

Problem Solving 1 - What a Problem Actually Is

The article breaks down the working definition of a problem into three components: expectation, gap, and subjectively perceived negative consequence. It also explains why bridging the gap alone is rarely the whole solution.

Problem is one of those everyday words that feels obvious until one tries to define it.

A problem can mean something that went wrong. A conflict. Damage. Difficulty. A health issue. A threat. Something bad that already happened, something ongoing, or something that may happen in the future. It can be material, psychological, relational, spiritual, imagined. One can have a problem with oneself, with another person, with money, with work, with meaning — or have no problem at all when someone hits them with a shopping cart.

If one decides to check the dictionaries, each one has a different definition.

But how are you supposed to solve a problem if you do not even know what the problem is?

Definition

For problem-solving, a definition has to do more than describe how the word is used. It has to identify the parts of a problem that can actually be examined.

In this framework:

A problem is a subjectively perceived negative consequence of the gap between expected state and current state.

The functional elements are: An expectation A gap between that expectation and the current state A subjectively perceived negative consequence of that gap

This can be seen in three ordinary examples.

1. **Bus arriving late**

- Expectation: Bus being on time
- Reality: Bus is late
- Subjectively perceived negative consequences: Multiple possible. Internal: stress, anxiety, anger. External: missing client meeting, work repercussions, lost money

2. **Relationship issues**

- Expectation: Positive interactions in the relationship most of the time
- Reality: Frequent fights
- Subjectively perceived negative consequences: Internal: frustration, guilt, lowered self-esteem. External: negative impact on children, divorce risk, insomnia

2. **Budget attainment issues**

- Expectation: Attaining yearly budget at a certain level
- Reality: Budget missed by 30%
- Subjectively perceived negative consequences: Internal (management): anxiety, anger, disappointment. External: loss of investors, layoffs, expense cuts

The framework can be applied to any problem, from deeply personal to systemic worldwide issues.

Expectations

Expectations are more often than not unconscious. One does not actively think, “No tree will fall across this path,” before walking through a forest. But humans have an extensive set of expectations about reality. Put simply, we expect everything to work smoothly, or as “supposed to.” This is why we go to the bus stop to catch a ride to work — we expect the bus to be there, on time.

It might seem that if one expected everything to go wrong, and everything indeed went wrong, this would not be a problem according to this definition, as there is no gap between expected state and factual state. But “expected” in this context is specific, and is factually closer to “desired” than “predicted.” A person can predict that something will go wrong and still desire that it goes right. “Desired” is not used here for an obvious reason — a person rarely “desires” a bus to arrive on time or cash machine to be functioning.

Expectations are also often multi-layered and bundled, rarely precise and detailed. “The relationship going well” can mean good communication, intimacy, mutual warmth, quality time, and many other non-conscious, non-verbalized, and vague elements.

The Gap

This is what common knowledge assumes is the “core of a problem,” even though according to this definition, the gap doesn’t constitute the problem. The gap is the easiest element to notice because it seems to cause the whole cascade of effects. Using previous examples, the standard approach to gaps looks like:

If only the bus came on time, I wouldn’t...

If only we were getting along like before, there wouldn’t be...

If only the budget were attained, we wouldn’t have to...

Because the other elements are largely subconscious (expectations) or tangled (negative outcomes), the only clear element — “the cause” of all the mess — appears to be the gap. This is the main reason why “bridging the gap” (making current state match expected state) is commonly considered the only or the best solution to a problem.

Subjectively Perceived Negative Consequences

Subjective does not mean that problems exist only in people’s heads. But simply perceiving a gap doesn’t allow for an objective statement of a problem. What seems like “an objectively existing problem” can actually be a non-problem for the person experiencing the gap.

This is easily illustrated by observing a crowd waiting for a plane that gets cancelled. The variety of responses doesn’t just point to different personalities. The same gap — plane expected but cancelled — creates a variety of negative outcomes: work problems, financial troubles, missed connections, cancelled meetings or doctor appointments, or... no negative outcomes at all for someone happy with the compensation. The core of the problem depends on subjectively perceived negative consequences, not objectively assumed ones.

Moreover, for anything to be considered a problem with a possible solution, there must be subjective recognition of negative outcomes. Take someone drinking large amounts of alcohol regularly. To the outside world, they might appear to “have an alcohol problem.” But as long as the person doesn’t realize this causes negative outcomes in their life — or as long as there’s no subjectively perceived negative outcome — the situation is: A) unsolvable, and B) not actually a problem to the person drinking.

Finally, according to this framework, the level of consensus on negative consequences doesn’t matter when calling something a problem. The common assumption is there are “subjective problems”

(missed bus, relationship issues) and “objective problems” (cancer, war, pollution). But what we call objectivity is really just broadly shared consensus on a point of view. We may think war is an objective problem with obvious, universally shared negative consequences. But we must understand that for the attacking country and its allies, the same war might be a success, not a problem.

There's a more obvious positive side to the subjectivity of perceiving negative consequences: the framework assumes no consensus is required to call something a problem. As long as I experience negative consequences of a gap, I have the right to call my situation a problem, whether anyone else agrees or not.

We commonly misidentify the problem as a gap between “what is” and “what should be.” This is a limited understanding of the nature of problems. Our instinct is to bridge the gap because we assume the gap's appearance caused the whole cascade of troubles. While this identification of cause is correct (I missed the plane and now I'm angry, tired, in trouble at work, and facing financial difficulties), assuming that bridging the gap fixes everything is often wrong. At worst, it leads to wasted time fixating on magical thinking (if only the damn plane weren't cancelled). At best, it eliminates only part of the negative consequences (booking the next flight may help with work problems, but not with money, emotions, or health issues).

Positive consequences of the gap

A gap can exist without negative consequences, making it not a problem. Imagine waiting for a bus that doesn't come. Two minutes later, you see a great friend passing by in their luxury sports car. They stop, give you a lift to work, and you end up having a great time. Is this a problem? Obviously not - this is a “good surprise.”

expectations $\neq$ current state $\rightarrow$ subjectively perceived positive outcome = Good surprise

Observation of the gap from outside doesn't inform us of the problem's nature. Understanding the subjectively perceived negative outcome is necessary.

A missed bus can cause multiple subjectively perceived negative consequences:

- Person A: Anger (even though they were just going for a ride)
- Person B: Missed doctor's appointment booked months ago
- Person C: Underage child has to wait alone
- Person D: No negative outcome — decides it's a nice day and the walk will be more enjoyable

Obviously, the solution depends on the negative consequence, not the gap itself.

One gap can cause multiple subjectively perceived consequences, all requiring different solutions. For someone whose car broke down on the highway, whose wife has trust issues toward them, fixing the car doesn't eliminate the negative outcome of the wife being angry, jealous, or suspicious.

The gap has only one way to be bridged, often unavailable. Negative consequences can be approached in multiple, creative ways. A person diagnosed with an incurable disease has no chance of bridging the gap. But they have vast possibilities to address all subjectively perceived negative outcomes: stigma, life quality deterioration, loneliness, medical expenses.

Role of expectations in solving problems

Expectations are important particularly because the more expectations one has and the less conscious they are, the more problems they will generally encounter (defined as subjectively perceived negative outcomes resulting from the gap between what was expected and what is).

Changing expectations can solve some problems — specifically, problems that are a direct result of expectations alone.

Example: If I expect sunny weather on holiday and it rains, I face negative consequences in the form of annoyance and disappointment. I can change my expectations, and this eliminates the negative outcome.

Obviously, many negative consequences are quite independent of expectations. Regardless of my expectations, I'll have to pay for an extra plane ticket if I miss the flight.

Still, adjusting expectations — particularly understanding that things not going as planned is part of life (or better: what makes life interesting) — allows us to avoid adding internal problems (emotional ones: anger, disappointment, guilt, sadness) to external problems (missed plane).

In summary: A problem is “a subjectively perceived negative consequence of the gap between expected state and current state” and NOT: “a gap between expected state and current state leading to negative consequences.”

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