

Problems of Our Own Making

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 created by our assumptions or statements so discrepant from reality that the mere assertion creates a new layer of problems. A problem most often associated with a key executive with both the authority to make their assumptions compelling, and the ability to deflect feedback about the consequences of their position.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Naive, arrogant, or unrealistic demands (<i>We have to double out sales this quarter!</i>).● Denial of the obvious (<i>We don't need to have cash flow as long as we have market share.</i>)● The self-fulfilling prophecies (<i>People are only motivated by fear and reward</i>). <p>Often exacerbated by a refusal to see the complexity of the situation or cost of the proffered solution. Often accompanied by strong sense of urgency, concern for survival, or fear for loss of moral integrity. Problems of Our Own Making are seldom capricious; the perpetrator often feels compelled despite the overwhelming challenge.</p> <p>Straining a system with impossible demands may create other problems, such as lowered morale and turnover.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Attempting to introduce a new organizational practice which is dramatically out of synch with the current state of the organization, such as purchasing a TQM training program in a "command and control" culture● Calling for 60% growth in staffing when morale is low and turnover is 30+%● Demanding complete product documentation when Engineering is swamped with new systems to design● Asking a QC department to validate product manuals for a new international customer group when they have no one who speaks the native languages involved.● Believing that employees are only motivated by external rewards and punishments, which justifies extensive "bonus" systems, which only further disconnects employees from the intrinsic motivation of their work.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Introducing reliable and credible data on the actual situation into the dialogue● Making visible the barely noticeable but cumulative degradation that follows from pursuing impossible goals; erosion can eventually lead to system failure.● Getting key players to see the situation as it is, to make reasonable demands based on full assessment of the current reality● Translating assumptions into hypotheses to be tested
Definition of Good Outcome	<p>The demanding goal is acknowledged, but it is translated into a series of intermediate steps that start with current performance and ends with the desired state. There is an open comparison of vision vs. capability; rather than simply becoming more adamant, people look for solutions. People are once again engaged in the issues rather than giving up.</p>
False Solutions	<p>Relying exclusively on hyped up motivation, heroic effort, conviction, or financial rewards.</p>
Typical Identification Errors	<p>Executives and managers oftentimes announce "stretch goals", which they understand are beyond the capacity of the present system. If people respond with a sense of challenge and excitement, the goals may create new levels of motivation and performance. Such a strategy requires leaders who are closely in tune with the staff of the organization, a feature which is typically absent in a Problem of Our Own Making.</p>

When to Exit

- The offending voice is both intractable and invulnerable
 - The offending executive has shown a willingness to punish anyone who challenges his/her perceptions.
 - There is no one with enough credibility to “get the Prince’s ear”
 - The corrosive consequences are quickly accumulating without likely relief
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Process for Problems of Our Own Making

In problems of our own making, there is usually a principal actor (whose unfortunate behavior means they are unwilling to explore any “problem”), a change agent (who has access and influence within the organization, but little authority), and an audience who lives with the consequences of the principal’s actions or statements.

	Speaker	Audience	Neutral Party
Naming and Framing	<p>(Problems in this class are a failure in leadership and a failure in naming and framing. Rather than playing their rightful role in framing the problem. In this problem type, they <i>are</i> the problem. It is the audience who suffers with the consequences of their statements who struggles to name the situation as a problem.)</p> <p>In those occasions where there is an authority who can frame the problem, something like the following would be most useful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We may be struggling here just because we've set such high expectations for ourselves. Perhaps we should better understand what we're actually capable of doing rather than just focusing on what we need to do." 	<p>If the speaker were willing to look critically at their behavior and its consequences, it would not be a Problem of One's Own Making, and the problem (happily) would have shifted into another class. Assuming that the principal is still insisting on the necessity of their impossible point of view, this part of the process is more for the change agent than anyone else.</p>	<p>The neutral party in this situation is typically a confidante of the leader who can engage a conversation that might be politically risky for anyone else. Not everyone can tell the emperor he has no clothes.</p>
Exploring the Problem		<p>The key issues are finding and documenting the collateral damage that stems from the principal's actions. That data, hopefully, can persuade the principal that their goals are more certainly achieved by reframing them in a way that is engaging and motivates the audience rather than eroding their effectiveness or their morale.</p>	
Considering Options	<p>The Speaker in a Problem of Our Own Making is typically driven by an outcome which they cannot set aside. For example, they may have heard from Wall Street analysts that unless the company can meet a certain level of growth, they will downgrade their BUY recommendation to a SELL. The financial consequences for the company could be devastating.</p>	<p>The only options that are likely to survive even a moment of reflection are those that accept the necessity of achieving the outcome and propose different, more manageable strategies for getting there.</p> <p>The real outcome here is not an alternative strategy, but rather the re-engagement of desire and reality. As long as there is a candid discussion of what is possible along with what is needed, there is hope for a better outcome.</p>	

Speaker	Audience	Neutral Party
Implementing Solutions	The implementation for Problems of Our Own Making is intended to move the problem out of this class and into another, more tractable category. If, for example, the CEO has demanded levels of growth that are untenable (and more likely to instigate turnover), then a successful implementation would recast the problem as a one of work process redesign (a Puzzle), improving supply chain performance (Life of Its Own), or perhaps planning for a turbulent future (Uncertainties).	
