

Problems that Bite

One of the 8 problem types defined on www.problemsolving2.com, a website created by Jerry L. Talley.

These pages outline the essential nature of the problem and the best process for addressing it.

Definition	<p>Long entrenched conflict that is heavily laced with strong moral themes; the players are intimately entangled with the problem and find it difficult to "step back" or get any perspective. They have linked their self-identify to their stand on the problem and cannot compromise or even negotiate without feeling personally violated. There is often an array of heroes and martyrs. Strong and colorful personalities cloud the issues and make analysis difficult. Those who have fallen in service of their positions create a new layer to the problem as they motivate a new round of staunch (even rabid) advocates.</p> <p>There is no consensus on the nature of the problem; it is treated as an amorphous cluster with little focus on the central issues. There is little strong desire for resolution; there is more drive for moral clarity or even revenge.</p> <p>It is impossible to dissect the problem into parts. It is equally impossible to "back out" of a failed solution; experimentation fundamentally changes the problem.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The Middle East● Bitter management - labor disputes● Health Care industry (providers, insurance companies, administrators, legislators, users)● The US Postal system● California's energy crisis of 2001● Abortion debate● Poverty / Welfare
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Sometimes the problems are not technically complex at all; the abortion debate, for example, does not involve any new technologies.● The process challenges are overwhelming and relentless. Often any contact at all produces nothing but chanting, yelling, and even violence. Not clear who is "in" the problem and what role they should have.● Extremely difficult to find neutral parties who might provide better communication or even mediation.
Definition of Good Outcome	<p>They stop shooting and start talking. People start defining the criteria for solutions, preferably those that embrace all the players rather than just one camp. There is an emerging "community of common interest" as participants focus more on similar interests rather than points of friction. Most "solutions" will be partial, or provisional. What is critical is creating the dialogue that allows for on-going exploration. Just having the conversation fundamentally alters the playing field; people come out from behind their stereotypes and simplistic assumptions.</p>
False Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Pushing too hard for an immediate solution.● Using political power to squelch debate.
Typical Identification Errors	<p>Just because people disagree or enjoy robust debate does not mean they are caught in a Problem that Bites. These problems are marked by the personal undertones and the long-standing bitterness of feelings. Problems that Bite have often festered for years. (e.g., the Bosnian-Croatian conflict dates back to a battle in the 1400's). Dilemmas may create conversations that are similar in tone, but people caught in Dilemmas often immediately recognize the concept of a dilemma and are willing (even eager) to reframe their friction as something other than personal accusation. In Problems that Bite, participant are more recalcitrant; compromising means abandoning moral beliefs and betraying their fallen comrades martyrs.</p>

When to Exit

With this type of problem, the strongest issue is “when to enter”. If you are already in, there are some conditions when you should strongly consider leaving:

- There is a strong chance of violence
 - Strong personalities are more interested in revenge than in any redress
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Process for Problems that Bite

	External Authorities	Antagonists	Neutral Party
Naming and Framing	<p>Anyone interested in productive resolution of this problem type should work behind the scenes to cultivate (1) tolerance for the opposing sides, (2) definition of criteria for a solution, and (3) commitment to even a partial resolution of issues rather than ongoing warfare.</p>	<p>The players in a Problem that Bites are the most complex. The antagonists are typically beyond conversation. Among them, however, there may be some more insightful principals who understand the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The futility of following the current course of actions• The negative impact on the unwilling victims of their conflict• The necessity of tempering their unbridled advocacy in favor of more complex but ultimately more responsible strategies <p>Presumably the rest of the principals are locked into pursuing only their own interests through amassing political power or through violence.</p> <p>The other relevant players are the victims of the conflict: the customers of a bureaucracy torn by a Problem that Bites, the families and the economy of the Middle East, the children of Ireland, or the customers of America's health care system.</p>	<p>It is debatable whether anyone can be a neutral change agent in a Problem that Bites. The polarization of the opposing sides acts like a "black hole", sucking in anyone who dares to venture too close. Savvy change agents will work behind the scenes and help to surface critical coalitions or to force consensus on milder points of the conflict.</p>
Exploring the Problem		<p>The problem for consideration is almost never the one at the core of the conflict. In fact, there is generally no consensus on the "core problem". The more fruitful notion of "the problem" is to think of how to increase the number of insightful principals, and how to find the right point of entry into the morass. That is, even among people who are violently opposed, there may be points of consensus. If nothing else, they may agree on topics for discussion, or on a list of principal players.</p> <p>Another point of possible agreement is the likelihood of intervention by higher authorities if they fail to resolve their differences on their own. Labor-management disputes, for example, may court the attention of governmental bodies if their debate is too bitter or too protracted. Even public opinion can eventually weigh in to force a solution if the antagonists are not careful. In those unfortunate cases where there is no higher authority (e.g., The Middle East), prospects for resolution are slim.</p>	

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<p>Considering Options</p>	<p>As one of the more unbearable problem types, the options to be considered here are not for total resolution of the issue, but rather for how to move the problem into another more tractable class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are there topics (probably removed from the core issues) on which we might find enough agreement to take some action (i.e., could health care principals in a particular county agree on the issues that need to be discussed, or on the people who need to be involved)? ● Is there a small group of more insightful players who could form a core group pushing for action? ● Is there a neutral place for conversation? ● Is there anyone who could provide neutral facilitation? ● Is there a higher moral ground that would provide leverage for resolution? 	
<p>Implementing Solutions</p>	<p>Monitoring progress in any change effort has to focus on the unfortunately high likelihood of slipping back into full conflict. Any new behavior in a Problem that Bites is likely to be fragile and in need of constant support.</p> <p>Like Problems of Our Own Making, the most successful implementation is one that moves the debate into another problem category. In most cases, it will be Problems with a Life of Their Own or Problems with Many Voices.</p>	