

Problems that are Dilemmas

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>Problems experienced when we are committed to two (apparently) incompatible goals. An unacknowledged dilemma creates conflict and opposition. Efforts toward one side of the paradox compromise or negate efforts toward the other side. Can result in painful and costly oscillation between two extremes.</p> <p>Dilemmas are enduring tensions, for which there are only temporary resolutions. Circumstances can easily demand a change in the previous balance point.</p> <p>In organizations, dilemmas are often split across functional boundaries. This can heighten friction and prevent empathy. If left unattended, it can escalate into a Problem that Bites.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Customization vs. economies of scale (Sales vs. Manufacturing)● Control through centralization vs. customization through decentralization (Headquarters vs. Field offices)● High quality vs. competitive pricing● Short time-to-market vs. product quality (Marketing vs. Engineering or QA)● Consistent global operation vs. customization to local markets and conditions
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Seeing the interconnections between the two "sides"; learning to see <i>one</i> paradox instead of <i>two</i> goals; realizing that both sides have to win● Creating a learning arena rather than pushing for a fixed solution● Shifting from a mindset of advocacy to one of cooperation● Creating relationships (communication, consideration) between groups that are typically antagonists
Definition of Good Outcome	<p>The structure of the organization no longer divides people who need to be in frequent contact. Based on their greater respect and consideration for each other, people from both sides of the dilemma work toward provisional "solutions" which advance both sides. In addition to immediate improvements, there is a mechanism for continual tracking, experimentation, and learning from experience.</p>
False Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Players agree to compromise and "act nice" in public, but privately hold to their local mentality; neither leg of the paradox is really satisfied, which only motivates greater advocacy and friction.● Treating the goals as separate objectives, possibly giving each goal to a separate department.
Typical Identification Errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Dilemmas are often mistaken for a Problem of Many Voices, that is, it appears that parties with different interests need to be brought to the bargaining table. Such a strategy only makes the dilemma worse; a compromise struck without the understanding of the dilemma may become institutionalized.● Problems that look like value conflicts are often dilemmas in disguise (i.e., Respecting tradition \wedge Pursuing innovation). Treating them as a matter of personal judgment will only underscore commitment to one side or the other and prevent finding a truly unique, blended solution.

When to Exit

- One side of the dilemma is adamant about maintaining an advocacy role.
 - The corporate culture (and/or executive preference) views competition as the best way to sort out the friction between the two perspectives; their support for collaboration is fragile or ritualistic at best.
 - The organizational structure and reward system are fixed and push for competition rather than managing the dilemma.
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Process for Problems that are Dilemmas

	Leader / Sponsor	Individual Contributors	Neutral Party
Naming and Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I see us as concerned with two valuable but seemingly incompatible goals. And we’re polarizing on those goals, and, to some degree, against each other. I’m not interested in ‘just A’ or ‘just B’; I want to look for ‘both A and B’. And that’s not going to happen unless these two sides are working together more closely. Some of you have made a name for yourself by your staunch advocacy for one side or the other. We can no longer afford such a luxury. I’m expecting everyone to start thinking and acting as if both sides of this dilemma were equally important to them.” 		<p>Since dilemmas are often not recognized by those caught up in them, there is often a Facilitator involved as well as the principals who eventually have to address the problem.</p> <p>Their primary role is to introduce the mindset of a dilemma by drawing out peoples’ perceptions and assumptions of each other.</p>
Exploring the Problem		<p>Since dilemmas usually involve different groups who stumble over each others’ best efforts, capturing their perceptions of each other may provide the first visibility into the nature of the problem as a dilemma. The stereotypes generated by the conflict of an unacknowledged dilemma commonly infer personal deficits or moral bankruptcy to the other party. People on the other side of the dilemma are often seen as “stupid”, “uncaring”, “oblivious”, “selfish” or “dense”. The behaviors which support those attributions may be the starting point to understanding how the two sides of the dilemma are linked.</p> <p>Inquiring as to how perceptions are created and maintained exposes the cyclical nature of the distortions.</p> <p>Dilemmas come in three flavors. See notes below for more details.</p> <p>A good problem definition should include at least the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of the 2 or more linked goals Examination of the connective tissue which makes the goals appear as competitive Recognition of the resulting contamination of relationships, solutions, client satisfaction, or work processes if the dilemma is ignored 	<p>The role of a Facilitator can be crucial in exploring dilemmas. Dilemmas are often more visible and understandable to someone outside the fray.</p> <p>Before the essential nature of the situation is well understood, it is exceptionally easy for the participants to slip back into the stereotypical thinking generated by the dilemma.</p> <p>There is a shift in mindset that needs to occur before people begin to see the reality of their conflict.</p> <p>Some key questions help in this early exploration. See the notes below for more details.</p> <p>As the nature of the dilemma is slowly revealed, the Facilitator should be watching for new relationships among the participants. They may become more respectful of each other as individuals (without the stereotyping) and more conscious of how each side can make the others’ situation untenable.</p>

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Considering Options		<p>The process of finding ways to maximize both sides of the dilemma may provide a pilot or template for later efforts to manage the dilemma as an ongoing activity. It will be worthwhile to periodically highlight the process as well as the solutions it produces.</p> <p>The solutions considered must secure the minimum level of each goal as well as create the possibility for breakthrough solutions which maximize both. Solutions should also include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strategy for managing the dilemma (“early warning” system for falling below minimums; forum for exploring possible solutions) • A process to create and maintain collaborative relationships among those involved • A learning mechanism for ensuring the principals become more adept over time • Structural supports (functional boundaries, rewards, etc.) which will support ongoing dilemma management 	<p>The biggest challenge for the facilitator is to push for synergy rather than compromise. Since relationships are often fragile, people will gravitate quickly to a partial solution that appears to offer a quick resolution without addressing the fundamental tensions.</p> <p>The second challenge is capturing the process as well as shepherding the group to a substantive solution. HOW the group got to a solution is as important as the WHAT.</p>
Implementing Solutions	<p>Dilemmas are seldom treated successfully without changing organizational structure, rewards systems, job descriptions, and the like.</p> <p>Such changes are certain to require executive authority to effect. For example, it may become necessary to regroup employees around regions or customer groups rather than by functions. This would bring together representatives of both sides of a dilemma together working to satisfy customer needs.</p>	<p>The most significant feature of implementation for solutions to dilemmas is that they are ongoing. Dilemmas do not respond to single-point solutions; they are a constant tension which will have different solutions at different times.</p> <p>Monitoring implementation requires attention to the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guarding against excesses on either side of the dilemma • Tracking evidence of breakthrough solutions rather than just compromises • Checking the quality of the relationships between the principals 	<p>Since implementation will not be a single effort, the facilitator has to build in the group process and leadership that will be sustained over time.</p>

Exploring the Dilemma

For the purpose of these notes, let us assume we have two goals, A & B, which are linked in a classic dilemma. Assume further that A and B are located in different organizational segments, so there is an A-world and a B-world, that is the adherents to each goal live in their own functional location. Since they are located in different organizational segments, they are also associated with different groups: the A-people and the B-people. That is the adherents to each goal share different history, stories, and language.

The following questions are meant as prompts for discussions between the two groups. They are designed both to explore the situation and to generate some of the key insights important for resolution.

Identifying core strategies:

1. What would we do if A was our sole and exclusive concern?
2. What would we do if B was our sole and exclusive concern?

These questions just surface the basics. For example, Sales feels that “growing market share” is their primary goal. In pursuit of this ‘A-goal’ they sell as much as possible, as quick as possible, and expect the rest of the organization to be grateful. Engineering considers the Goal B = high quality product design and delivery, so they look for in-depth discussions with clients and time to resolve technical complexities.

Understanding consequences:

1. How does it impact the A-world when the B-people work their hardest in pursuit of B?
2. How does it impact the B-world when the A-people work their hardest in pursuit of A?

These questions start to identify the linkage between the two goals, how efforts toward one undermine the success of the other. For example, Engineering’s detailed questioning might slow down the sales decision as the client discovers the ramifications of their initial desires. From the other side, Sale’s focus on sales volume could easily swamp the capacity of Engineering to deliver quality products, forcing them to cut corners in design or forego technical conferences to make delivery dates.

Defensive strategies:

1. If your concern was just B, what would you feel compelled to do in response to the A-focused strategies?
2. If your concern was just A, what would you feel compelled to do in response to the B-focused strategies?

These questions expand on the work of the previous segment. In response to Engineering’s desire for detailed discussions, the Sales staff start to adopt certain defensive strategies, such as not inviting Engineering into sales meetings until the client has signed the contract. In response to unmanageable volume, the Engineering department may feel compelled to pass on products without any accountability for quality. One of my clients discovered that their Engineering group was delivering software customizations that they knew would not run; they simply gave up on quality goals altogether.

Free strategies:

1. Are there actions in pursuit of A which have no consequences for the pursuit of B?
2. Are there actions in pursuit of B which have no consequences for the pursuit of A?

Often there are behaviors that have no consequence for the other side. They are efforts in support of A or B which do not immediately compromise the other. For example, if Engineering sends staff to professional development conferences, it would be neutral for Sales' pursuit of market share. The efforts of Sales to pre-qualify potential customers has no impact on Engineering's desire for quality.

Managing errors:

1. If we went for A without constraint, what errors would we encounter?
2. If we went for B without constraint, what errors would we encounter?
3. Who experiences the errors?
4. Can any of these errors be mitigated?

This discussion explores the reality that All-A or All-B usually produces serious consequences to all parties. Unrestrained pursuit of market share could swamp the organization and damage the reputation that depends on timely delivery of quality products, and thereby compromise market share in the long run. The unconstrained pursuit of product quality could lead to prices above the prevailing market rate or lengthy delays in delivery.

Building up images (feel free to explore stereotypes):

1. When the B-people do the things they do, what do you imagine or assume about them? Their motives? Their competencies? Their psychological makeup?
2. When the A-people do the things they do, what do you imagine or assume about them? Their motives? Their competencies? Their psychological makeup?

When people are more comfortable with each other (and more able to see how the dilemma has seduced them into less than honorable behavior), it is useful to make their mutual stereotypes public and a topic of discussion in and of themselves. For example, when Engineers ask complicated questions that send clients back to their own technicians for time consuming clarifications, what does the Salesman start thinking about those Engineers? What phrases would s/he use in describing them to her/his colleagues back in the Sales department?

Building understanding:

1. From the perspective of A, what is the value in B?
2. From the perspective of B, what is the value in A?
3. For A-people, what is it that B-people just don't understand about the world of A? Your priorities? Your motives? Your most important source of satisfaction?
4. For B-people, what is it that A-people just don't understand about the world of B? Your priorities? Your motives? Your most important source of satisfaction?

These questions can be useful for helping A-people and B-people to see the other side as equally committed to the company, equally professional, equally hopeful of doing a good job. The stereotypes explored in the previous section are translated into understanding and, hopefully, some empathy.

Types of Dilemmas

1. **Classic dilemmas:** same behavior, different criteria

There are conflicting criteria for the same behavior. While the blend may be difficult, it is **essential**. Each side of the dilemma is valuable only because of the other side. Attempts to live only under one side of the dilemma are fatally flawed.

Examples

Order \wedge Freedom
Empowerment \wedge Alignment

A special case of classic dilemma occurs with an activity which is complex enough to be a work process or a project. Often there are criteria dominant in the early part of the process that conflict with criteria that become dominant in a later point. For example, accuracy of information taken during the sales cycle is essential for the timely processing of the order. The separation (functional or temporal) between the relevant events is an illusion; good process design and good project management pull for combining criteria and designing them into the work.

Innovation \wedge Manufacturability
Speed (customer satisfaction) \wedge Accuracy (process integrity)

2. **Orthogonal dilemmas:** different behaviors, different criteria

There are two different sets of behaviors that seem diametrically opposed. They generate different cultures, different structures, different staffing. While there may be a hybrid that is preferable, the blending is **optional**; a company could be viable exploiting just one half of the dilemma

Examples

Centralization \wedge Decentralization
Service orientation \wedge Product orientation

Deciding whether to take on the dilemma is a matter of vision, strategy, and/or values. If the company decides to pursue a hybrid, the work is like a classic dilemma.

3. **Sequential dilemmas:** different behavior, different times

There are different behaviors which cannot be performed simultaneously; the most likely solution is to sequence them appropriately; the tension in the dilemma eventually becomes one of relative emphasis, timing, and transitioning.

Examples

Performance \wedge Development
Work \wedge Home (actually important to keep these two separate. "Bringing work home" or "marrying a co-worker" would not necessarily be a resolution.)

The key strategies are

Proportion of time to spend in each
Sequencing of the activities
Thorough transitioning