



EPICENTRAL

A Newsletter from Epicenter Development Group highlighting ideas that improve organizations

Welcome to Epicenter Development Group's newsletter, EPICentral. The purpose of this newsletter is to highlight fundamental ideas that have helped organizations develop and maintain great manufacturing and service operations. We hope that you find our EPICentral newsletter helpful, and we would welcome your comments on its content.

IS/IS NOT Tables - The Overlooked Problem-Solving Tool

I was recently talking with a client about problem-solving tools. Based upon this discussion and others that I have had with clients in the past, it seems like most organizations are familiar with and understand the "main stream" problem-solving tools like the "Five Whys", Cause-and-Effect Diagrams, and Brainstorming. There is one powerful tool, however, that is often overlooked in the problem-solving tool kit. The tool is called "IS/IS NOT" or "5W 2H," and it is an important part of the general problem-solving process for defining the landscape and boundaries of an unknown problem.

Imagine that you have a quality problem that you are trying to solve. As part of your normal problem-solving process, you have generated a long list of possible root causes. Unfortunately, the list is large; and you don't have the time or resources to investigate them all. This is precisely where the IS/IS NOT tool comes in handy. The IS/IS NOT tool can be used to generate a detailed profile of the problem characteristics; and once a profile has been created, it is much easier to evaluate and eliminate potential problems from the list of alternatives.

Steps to create and use an IS/IS NOT table:

1. Form a problem-solving team. The IS/IS NOT tool will create a more robust profile if you have a team of people from different areas of your organization to ask and answer the questions.
2. Create a blank IS/IS NOT table on flip chart paper with the general categories and base questions (see the example table below). You may also want to create a standard listing of questions that are specific to your industry (service, retail, manufacturing, etc.).
3. Run through each of the base questions (one category at a time) and answer them to the best of your ability. You might find that you can't answer all of the questions and will need to do some research to find the answers.
4. Brainstorm on other potential questions that would be helpful to understand the nature of the problem. Answer these questions and add those to the table.

Question	Example IS Question	Example IS NOT Question	Example Answer
Who?	Who is affected by the problem?	Who is not affected by the problem?	Customer A has a problem with the product. Customers B and C do not have a problem even though they receive the same product.
What?	What products are involved in the problem?	What products could also be involved in the problem but are not?	Product 123 is rusting prior to customer assembly. Products 234 and 345 use the same process, but they are not rusting.
Why?	Why is this a problem? Is the process where the problem occurred stable?	Why is it not a problem?	The surface rust is a problem since it affects the salability of the final product.
Where?	Where was the problem observed?	Where could the problem be observed but is not?	Product 123 is rusting at the base. The main body and top of the product are not rusting. The only customer site that is experiencing this problem is in Georgia.
When?	When was the problem first noticed?	When could the problem have been noticed but was not?	The problem was first noticed in March. We've been sending product 123 to Customer A since November with no reported problems.
How Much/ Many?	Quantity of problem? How much is the problem causing in dollars, people, and time?	How many could have had the problem but weren't? How big could the problem be but is not?	An average of 20-30% of the total units sent to the customer were reported as defective due to rusting. All other units showed no traces of rust.
How Often?	What is the trend (continuous, random, cyclical)? Has the problem occurred previously?	What could the trend be but is not?	The problem has consistently occurred since March. The level of rejects rose to 40% during the first week of April and dropped to 5% during the second week of May.

Once the IS/IS NOT table is completed, it can be used as a profile to evaluate potential root causes. If a root cause does not fit the profile, then you have not sufficiently identified the REAL root cause. In addition, the table can offer insights into where to look for the root causes.

Final Thoughts: Sometimes the most important part of problem solving is asking the right questions. The IS/IS NOT tool challenges people to ask a number of questions about the problem before digging into the generation of possible causes. This, in turn, helps people to focus their investigation on potential causes and reduces the time and energy required to evaluate each root cause being considered.

Next Steps

If you would like more information on this topic or other similar types of tools, please contact Bill Proctor with your request at wproctor@epicentergroup.com or 216-702-0952. You can also find previous issues of EPICentral at [Newsletters](#).

Mr. Proctor also speaks on a variety of problem-solving and system design topics that can help companies significantly increase the success and profitability of their businesses. If you are interested in having Bill speak at one of your upcoming meetings/events or would like more information on any of the speaking topics, please visit [Speaker Services](#) or you can email sales@epicentergroup.com.

Epicenter Development Group is a unique consulting firm that seamlessly integrates the disciplines of Systems Engineering and Organizational Analysis & Development to create practical design solutions to your toughest challenges. It is on the cutting edge of problem-solving solutions and the creator of a unique process called GreenRoom Engineering. This process adds greater value and cost savings for clients as compared to traditional engineering methods.

William Proctor, Epicenter's founder and president, has provided services around the country to more than 100 companies consisting of a variety of organizations; and Epicenter continues to grow as a resource for firms of all sizes.

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