How to statements

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How to statements

A useful tool in creative problem solving is the 'how to' statement which provides a powerful way of reframing the problem. For example, consider the problem of a city council concerned with the amount of graffiti being scrawled on bridges, walls, trains and other surfaces. It regularly receives complaints from residents, it looks unsightly and contributes to the image of a declining neighbourhood and it costs a lot to remove. For them this is a problem – but it could be framed in many different ways by using how to statements. For example:

How to …..

- Reduce the costs of cleaning it up?
- Use surfaces which are difficult to write or paint on?
- Provide alternative spaces/surfaces for graffiti artists to work on?
- Make neigbourhoods look more attractive?
- Provide other things to occupy bored kids who are creating the graffiti?
- Catch offenders before they can damage surfaces?
- Make graffiti a positive feature which people like to see?

And so on. Each of these formulates the problem in a different way and leads to very different solution pathways. For example, if the underlying problem is 'how to use surfaces which are difficult to deface?' then the solutions may lie in the realm of chemistry or material science. If it is 'how to catch offenders?' then the solution may be around remote monitoring, neighbourhood watch schemes, more police presence, etc. And if it is about 'how to provide alternative spaces/surfaces?' then maybe there is a solution in opening an arts centre or designating public walls for open decoration.

The power of 'how to' statement sis that they help explore and open up problems and suggest multiple solution pathways. They are a helpful way of starting brainstorming sessions by redefining and exploring the dimensions of the problem.

Using how to statements

1. Begin by asking the problem owner to talk about the problem in their own words giving as much description as possible about context, why they (and others) feel this is a problem, what ahs already been tried, etc.

2. Then brainstorm alternative definitions/formulations of the problem using the structure 'how to' at the start of each statement. Allow wild ideas and amusing representations – the purpose is to generate as much variety as possible.

3. Then ask the problem owner to select the definition which most closely appeals to them.

4. Then use other techniques – brainstorming etc. – to explore possible solutions to that challenge.

5.   If necessary repeat the process using a different 'how to' formulation as the starting point.

Activity

Choose a problem to work on; for example:

- How to speed up the time taken to board an aeroplane?
- How to make mobile phones less distracting?
- How to get rid of surplus Christmas-themed stock at the end of December?
- How to reduce the traffic jams around the school gates just before the start of school?
- How to encourage people to donate more to charitable causes?

Or select a problem of your own

Generate a series of alternative 'how to' statements which reformulate the problem in different ways