Problem Statement

Trigger questions for creating a clear problem definition

A well-defined problem is the foundation of effective decision-making, design, and strategy. Poorly framed problems often lead to misaligned solutions, wasted effort, and unresolved stakeholder concerns.

This document provides structured trigger questions to help clarify, validate, and articulate a problem before moving into ideation or solution development. The goal is not to solve the problem, but to understand it thoroughly and objectively.

Use these questions in workshops, stakeholder interviews, discovery phases, or individual analysis.

- Treat the questions as prompts, not a checklist.
- Not all questions will apply in every context.
- Revisit the questions as new information emerges.
- Focus on describing reality, not defending existing decisions.
- Capture answers in clear, specific, and observable terms.

Defining the problem

These questions help establish a shared understanding of what is happening, who is affected, and why the issue matters.

Goals and Expectations

- What are the current goals of the product, service, or system?
- What outcomes do stakeholders expect?
- Which goals are explicitly stated, and which are implied?
- How is success currently defined and measured?

Gaps and Misalignment

- Which goals are not being met?
- Where is the gap between expected and actual outcomes?
- How long has this gap existed?
- Has the gap been growing, shrinking, or remaining stable?

Current State

- What is happening right now?

- What behaviors, processes, or system outputs indicate a problem?
- What workarounds are currently in place?
- What evidence supports that this is a problem (data, feedback, observations)?

People and Impact

- Who is affected by the problem directly?
- Who is affected indirectly?
- How does the problem impact users, customers, teams, or the organization?
- What emotional, cognitive, or physical strain does the problem create?

Context and Frequency

- When does the problem occur?
- Where does it occur (specific environments, platforms, touchpoints)?
- How often does it occur?
- Under what conditions does it become more or less severe?

Consequences

- What happens if the problem remains unsolved?
- What risks does the problem create?
- What costs are associated with the problem (time, money, effort, trust)?
- What opportunities are being missed because of the problem?

Requests and Constraints

- What improvement requests have been made?
- Which requests describe desired outcomes rather than specific solutions?
- What constraints must be respected (technical, legal, organizational, budget)?
- What assumptions are embedded in the requests?

Examining the origin of the problem

These questions help uncover how the problem was framed, by whom, and whether that framing is reliable.

Source of the Problem

- Where did the problem statement originate?
- Who initially identified or raised the issue?
  - A manager?
  - Senior leadership?

- A colleague or team?
- A client or customer?

- Was the problem formally documented or informally expressed?

Reasoning and Rationale

- Can the person who raised the problem clearly explain their reasoning?
- What evidence or experiences informed their perspective?
- Are the underlying assumptions stated or implicit?
- Are those assumptions still valid in the current context?

Perspective and Bias

- Has the problem been examined from multiple viewpoints?
- Whose perspectives are missing?
- What incentives or pressures may influence how the problem is framed?
- Is the problem framed from a user perspective, an operational perspective, or a business perspective?

Implications of Assumptions

- What happens if the assumptions are incorrect?
- What decisions are being made based on these assumptions?
- What risks emerge if the problem is misunderstood?
- How might reframing the problem change the direction of possible solutions?

Outcome of a Strong Problem Statement

After working through these trigger questions, you should be able to:

- Describe the problem clearly without proposing a solution
- Align stakeholders on what the problem is (and is not)
- Separate symptoms from root causes
- Identify uncertainty, assumptions, and knowledge gaps
- Create a stable foundation for exploration, design, or decision-making

A well-defined problem reduces rework, improves collaboration, and increases the likelihood that solutions address the real issue rather than surface-level symptoms.