

# THE SYSTEM

Finding a solutions story,  
step by step

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**STEP 1: What problem am I covering?**

**STEP 2: What are small slices of the problem?**

**STEP 3: Look for who's doing better with a piece**

# STEP 1: What's the problem I'm covering?

Examples:

Pedestrian deaths

Flooding

Kids not learning to read

Obesity

Rents too high

Homelessness

## **STEP 2: What are small slices of the problem?**

**Every problem is made up of many smaller problems.**

**Which of those are important in your community?**



**SLICES**

# **What small slices of the problem matter most?**

**Too slow  
Too much bureaucracy  
Too little government oversight  
Inequitable access  
Racially unjust  
Little citizen participation  
Opposition from powerful  
interests  
Cultural insensitivity  
Harmful cultural practices  
High cost  
Skewed incentives  
Siloed information**

# What small slices of the problem matter most?

**BIG SLICE: Kids aren't  
learning!**

## **POSSIBLE SMALL SLICES:**

Schools too far from homes  
Bad curriculum  
Unequal resources hurt poor areas  
Large gaps between rich and poor  
Parents uninvolved  
Powerful groups oppose reform  
Parents unaware of kids'  
achievement  
Families need kids to work  
Teachers are often absent  
Poor teacher training  
Patriarchal customs  
Families can't afford schoolbooks

+ 100s more

**What  
adjective  
describes  
a key piece  
of the  
problem?**

**Expensive?** Look for a way that's cheaper.

**Slow?** Look for a way with less waiting time.

**Unfair?** Look for a way that's more equitable.

**Unavailable?** Look for accessibility.

**Kafkaesque?** Who's cut red tape?

**Top-down?** Who's involved citizens?

**Culturally insensitive?** Where are ethnic communities serving their own people?

**What groups  
of people are  
living with the  
problem?**

**Look for places that have  
succeeded with:**

**seniors  
immigrants  
Latino children  
people with disabilities  
diabetes patients  
smokers  
etc.**

## **STEP 3: Look for who's doing better with that piece**

**Use data**

**Ask experts with wide knowledge**

**Ask sources: “who is doing a better job?”**

# What does “better” mean?

Who's **doing it well**  
compared to others with the  
same resources?

Who's made newsworthy  
**improvement**?

# 2 ways to find “better”

1. Start with the  
**RESPONSE:**  
Who's got an  
interesting one?

I heard about an interesting  
response in a

hospital

school

neighborhood

business

city government office

# 2 ways to find “better”

**2. Start with the  
PROBLEM:  
Which place is  
seeing better  
results with the  
same resources?**

Using data or interviews, I found a  
positive deviant:

the city with the lowest child  
asthma rates  
the school with the smallest  
achievement gap between wealthy  
and poorer students  
the hospital with the lowest  
infection rate  
the coastal city most protected  
from flooding  
etc.

## **Method 1. Start with a solution:**

**city provides free asthma screening and inhalers**

**a school provides after-school tutoring to low-income kids**

**a hospital adopts checklists for infection control**

**a coastal city builds swales and rain gardens**

## **Method 2. Start with the problem and find a positive deviant:**

**the major city with the lowest child asthma rates**

**the local school with the smallest achievement gap between wealthy and poorer students**

**the local hospital with the lowest infection rate**

**the coastal city most protected from flooding**

