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Problem Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ready, shoot, aim. Read that again. Are you sure that is the correct order? We are so familiar with the phrase that you may have read it as “ready, aim, shoot.” That is the correct order for the sequence of actions, but many coalitions reverse the last two and take action before fully understanding a community problem. Armed with a bit of information from their community assessment and eager to initiate change in the community, most coalitions do not take the time to conduct a thorough problem analysis and instead jump to staging interventions.

The hazards of this approach quickly become evident. The coalition can lose credibility with the community because interventions lack a coherent rationale. The coalition is more likely to chase surface issues instead of addressing true root causes. In addition, the coalition is less likely to see desired outcomes because the various actions they take most likely will not work together to create larger positive effects.

The reasons for conducting a problem analysis reach beyond avoiding these common hazards. A solid problem analysis will help the coalition and the community understand that most important problems have multiple and inter-related causes. Conducting a problem analysis will help the coalition uncover the membership's assumptions about these root causes and determine if the members' assumptions are supported by science or by evidence from the community. Furthermore, the problem analysis process can help bring the coalition to consensus about root causes, which will help them avoid later conflicts.

For example, some members may believe that the reason young people in the community are using drugs is because these young people lack the discipline and knowledge to make good choices. Other members may believe that the reason for youth substance use is largely a problem in their families, while still others may see a community that turns a blind eye to the issue as the real culprit. Which, if any, of these beliefs are true? How will the coalition navigate these different points of view to arrive at a shared understanding of the drug abuse problem in their community? Using the data from a community assessment to conduct a thorough problem analysis is the answer to this typical coalition dilemma.

Problem analysis consists of using a systematic process to explore or “unpack” a complex community issue. There are a variety of processes a coalition can use for this analysis, depending on the issue to be addressed. Some of the more frequently used problem analysis techniques include: Five Why's, Fishbone, Behavioral Analysis, and But, Why Here?. Regardless of the process or technique selected, the goals for conducting the analysis are the same.

- *Problem analysis is a tool coalitions use to understand complex issues and arrange interventions for maximum effect.*

- *The goals for conducting a problem analysis are to:*
 1. *Understand the relationship between important community issues.*
 2. *Identify root causes*
 3. *Validate assumptions with community data*
 4. *Achieve consensus among coalition members*
 5. *Establish criteria for selecting interventions*
 6. *Create a picture of the relationship between the problem and multiple root causes (e.g. a logic model)*

- *Targets of change are individuals, institutions or conditions that must change to neutralize root causes.*
- *Agents of change are those who can ask for or leverage needed change.*

PART 1: REASONS FOR CONDUCTING PROBLEM ANALYSIS

There are six reasons to conduct a problem analysis. First, a coalition must gain an understanding of the relationship between the chosen issue (such as substance abuse or teen pregnancy) and other community problems or concerns. Second, the coalition needs a complete picture of the root causes that are creating the problem. Then the coalition must use this list of root causes to break down the complex issue into elements that can be documented with community data.

Next, this process of problem analysis should help the coalition membership achieve consensus on a shared understanding of the community problem. In addition, the problem analysis process should give members the opportunity to share their assumptions about root causes and examine these assumptions in the light of community data, community experience and scientific evidence. Finally, this consensus creates a rationale for deciding what actions should be taken by the group to address the problem.

Developing such a consensus about the problem and its root causes is a crucial step for coalition members. Without such an agreement, there is no basis from which to prioritize action. Coalitions that lack this consensus will often find a tug of war exists between members who argue for different interventions, programs or policies. The rationale for making these important decisions should not be the political influence or power of an individual coalition member. Rather, the coalition should select the actions to be taken because they are those most likely to change root causes and achieve longer-term positive outcomes.

In the end, the result of a problem analysis should be a clear picture showing the problem and its causes. This literal picture or visual diagram is often called a logic model or theory of change. Coalitions will find it hard to create a logic model if they have not first conducted a problem analysis. It is difficult to suddenly produce a logic model if the team has not engaged in the underlying process of problem analysis.

A coalition's logic model or visual diagram of the problem and its root causes serves as a starting point for identifying targets and agents of change. Targets of change are the conditions that need to be different; these are also those whose behavior must change in order to neutralize the root causes. Agents of change are community members who can be mobilized to ask for change or leverage needed change.

PART 2: TECHNIQUES FOR ANALYZING PROBLEMS

A visual approach to the analysis is usually best when a group is trying to discover the relationships among many ideas. A visual approach also works best when there are many people who need to contribute their ideas and help shape a shared result. There are a number of traditional techniques popular for this process in the

community health and development world. The most frequently used techniques: Five Why's, Fishbone, Behavioral Analysis, and But, Why Here?

FIVE WHY'S

The "Five Why's" technique has at its core the idea that the purpose of problem analysis is to uncover, challenge and test assumptions. To do this, a problem is written on a large piece of chart paper or on a dry-erase board. Coalition members then are asked, "Why is this problem happening?" A round of initial answers are charted. The group then takes each of the identified causes (or "why's") and asks, "Why is this happening?"

- The "Five Why's" technique is used when little is known about the root causes of a community problem..

The process continues until the group can no longer identify a more basic "why" or root cause. At a minimum, the group is charged with completing five layers — hence the technique's name of Five Why's. This technique often is used because it requires members to challenge each idea generated and to attempt dig further to arrive at a set of truly foundational root causes. This process is akin to peeling the layers of an onion.

For example, the community problem of teen pregnancy might be identified. Using brainstorming rules, a group of coalition members could list unsupervised time, parents not clearly communicating expectations, young people not knowing how to use contraception, contraception not being available in the community, hyper-sexualized media content and substance use at parties or other social gatherings as initial reasons for the pregnancy problem. The group would then take each of these reasons and repeat the process of asking why. The results are often portrayed as a series of related layers. Figure 3.1 provides a partially completed example. What root causes might you add to those listed?

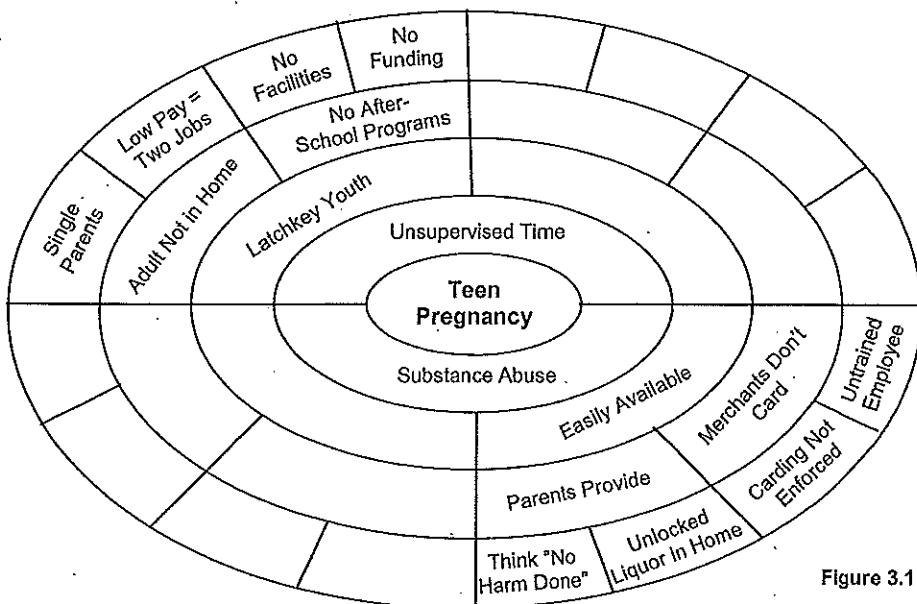


Figure 3.1

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Write your coalition's problem statement in the center circle.
2. Ask, "Why is this happening?" and place your answers in the next circle layer.
3. For each answer you brainstormed ask again, "Why is this happening?" and place your answers in the next circle layer.
4. Continue until you have completed "Five Why's?"

