

## Defining the Problem in Big Negotiations

Defining your problem is critically important for big, long-standing, or complicated negotiations. Put another way: if someone came to my office and I were to immediately ask about the solution to their problem, I'd be asking them to describe something they can't even see. Imagine that you are hiking up a mountain. The taller the mountain, the less you can see the top from where you stand at the base. You need to start at the bottom, working your way up step-by-step. With each rocky path you traverse, or stream you ford, you gain experience and confidence that helps you continue. And at some point, the summit becomes visible. You're able to picture what it looks like and how you will get there.

As we hike up a mountain, so too do we negotiate. By asking yourself what problem you want to solve, you are starting where you need to start—with the problem you're trying to solve—and generating information that will help you visualize and reach your goal, which is your solution.

Let's take an example. One big problem the United States faces is the chronic absence of some children from school. Chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days due to absence for any reason, can translate into third graders unable to master reading, sixth graders failing subjects, and ninth graders dropping out of high school. According to non-profit Attendance Works, which helps schools and community partners work together to reduce chronic absence, every year more than eight million students in the United States miss so many days of school that they become academically at risk in the ways described above.

Traditionally, people looking at the problem of chronic absence tended to focus only on what was called "truancy," or unexcused absence from school—meaning days when students did not have a parental note excusing them from class. This one-sided definition of the problem assumed inappropriate student or family behavior, and often led to a kneejerk, punitive solution: penalties for both students and parents in an effort to force better behavior. But the penalties didn't work.

When Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, sat down to define the problem, she didn't focus on unexcused absences and suspensions. Instead, she defined the problem as kids missing significant amounts of school for any reason. Indeed, in the early grades, she found that many at-risk students were accumulating excused absences, meaning that focusing on truancy wouldn't catch the problem.

With that problem definition guiding her, Hedy encourages schools to uncover the actual problems preventing kids from attending school by talking with kids and parents. These efforts have led to unexpected solutions.

Once they opened lines of communication with their students and families, principals at a number of schools found something unexpected: sometimes, kids skipped school not to avoid the work, or because their parents didn't prioritize learning, but because their clothes weren't clean.

Students who didn't have a way to clean their clothes would stay home rather than feel embarrassed in front of their peers. Armed with this discovery, a growing number of schools partnered with local businesses or foundations to provide clothes-washing services at school. One school reported that the percentage of students attending school 90 percent of the time jumped from 46 percent to 84 percent after combining the clothes washing program with check-ins from caring mentors. Broadly defining the problem of chronic absence helped Hedy, Attendance Works,

educators and community partners from around the country design one innovative, effective solution that benefited families and districts alike.

As this example shows, if you're dealing with a big or complicated negotiation, it's critical to define your problem. Knowing the problem you want to solve will give you a roadmap for the conversation you need to have.

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