

The Problem Statement

Preamble

A persuasive problem statement consists of three parts: The ideal, the reality, and the consequences for the reader of the feasibility report. Well-constructed problem statements will convince your audience that the problem is real and worth having you investigate. Your strategy is one of contrast: by situating the ideal scenario next to the situation as it exists, you can not only persuade the reader that a problem exists, but then go on to emphasize the consequences of ignoring or addressing the problem. Remember, your problem statement is the backbone of the proposal and the feasibility report. By giving careful consideration to how you construct it now (for the proposal), you can use it when doing your research and writing for the proposal as well as the progress and the feasibility report. The problem statement is the key element in every grant proposal. It is the first impression the reviewer will have of your project and funding request. The problem statement or statement of need must make a clear, concise and evidence-supported statement of the problem you are addressing and wanting to solve. It is also most likely the shortest written section in your grant application.

Learning Objectives

1. To understand what problem statement means in a proposal.
2. To be able to write a fundable proposal.

Learning Outcome

1. The student is expected to have an understanding of what a problem statement means.
2. By the end of this topic, the student should be able to write a good problem statement.

Discussion Notes

The Problem Statement/Project Rationale gives an explanation about the issue that is being addressed by the project. It also argues in favour of implementing the project in the proposed area in the existing conditions. It is very critical that we give evidence to what we are writing in this section of the proposal. Evidence can be in form of other research, existing literature or data collected by the organization itself. The following are some important points that need to be remembered while developing the Problem Statement/Project Rationale:

- Problem Statement/Project Rationale is a brief analysis or summary of the problems identified

- relating to the project or issue to be addressed by the project.
- It has to be precise and point-to-point basis.
 - Use of quotes, live examples, references, research data and press articles would be very helpful.
 - It has to be very specific to donor issues and priorities.
 - Giving references to other NGOs, Governmental work in the area working against the same problem would be useful.

Some Common Information we use in this Section includes:

- Country, region, area details (location in region, government, population etc);
- Poverty information, including information on the state of the economy,
- Employment/unemployment;
- Gender issues;
- HIV/AIDS situation;
- Health and education

Explaining the Problem Statement in the Proposal

Sometimes, we may find difficulties in writing the exact problem we intend to address in the proposed project. It happens this way that the problem we are mentioning in the proposal is not a problem at all, but is actually an effect of another problem. For example, suppose there is high child mortality rate in our project area and we wish to put up a proposal on it, we cannot mention this as a problem because this is an effect of a problem, while the problem is something else. In this case, it could be the prevalence of diarrhea that is leading to high child mortality. So the problem here is —the prevalence of diarrhea and not —high child mortality rate.

It is also necessary to mention the cause of the problem because it is an integral part of the project implementation. In this scenario, the cause of the problem (the prevalence of diarrhea) could be the —poor knowledge of the community about proper hygiene and sanitation. Effect>Problem>Cause

The relationship between the three (Effect, Problem and Cause) has to be outlined in the

Problem Statement of the proposal. If we have an issue, it will be good exercise to go a step back and forth to find out its cause and effect relationship. The best way to understand the cause of an issue is to ask —What... continuously. This will help reveal the cause of the problem. A problem can have many causes and effects.

“The Why of Why”

- Projects evolve out of identified problems
- It is the problem that comes before a project
- The secret of solving a problem is proper identification of the problem.
- This requires a thorough investigation.
- A problem does not happen in isolation. It goes hand in hand with cause and effect.
- There is a relationship between cause and effect. They are linked by the problem.

A way to analyze a problem is through analyzing the root causes and its effects.

- State the problem as effectively and precisely as possible
- Refer to any research data that is available, including publications, reports, newspapers etc.
- Give a narration of community perception with quotes.
- Check back how well it matches with the donor guidelines or issues.
- Give thorough background information about the region, community and resources available.
- Explain the organizational strength and capacity in countering this problem and achieving long-term results.
- Problem Statements lead the reader from a SHARED CONTEXT
- to the perception of a PROBLEM
- to a proposed SOLUTION

Problem Statements Frame Solutions

- Do not forget, if you are introducing an ARGUMENT, you are MAKING A CASE for something
- We make arguments to solve problems

- Problems can be either conceptual or pragmatic but always help us to THINK or ACT DIFFERENTLY
- A concise problem statement motivates the reader and sets the stakes for the argument to follow. A good Problem Statement introduces a QUESTION and makes us aware of the COSTS that might result from it. PROBLEM = Question + Costs or Benefits.

Recognizing Costs

- Costs are negative effects that impact or influence your intended audience.
- Costs can be monetary, but they can also be abstract, emotional, social or logistical.
- We call it a cost when bad things happen as a result of a certain course of action.
- Arguments should also consider as potential costs those missed opportunities that can result when decision makers fail to pursue new options and ideas.

Acknowledging a Problem

- Requires that we understand costs and benefits
- Requires that we are motivated and influenced by those costs-we accept
- The problem as something relevant to our lives and concerns
- Requires that we want, need, and are able to imagine a solution
- Problem Statements should ALWAYS give us an easy answer to the question, so what?
- Because without an explicit statement of why we should care, we cannot move on to the issue of what we should DO.

The problem statement serves several purposes in a project. First, it significantly clarifies the current situation by specifically identifying the problem and its severity, location, and financial impact. It also serves as a great communication tool, helping to get buy-in and support from others. When problem statements are well written, people readily grasp and Understand what you ‘re trying to accomplish.

Write the problem statement with the audience in mind. Keep in mind that you probably have to both convince management to provide resources to solve the problem and enlist

team members to assist you; you don ‘t want to spend your pre and over what you ‘re trying to accomplish. include the following:

- A brief description of the problem
- Where the problem is occurring by process name and location
- The time frame over which the problem has been occurring
- The size or magnitude of the problem

Now it is time to begin writing the narrative section of the grant proposal. The first section of the narrative is always the Problem Statement or Needs Assessment. This section is where you will introduce the funders to your organization and identify how your project will impact your local community.

A Problem Statement should be organized into the following sub sections:

- Need to be addressed: Explain the extent to which the project meets the specific purpose of the source of funds.
- How the needs were determined: Describe how, you determined the needs you propose to address.
- How the needs will be met: Explain how you propose to use the project to meet these needs.
- Benefits to be gained: Describe what benefits will be realized as a result of meeting the needs.

Now let's go through the Problem Statement step-by-step.

Step 1: Explain the need to be addressed:

- **Clearly relate to purposes and goals of your organization.**
- **Be supported by objective evidence, experiences, statistics, and testimony.**
- **Give reasonable dimensions: Can your organization realistically solve the problem?**
- **State in terms of clients rather than needs of your organization.**

Step 2: Describe how the needs were determined:

- Focus on a particular group — at a particular time — in a particular place.
- Present conditions as being similar to those in other places.
- Questions to consider in determining approach:

a. Who else has expressed concern with the problem?

b. Who besides your target group might benefit?

c. Might your approach be of interest or benefit to others?

Step 3: Explain how the needs will be met:

- Who 's behavior is in need of change?
- What-is the behavior to be changed?
- Why -does undesirable behavior exist and/or should behavior be changed?
- How-Might behavior best be changed?
- How Much-Needs to be changed?
- Are there other programs like yours that have demonstrated success?
- What techniques will be of the most value to people, not the applicant?
- Do you have the capability to proceed as proposed?

Step 4: Describe the benefits to be gained:

- With whom are you concerned?
- On which conditions do you plan to focus?
- Can changes be accomplished within the grant period?
- Is the problem statement concerned with people or the applicant?
- Where does the problem statement lead?

Examples of Statement of Problem

You must be careful to avoid under-writing a problem statement. A natural tendency is to write a problem statement too simplistic problem. If you 're going to recruit support have to understand the context and the significance in order to support you.

Following are examples highlighting the depth and quantification of a project definition. A poor problem statement is followed by an example of an acceptable problem statement. First up: a statement with too little information:

Every request for proposal for every grant is going to is Your Many Problem? Grant writers have no idea how loaded that question really is.

Most of the grant applications/request for proposals contains explicitly detailed information defining what

you need to include within the scope of the problem statement. Others do not offer much information at all and expect the grant writer to understand the required contents of the problem statement. Before you begin, make sure you understand what the funder considers a problem. You can gain that information by reviewing the funder 's website and reading all materials grant writers fail to create a sound problem statement by introducing problems that are not clearly stated in the request for proposal.

The problem statement explains the reason for the entire proposal. It should make a clear concise and well-supported statement of the problem to be addressed. Each funder will define how long the problem statement should be, so follow the directions carefully. The problem statement should be discussed in reasonable dimensions with a clearly defined target population and geographic area of service. The good news is that you do not need to do all of the research on your own.

Any local or state government planning office or local university should be able to provide some excellent support in the methodology of collecting community needs assessment data. Many organizations within your community have already gathered much of the data you will need. Consider contacting the local chamber of commerce, school districts, county planning offices, state data repositories, and other state and federal agencies whose focus falls within the scope of your problem. Types of data to collect depend on the problem you are interested in addressing with each grant project.

Within the problem statement you cannot make any unsupported assumptions, —gut instinct statements, or depend on anecdotal stories. The funder wants a sound, data driven discussion of the problem.

When considering the data, you want to include in your problem statement assure that you present data which creates an image in the mind of the funder reading your proposal. You want the funder to clearly see the target population and grasp the full scope of the issue at hand. To do that you may not need a lot of data. A mix of internal and external data can create a full picture. Use quantitative data defined by numbers and percentages.

Examples of internal/primary data could be arrest records, cost per client, number of repeat offenders, youth arrest records. Example of external/secondary data may come from many sources such as, the Census Bureau, reports, state agencies such as the state department of justice, local community organization who

serve the same population you are targeting within your project.

Always relate your data to your target population. Do not drown the reader with too many statistics and be as current as possible. Use tables, graphs and other charts to define and compare your problem. Images tend to speak louder than words but make sure you include a descriptor at the bottom of any graphs or charts you use to help clarify the numbers. And always keep a clear track of your sources. If you are using the internet make sure your source is legitimate and you change locations very quickly when surfing the web.

Do not be doom and gloom when you develop your problem statement. Make sure you address the community assets and resources available to support your project. The funder wants to see strong integration between your organization and the community you serve. Create your problem statement in an easy to read format, using a narrative which will peak the interest of the reader. Make the funder think —of course they need the funding!

In order to completely understand how to write a compelling and fundable problem statement, it helps to break it down into several components.

Describe the problem. Select and address a primary problem that needs to be eliminated prior to any other issues. Target and address the primary problem by reviewing its history and efforts to ameliorate it. Describe how the community is affected. Discuss what happens if this problem/need is not addressed. Do not discuss or focus on the solution anywhere in your problem statement. Begin your problem statement with a problem as it is defined by the funder request for propos imminent, immediate, vital etc to describe the effect on the target population. Identify the target population. Clearly describe the population affected by the problem. Who are the beneficiaries of this grant project? Where do they live? What is their age? What community issues affect this population in relation to the problem you described above?

Determine your community resources which address this problem. The funder will want to know what is already working and available to address this issue by community organizations. By assessing and mapping your assets and resources you can avoid duplication of service in your community. Begin by making an inventory of the assets and resources related to your target population and the problem you are addressing in the grant. Once you have gathered the appropriate community data, create a paragraph describing these assets you have discovered. Assets may be programs in the community,

related service providers, other new grant programs, local community strategic visioning or planning programs, other law enforcement partners, schools, business, etc.

Determine the need for problem resolution through a needs assessment. Gather the data needed to demonstrate that this problem is real in your community and how it compares to other similar communities. Determine what data will help support and identify the need for the project related to the target population. Who is affected by this problem? Where are they located? What economic conditions exist to create this problem? How is this problem causing harm to the target population?

Justify why grant funds should be used to solve this problem rather than local jurisdiction or agency funds. One of the pitfalls you can get into in justifying your grant is in defining the problem as a lack of program or facility. For example, the lack of a youth center in an economically depressed area is not the problem. The problem is that the youth in the area have educational and support needs not currently being addressed anywhere else in the community. The problem is not that your organization does not have the funds for a new patrol vehicle, but that certain levels and types of crime have increased in your community and the vehicle is one of the tools needed to address the increasing crime.

Once you are satisfied you have gathered enough information, begin to create the case for your funding. Allow yourself to write in a —free th run out of things to say about the problem. Then edit your case statement to meet the funder’s It is directions much easier to wordsmith. and compress your ideas and thoughts than to try and stretch them. After you have completed your first satisfactory edit of your problem statement, have it reviewed by someone outside your field. If they can see and understand the problem, you are ready to begin to create the rest of your grant application. This is the most important part of your grant.

Statements of Problem

To create a successful mission statement, you should keep the following concepts in mind. The mission statement should be simple. However, creating the statement is usually not easy. It may require several drafts. The statement needs to capture the very essence of what your business or organization will achieve and how you will achieve it.

The statement should be short and concise. The fewer words the better. Use just enough words to capture the essence. Most mission statements are too long. People tend to want to add additional information and qualifications to the statement. Usually these statements just confuse the reader and cloud the real meaning of your statement. Each successive draft of your statements should be to simplify and clarify by using as few words as possible. Your statements of vision and mission should be a single thought that can easily be carried in the mind. To test the effectiveness of a mission statement in a business, ask its leaders, managers and employees to tell you the vision and mission of their business. If they cannot instantaneously tell you both, their mission statement is of little use. The vision and mission guide the everyday activities of every person involved in the business. To be effective, your statements need to be short and simple, capturing the essence of what you want to accomplish.

Fluid Process - People agonize over writing mission statements. Granted, it is usually not a simple or easy process. However, they can be updated and modified later. It is often best to do the best job of writing it as you can, use the statement for a period of time, and then revisit it a few months or a year later. It is often easy to sharpen the statement at that time. Remember, the reason you are writing the statement is to clarify what you are doing.

Unique Businesses - It is usually more important to write mission statements for unique or nontraditional businesses where the purpose of the business is not generally known. Mission statements are important for these businesses so that everyone involved in the business understands what the business will accomplish and how it will be accomplished.

In essence this means —keeping everyone on the same page so they are all —pulling in the same direction.

Reflective Question

Discuss problem statement in relation to a proposal

Reference

Ziegler, M. Essentials of Writing Research Papers