Tackling Problems in Adaptive Policy Work

Doing Adaptive Implementation (to use with the case 'An Adaptive Recycling Policy')

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A Background on Blueville's Frustrating Recycling Policy

The mayor of Blueville was elected on the basis of a strong environmental message. She promised, especially, to promote recycling in the city—reducing the amount of plastic goods on city streets. There was no recycling, historically, so her administration had a lot of work to do.

Upon taking office, her staff approached a consulting firm that had advised other cities with prominent recycling strategies and asked for a 'plan of action'. The consultants' advice was clear: there are many private entities that will buy recyclables—especially plastics—but the challenge for a city government lies in collecting the recyclables.

Given this advice, the mayor's office established a contract with a private recycling firm, who would pay for recycled goods collected by the city and asked her team to develop a plan to collect recycled goods in the city. This seemed a great solution to the problem of having no recycling in the city.

The plan to collect recycled goods had two main elements: (i) The city procured recycling boxes for every constituent (individuals and businesses) to use in collected recyclables; (ii) The city set up collection points at four city buildings (the City Hall, Police Station, Registrar's Office, and School) where citizens were asked to deliver their recyclables.

The mayor was excited by this initiative, which seemed affordable and practical and would solve the city's problem (which they saw as 'having too much plastic waste on city streets').

Unfortunately, a year went by, and the policy did not yield the kind of results the mayor had hoped for. The amount of plastic waste on city streets did not seem to decrease at all, partly because very few constituents seemed to collect and deliver recyclables (evident in the low level of recycled goods collected at the four city buildings in the year).

The mayor was convinced that the general solution was the right one – "we just need to collect recycled goods, especially plastics"—but she recognized that her administration's policy was not working as she had hoped. So, she asked them to pivot: "Go and find out why the policy is not working and fix it!"

A Frustrated Team Tackles a Frustrating Policy

The mayor's staff held a short one-day retreat to reflect on their new orders, as part of a team that would help foster a better understanding of the way forward. This team included two city employees from the environmental management bureau (responsible for the policy), two members from the mayor's office (representing her, as the one demanding change), and three members from business and civil society (who, it was agreed, needed to be involved as users and potential end-beneficiaries of the policy).

The team members were frustrated. They did not know why the policy had not worked and started suggesting explanations for the failure—often in the form of blame. They blamed the consultants for offering a solution that was obviously lacking in some way, arguing that 'something in their solution was not complete, or fitted to our city, and the consultants should have known better.' They also blamed Blueville's citizens, suggesting that they had not taken advantage of the opportunities provided by the mayor's policies. One team member suggested that 'the citizens just need to commit to working with the city government more … and stop opposing everything we recommend.'

A coach that had been hired to help the team work through their challenge noted these comments and suggested that perhaps something was missing in the original solution and that Blueville's constituents were obviously less inspired by the policy than was expected. He noted that these kinds of deficiencies are common in policy work, however, and pointed to a poor 'problem narrative' underlying the work. He explained, 'when we don't have a strong understanding and narrative of the problem we are trying to solve, we often propose poorly specified solutions and find that people are not on board with those solutions.'

He argued that the team would be wise to stop and reflect on the problem before they proposed new solutions, curiously asking a few questions:

→ 'What is the problem?'

→ 'Why does the problem matter?'

→ 'Who does the problem matter to?'

→ 'How would we measure the impact of this problem—in data and stories?'

→ 'What would the problem look like solved?'

Constructing the Problem

Some members were a little frustrated by such questions, arguing that they all knew what the problem was and needed to work on solutions instead of talking about problems. The mayor wanted to see progress quickly, after all, and this required a focus on solutions, not problems.

These individuals were surprised, however, when they heard their team members' different views about the problem. Consider four examples of these views:

→ '**There is too much solid waste on our streets, especially around businesses, which undermines commerce and is of major concern to business owners.** This can be measured in the views business owners have of solid waste around their properties and is further reflected in the stagnating economic activity in the city center and declining value of business properties. If we solved this problem, business owners would tell us that the areas around their businesses are cleaner, there would be more activity in the city center, and business values and confidence would increase.'

→ '**The problem is that we have too much plastic pollution in the city, especially around bus stops that lower income workers use in their commute.** This affects the health and well-being of these workers and undermines their interest in coming to work. The problem can be measured by getting commuters' views on the cleanliness of bus stop waiting areas and how this makes them feel about coming to work. If this problem were solved, the commuters would be positive about their commute, and eager to come to work.'

→ '**The problem is that we do not recycle enough, which leads to plastic waste damaging the environment – whether on our streets or in our landfills.** This matters because we are destroying the environment for ourselves and our children. We can measure the size of the problem by capturing the amount of plastic waste on the streets and in our landfills and in our streams and rivers and lakes. If this problem was solved, we would have lower levels of plastic waste on our streets and in our landfills, higher levels of plastic waste captured in our recycling system, and a reason to hope for the future.'

→ '**We have too much plastic waste in our town, which is a visible reminder that government cannot address the basic challenges of our constituents.** This undermines confidence in government, which we can measure by capturing the confidence that constituents have in the municipality's promises to get things done. If this problem were solved, we would have less visible plastic waste and more confidence in government.'

The team realized that their different views reflected their different perspectives. They started to wonder if the prior policy work had not paid sufficient attention to the fact that different people felt differently about the problem, and perhaps felt that the jump to a solution made their views irrelevant (alienating them from the policy work). The team agreed that they needed to now develop a problem narrative that combined at least their members' different views, to be more inclusive of a broader range of perspectives.

This led to the team constructing a view on the problem based on their combined answers to the questions, which is shown in the picture below. It was a view that they were all excited about, and that they felt would motivate engagement from a variety of different actors – including city government officials, low-income commuters, and business owners. This was important because these groups were significantly affected by the problem and would be key to making any policy intervention work – given that they were arguably closest to the problem.

What is the problem?
'There is too much plastic on city streets [especially around commuter points and commercial areas] because of low levels of constituent recycling.'

Why does it matter?
'It undermines commercial activity'
'It reduces commuter well-being'
'It damages the environment'
'It undermines confidence in city government'

Who does it matter to?
'Commercial business owners'
'Lower-income commuters'
'All current and future constituents who depend on a healthy environment'
'The city government and mayor'

How would we measure the problem?
'The amount of plastic waste on the streets'
'The amount of plastic waste in landfills'
'Business owners' feelings about litter'
'Commuter's views on cleanliness of bus stops'
'The level of confidence in city government'

What would the problem look like solved?
'There is less plastic waste on the streets'
'There is less plastic waste in landfills'
'Business owners feel that there is less litter'
'Commuters feel that bus stops are cleaner'
'People are more confident in government'

Thinking about Causes of the Problem

The team's coach stopped them at this point and ensured that everyone agreed with the problem narrative – at least as the best version of the problem they as a group could come up with at the time. All team members indicated their approval and agreed it represented a collaborative product they could all support.

The coach then suggested another question for the team about 'why' the problem existed (or what was causing it). He noted that they should think about this quite seriously, given that the problem persisted even though the mayor had tried to solve it. This suggested that there were some sticky causes of the problem that past policy solutions had not addressed.

To better identify these causes and get to the roots of the problem, he suggested that the team ask a few additional questions:

→ 'What is causing the problem?'

→ 'What is causing that cause?'

→ 'What is causing that sub-cause?'

The team spent some time reflecting on this and came up with four proposed 'causes' of the problem. The first was that constituents didn't know how to get rid of plastic waste. The second was that constituents didn't have places to get rid of their plastic waste. A third suggested that constituents did not care about their litter (such that it was not about their knowledge or ability but rather about their will). A fourth cause emphasized that the problem could only be solved if constituents worked together, and they did not want to do so. These were shown in a 'fishbone' (or Ishikawa) diagram to illustrate the team's initial view on the problem and its causes (as below).

FISHBONE (ISHIKAWA) DIAGRAM

Proposed Cause 1

Constituents don't know how to get rid of their plastic waste

Proposed Cause 2

Constituents don't have places to get rid of their plastic waste

THE PROBLEM

'Too much plastic is on city streets because of low levels of constituent recycling.'

Proposed Cause 3

Individual constituents don't care about plastic waste they leave on streets

Proposed Cause 4

Constituents don't work together to address waste and litter

Socializing the Problem Narrative

The team knew that their problem narrative needed to be tested with people in Blueville. So, they organized to socialize the narrative with key groups (which meant sharing their views with constituents and seeing if it resonated). They split up into groups of two and agreed to go to four of these groups—businesses in the city center, commuters at city bus stops, members of the environmental management bureau, and the mayor's office. Their goal was to see if people in these different groups agreed with the narrative or had things to add. They knew that a full analysis of these groups' views could take months or even years of work. Because they wanted to build momentum and make quick progress, however, they agreed to pursue a minimum viable version of each group's views through a rapid engagement process that took just two days.
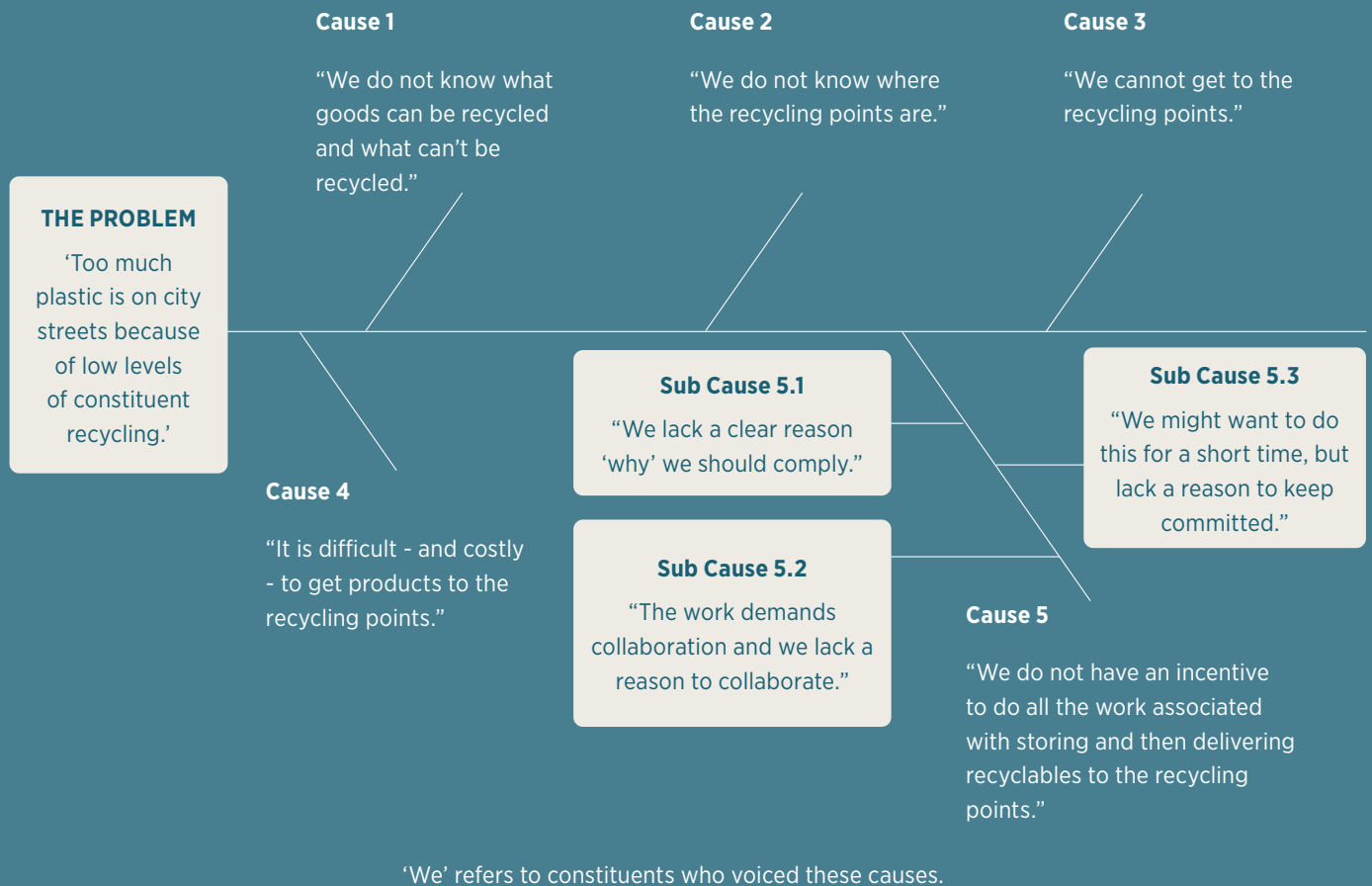
The different sub-teams pursued the work differently over these days. For instance, the pair who engaged commuters at the bus stop spent two hours each day at bus stops, asking commuters if they agreed with the problem statement and why they thought plastic waste was so high and recycling so low. In contrast, the pair working with business owners went to ten different businesses in the two days and shared the problem statement and fishbone, asking if the owners had any different or additional views. The coach encouraged all the team members to get stories from every interview, giving their interviewees a chance to share what they really thought. This would help them 'get into the shoes' of those they were listening to and really understand and appreciate their messages.

The full team reconvened three days later, comparing notes from their discussions. They all reported that the people they interviewed agreed with the general problem statement and were pleased that someone had come to ask them their views. Interviewees offered different views on 'why' the problem was festering, which led to some interesting insights for the team. One member noted how a teacher at the bus stop told her she did not know which goods counted as 'recyclables', for instance, and would gladly recycle goods if only she had better information. In response, the sub-team members assembled a selection of products and asked the teacher to explain which she would consider 'recyclables' (and where she was confused), which helped them appreciate the nature of her confusion. Another sub-team heard that business owners found it costly to get products to recycling points. To better understand this, the sub-team members asked the business owner to show them how they would store, pack, and then deliver recyclables to recycling points. This helped them better appreciate the cost and difficulty of doing such work.

After these discussions, the full team re-designed their fishbone, showing five causes that resonated somewhat with their original views but also reflected the perspectives of constituent groups. This is shown on the next page, where the causes are shown as statements from interviewees: 'We do not know what goods can be recycled and what can't be recycled'; 'We do not know where the recycling points are'; 'We cannot get to the recycling points'; 'It is difficult—and costly—to get products to the recycling points'; and 'We do not have an incentive to do all the work associated with storing and then delivering recyclables to the recycling points'.

The team was able to identify sub-causes for each cause. To save space, the diagram only shows sub-causes associated with cause 5, where the team heard that the lack of incentive seemed to be caused by a lack of any clear reason to comply with a recycling mandate, a challenge to collaborate, and a deficient long-term rationale to keep committed to recycling.

Cause 1

"We do not know what goods can be recycled and what can't be recycled."

Cause 2

"We do not know where the recycling points are."

Cause 3

"We cannot get to the recycling points."

THE PROBLEM

'Too much plastic is on city streets because of low levels of constituent recycling.'

Sub Cause 5.1

"We lack a clear reason 'why' we should comply."

Sub Cause 5.3

"We might want to do this for a short time, but lack a reason to keep committed."

Cause 4

"It is difficult - and costly - to get products to the recycling points."

Sub Cause 5.2

"The work demands collaboration and we lack a reason to collaborate."

Cause 5

"We do not have an incentive to do all the work associated with storing and then delivering recyclables to the recycling points."

'We' refers to constituents who voiced these causes.

More Excited than Frustrated

The team had been working on its challenge for less than a week and already had a clear and agreed narrative of the problem to work with (which they knew was probably not complete but provided a good starting point for their work). This narrative included a statement of the problem, an idea of key actors affected by the problem, ideas on measuring the problem – and problem solved – and a picture of the various causes of the problem.

While no one had started talking about solutions, the team felt that it was already making a lot of progress with this problem narrative. They were able to present it to the mayor and have her see what they were thinking in terms of the problem they were working on, the goals of their work (what problem solved looked like), and the areas they were considering for policy work (the 'causes' of the problem). Team members were also motivated by the engagement they had enjoyed with some of the affected groups – especially lower-income commuters and business owners – and what they head learned from this engagement. Team members presented the list of interviewees to the mayor as well, and found she was impressed at the way they had directly engaged constituents.

Most importantly, the team members were no longer frustrated by the challenge or overwhelmed by it – and they were not blaming people about the problem. Instead, they were excited to start addressing the causes they had identified and hoped to work with the people they had interviewed in this process. In a sense, the problem had opened up in front of them and was facilitating the emergence of a new sense of collaboration and emergence.