Solving Local Problems

The Challenge

Boy have we got a challenge! The General Plan says:

"Our central hypothesis is that the right tools will allow activism to solve the unsolved problems. But we have no proof this is true. *We thus need to find one or more small local problems, apply the tools, and see if we can solve the problem.* This would be done by applying the System Improvement Process (SIP), which incorporates all the tools. Experimental results would allow us to accept, reject, or modify the hypothesis. The last would mean improving the tools.

"**Local** means the problem must have what we suspect are *local root causes*, so that the root causes can be resolved by our efforts and those we work with. Otherwise we don't have the time and resources to solve it."

Characteristics of a Good Local Problem

We don't know for sure what these are until we've worked on a few problems. But based on Jay Forrester's work in solving business and public problems, we can start with this list of characteristics:

1. **The problem must be clearly defined**. For example, "increase self-esteem in a town's teenagers from an average of 40% to 80% as measured by a certain test by December 31, 2017" is a clearly defined problem. In contrast, "increase self-esteem in a town's teenagers" is not clearly defined. The principle we're following here is the business rule: "You can't manage what you can't measure." This is the Problem Definition step of SIP.

2. **The problem should have a clear local closed boundary.** For example, a county school system has such a boundary, but the education system does not.

3. **Key decisions must be made inside the boundary.** Otherwise the root causes probably lie outside the boundary, and thus outside of our control.

4. **Significant changes can be made to the problem system by the problem solvers.** The problem is in our control, so we have the ability to implement solutions. For example, if the problem involves a high school and we are working closely with that school's administration and its Parent Teacher's Association, then we probably have the support to implement solutions. Without that support it would probably be impossible to implement anything by trivial solutions.

5. **We have easy access to knowledge on how the problem behaves.** This knowledge comes from talking to people in the system. This allows us to analyze the problem and build a model of its behavior.

6. **The problem must be locally systemic**. Recall that **systemic** means "originating from the structure of the system in such a manner as to affect the behavior of most or all social agents of certain types, as opposed to originating from individual agents." If it's state or nationally systemic, then we probably don't have the resources to implement the solutions. If it's not systemic, then we have dysfunctional organizations and people. Fixing that sort of behavior falls into organizational and clinical psychiatry. It's a micro problem, not a macro problem, which is what systemic applies to.

7. **The lead analyst, Jack, must gain a sense that the root causes are probably local.** Even though one never knows what a difficult problem's root causes are before analysis, one can through experience develop a feel for whether the root causes are likely to be local or systemic to the point of being outside the problem's boundary as defined. This feel is useful but not infallible.

   Much of this feel relates to whether a problem appears to be a symptom of the Broken Political System Problem. If so, then the problem is probably not within our ability to resolve the root causes, though it might be if the political unit has low change resistance to resolving the root causes of the Broken Political System Problem. For example, a highly progressive state like California or a county like DeKalb County, Ga might have low change resistance. These are known as "pockets of low change resistance."

Analysis of Local Problems

Once we've found a problem that satisfied these characteristics, analysis begins. Here we simply apply SIP. The key to a good analysis is good data. This data comes from objective inspection of the problem system. *Why does the present system behave the way it does?* Answering this question requires talking to people in the system to determine:

- What they see as the problem
- The history of the problem in general
- The history of past solutions and their outcomes
- What different people think the causes might be
- Why people in the system make the decisions they do
- Additional things as driven by applying SIP

As we go we fill in the blanks in the SIP matrix and build social force diagrams, causal flow diagrams, and feedback loop simulation models as necessary. SIP drives construction of a model of problem behavior that is designed to clearly include the problem's intermediate causes and root causes.

This will take a while. To ensure success we need to just take our time and do a top-quality job of following the process. If we encounter difficulty for long, that doesn't show we activists have a weakness of some type. *It shows the process is weak.* Stop, improve the process, and then continue. With continuous process improvement, the right process will lead to the right results.