation and Change*

“The mere formulation of a problem is often far more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science

ALBERT EINSTEIN



Rob Sheffield is a self-employed consultant, working in team management and leadership development. He is also a visiting lecturer at the University of the West of England on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate business courses.