

Problems with Many Voices

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>Multiple stakeholders with strong preferences for the final outcome. There is no option for everyone to pursue their own choice; some constraint requires a single choice. Political maneuvering of the players typically obscures key information as well as real interests.</p> <p>Often represent enduring differences of opinion that will clash in a wide variety of specific situations.</p> <p>NOTE: These problems often contain a Dilemma, such as Growth vs. Quality of Life, but until that Dilemma is embraced by all, that class is not the appropriate anchor for the problem.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Developers vs. environmentalists vs. residents deciding on a large housing project● Negotiating product specs with a client● Owners, contractors, architects developing the specifications for a major construction project● Competing companies creating industry standards to create a stable marketplace for their products● Infighting among departments
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Surfacing the players and bringing them to the table; some of the players may decide to "play" the problem solving effort to secure their own ends (withholding information, misrepresenting their interests, etc.)● Surfacing the interests behind the stated positions● Working with representatives of constituencies instead of the actual players● Maintaining "good faith" interaction (rules for conflict)● Managing volatile or hostile interaction
Definition of Good Outcome	<p>There is a durable agreement among conflicting players which avoids a stalemate. People pursue a solution that is advantageous to all parties. If there was sacrifice, it feels fairly distributed. The process used maintains the ability and willingness of the players to work collaboratively on other issues in the future.</p>
False Solutions	<p>Attempting to legislate a single solution, and thereby adding to the animosity between the players. If the interpersonal animosity is great enough, the problem may migrate into Problems that Bite.</p>
Typical Identification Errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● People in disagreement may not be in a Problem with Many Voices. They may be caught in a Problem that Bites. In that case, the greater bitterness of the conversation and entrenched positions signal a need for something more than mediation.● Dilemmas often look like a conflict between two groups, but compromise would be a sub-optimal solution.● Value conflicts that reflect a simple difference in preference would fall under this category. This error can easily occur if both sides cloak their interests under the mantle of "values" to give them greater validity.
When to Exit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Key participants refuse to compromise or negotiate in good faith● There is evidence that some players persist in political maneuvering behind the scenes

Process for Problems with Many Voices

	External Authorities	Antagonists	Neutral Party
Exploring the Problem		<p>While the principals' perception of the problem is critical, it is also important to surface their perceptions of the forum within which they can explore a joint solution. If they do not see it as equitable and rational, they may cut short their participation.</p> <p>The definition of the problem should include identification of the interests of all legitimate principals and exactly how those interests might conflict. It should also address the broad parameters of the forum and/or process needed for the eventual resolution. For example, does it look like facilitation would be sufficient? Or is mediation required?</p> <p>Once engaged, the principals can tackle the exploration of the problem. Part of that work will be finding the components of their conflict which are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Puzzles (solvable through investigation rather than discussion) ● Problems with Uncertainties (requiring exploration and tracking of multiple futures) ● Dilemmas (requiring synergy rather than compromise) ● Life of Their Own (requiring prudence and humility) ● Problems that are Too Rich (requiring creativity rather than conflict) 	<p>The facilitator needs to ferret out the players. What are their interests? Where, exactly, do those interests conflict? But also, what is their history with each other? What are their skills at negotiation, compromise, and managing conflict?</p> <p>The other critical event in this phase is surfacing the interests behind the positions. That is, each participant makes a stand for some outcome, but that position may only vaguely reveal their true interest, which is the value they would like to achieve through negotiation.</p> <p>The facilitator can also help the participants by articulating the nature of the essential problem as it emerges from the discussion.</p>
Considering Options		<p>During the exploration phase, the principals are spared the need to give up any of their interests. Once they begin playing with potential solutions, they will probably anticipate possible losses through negotiation.</p>	<p>While there is room for a free-form, creative phase in considering options, the formulation of specific options will probably require the norms of negotiation and compromise. The demands on the facilitator or mediator will escalate sharply.</p> <p>Just as the participants need to be flexible and creative in framing options, the facilitator needs to be equally innovative in designing new process tools. For example, a group might need a way to step past unresolvable disagreements so they can find areas of at least partial agreement. So a facilitator might design a way to flag and temporarily "park" issues that would otherwise derail negotiations entirely.</p>

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Implementing Solutions	The monitoring of outcomes in this problem class will involve both evaluating progress against the plan, but may also have a component of enforcement. After all, the decision to proceed with a joint solution has made between parties at odds in their interests. Without some assurances of enforcement, suspicion may creep back into the process and undermine successful outcomes.	
