

# How to: Write a Problem Statement

## What?

A problem statement is usually one or two sentences to explain the problem your process improvement project will address. In general, a problem statement will outline the negative points of the current situation and explain why this matters. It also serves as a great communication tool, helping to get buy-in and support from others.

## Why?

One of the most important goals of any problem statement is to define the problem being addressed in a way that's clear and precise. Its aim is focus the process improvement team's activities and steer the scope of the project.

## How?

Creation of a problem statement is an activity that is best completed in a small group (4-6 people). It is helpful to have a couple of people who are involved in the process and a process owner involved in the activity.

1. Get each person to write his or her own problem statement without conferring. Compare each of the sentences/ looking for common themes and wording.
2. Start to write an improved statement using the common themes.
3. Ensure that the problems include the customer's perspective
4. Ensure that the statement focuses on existing problems.
5. Try to include the time frame over which the problem has been occurring.
6. Try to quantify the problem. If you do not have the data to hand, defer writing the final problem statement until you have been able to quantify the problem.

You should be able to apply the 5 'W's (Who, What, Where, When and Why) to the problem statement.

A problem statement can be refined as you start to further investigate root cause.

Finally, review your new problem statement against the following criteria:

- It should focus on only one problem.
- It should be one or two sentences long.
- It should not suggest a solution.

### **An example problem statement:**

The staffing model in the Process Improvement Unit (PIU) has changed (we have more staff, and some of the staff have different working patterns) we need to have a clear way of recording status and stage of our business activities (projects, workshops and training) that will be used by all PIU staff, so that we can work effectively and provide good service to our customers. A member of staff is due to go on annual leave in two weeks time and we have no visibility or way of easily sharing information about their work, this will make it hard for the rest of the team to cover the work during staff absence.

(Email us at [piu@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:piu@sheffield.ac.uk) if you'd like to see the visual management board we implemented to deal with this problem).