

What's your problem?

Some thoughts on Problems, Problem Management and Problem Analysis.

Problem definition:

“A question proposed for solution or discussion. “ - Dictionary.reference.com

“The cause of one or more incidents.” - ITILv3

Another way:

A Problem = Yes to these 3 questions:

1. Is there a deviation from what is expected?
2. Is the cause unknown?
3. Do we need to know the cause to take effective action?

Example:

Brendan rents a car at Dublin airport to drive to Belfast. While driving, the car breaks down.

Brendan asks:

1. Is there a deviation? Yes, this is not normal service.
2. Is the cause unknown? Yes, Brendan does not know why the car stopped.
3. Does Brendan need to know the cause to take effective action? No way. One phone call to Avis and I get a new car delivered within 30 mins. (a temporary solution (workaround) and restores normal service as soon as possible).

Brendan does not have a problem and does not need to do Problem Management/Problem Analysis.

The guy picking up the car for Avis, let's call him Jack.

Jack asks:

1. Is there a deviation? Yes, this is not expected normal service for Avis.
2. Is the cause unknown? At the moment, yes, Jack has no idea why the car stopped.
3. Does Jack need to know the cause to take effective action? No way, just pick up car and load onto lorry and return it to Avis.

Jack does not have a problem and does not need to do Problem Management/Problem Analysis.

Back at the Avis garage, Tyler is working away with the rest of his team as the car is delivered.

Tyler asks:

1. Is there a deviation? Yes, this is not expected normal service for Avis.
2. Is the cause unknown? At the moment, yes, Tyler has no idea why the car stopped.
3. Does Tyler need to know the cause to take effective action? Yes, Tyler needs to know why the car stopped.

Tyler has a problem. The first thing Tyler does is to state the actual problem.

Tyler states the problem as one object and one deviation. Car DP24117 won't start. He writes this on the team board so everyone can follow his thinking. The DP24117 is the registration and unique for that car.

Object = Car DP24117, Deviation = Won't start.

Tips to find your object:

What actual object or group of objects have the deviation?

What is the name of the thing no longer at "should" Eg. The rental car "should" start but wont.

Tips to find your deviation:

What deviation does the object have?

What do you see, hear, feel, taste, smell that tells you that there is a deviation?

Be aware of grouping objects. You can group objects as long as you know, **for a fact**, that the same cause is the reason for the deviation on all the objects. Otherwise you may start working on more than one problem at a time. The most usual suspect is the word "AND". Eg. The car wont start AND I can't get in touch with Avis support = two problems with two different causes.

Problem Management:

ITIL states that the purpose is to manage the lifecycle of all Problems. However, while managing the lifecycle, do better Problem Analysis. This is where the real magic happens!

Problem Analysis:

Specify the problem, identify possible causes, evaluate possible causes, confirm the true cause, and think beyond the fix (the workaround). How can we stop this Incident from happening again? The real customer value is achieved from Problem Analysis but just maybe, this is how you already structure Incident Management?

Wouldn't it be great if everyone on your team approached Incident Management and Problem Analysis with a common understanding of the actual problem...

So, *what's your problem?*