**Is-Is Not Matrix**

**Purpose**

The Is-Is Not Matrix is useful when there is a problem but the causes are not readily apparent. The tool is a means to narrow down the areas of potential cause. It is particularly useful if a work team or program knows that there is a problem, it can be named, but everyone feels fairly unclear about where to start in terms of finding causes.

**How it Works, What it Means**

The Is-Is Not is a systematic reflection on the scope of a problem. This reflection occurs through answering a series of questions about the problem in relation to what is “is” and what it “is not.” The questions cover time, place, scope and involvement. At the end of the exercise, a team should be able to narrow down the parts of processes, departments, staff areas, or locations in which to undertake more in-depth analysis to find and address the cause of the problem.

**An Example**

Let’s say in a given district there is a sharp disenrollment of families from early childhood programs. The district has four different pre-kindergarten program sites with a variety of programs co-located at those sites. In spite of increases in pre-kindergarten policies to expand access and funding to pay for slots, enrollment has been doing down in the district. Everyone involved is baffled. The early education team for the district convenes to develop and accurate problem statement and complete an Is-Is Not Matrix. The problem statement they develop states:

***Enrollment is decreasing in district early education programs.***

Next, they develop questions that will reflect their specific needs based on the guiding questions typically used for Is-Is Not Matrices:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions | District Questions |
| **What** occurs?  **What** objects are affected? | What is happening?  What programs, families, or children are affected? |
| **Where** does the problem occur?  Geographic  Physical  On an object | In what communities is it occurring? |
| **Extent of the problem**:  How many problems?  How many objects have problems?  How serious is the problem? | How much is it happening?  What will happen if it continues? |
| **Who** is involved?  To whom, by whom, near whom does it occur? | Which district staff are affected?  Who is involved? |

The team then creates the Matrix using their questions and the Is, Is-Not, and Distinction categories. After spending a staff meeting walking through all of the questions and addressing them on the Matrix, they have the following result:

Problem statement: ***Enrollment is decreasing in district early education programs.***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District Questions | **Is** | **Is Not** | Distinctions |
| What is happening?  What programs, families, or children are affected? | *Enrollment decreasing*  *Most losses between December and February*  *Early education programs* | *School-based Head Start programs* | *Not being observed in the Head Start programs on site in certain district locations.* |
| In what communities is it occurring? | *In schools 1, 3, and 4* | *In school 2* | *Not in school 2* |
| How much is it happening?  What will happen if it continues? | *In school 1, since 2013; school 2 since 2014; and school 4, since last year (2015)*  *Will have to close a program and consolidate* | *Historical (i.e. a recent phenomenon)* | *Has been happening longest in program 1 and most recently in program 4.* |
| Which district staff are affected?  Who is involved? | *All early education staff*  *Admin staff learn of disenrollments first – parents call district office* | *K-6 or elementary schools* | *Admin staff may know more based on what parents tell them when they call (?)* |

Once the district team identifies the distinctions, or the ways in which the Is and Is-Not items differ, they begin to speculate about what these distinctions suggest. The notice immediately that there may be something happening that is related location in the district. When they consider who is involved in the disenrollment of children from programs, they realize that the district administrative staff who take the calls may know more.

Each staff member agrees to investigate one piece of this matrix based on the distinctions noted. When the group reconvenes they learn the following:

1. When administrative staff were asked whether parents made any comments when they disenrolled their children staff said that on occasion parents would say that they had problems getting their children to programs. However, transportation has always been a challenge in the district early education programs – this is not new.
2. However, public bus service has been cut back since about 2012. The first routes to be reduced were near the transportation area for school 1.
3. In 2014 a major highway near program 2 closed for a three-year construction project that has affected businesses in this community adversely. Residents in this part of the district have a much harder time getting around.
4. Bus routes near school 4 were reduced as part of the ongoing public bus service cut-backs, which have been very gradual over time (and almost not noticeable to most residents).
5. The reason enrollment is not being affected in sites where there is a Head Start present (such as school 2 and the other two district Head Start sites) is because Head Start has maintained its bus services.
6. District staff make a few informal phone calls to former families with children enrolled and they learn that most have left because of transporation problems. Many are now using friend, family, or neighbor care.

With this information the early education team can now target their efforts towards locating transporation options for the district’s families.

**Remember**

* The problem statement has to be very precise.
* The problem statement needs to address only one problem (not multiple problems).
* The more detail in which the Is and Is-Not statements are described, the greater the likelihood that a cause will be easy to see.
* Teams can consider including examples of real-life occurrences of the problem in the matrix.
* To complete the Is-Not column, teams need to think through where the problem could be occurring but is not occurring. This is often a clue to the cause of the problem.
* Teams should customize the matrix to assist them in digging deeper into the problem and ensure that the right questions are being asked.
* Avoid blame. For instance, in the area of the matrix for *Who is involved?* Notice that it is not *Whose fault is it?*

Sources: Tague, N. R. (2005). The quality toolbox. 2nd Ed. American Society for Quality. Milwaukee, WI: Quality Press.