

Community Problems and Root Causes Facilitation Guide

Introduce the Exercise

- This exercise helps service providers and other stakeholders develop a shared analysis and a collective vision by connecting the work of their agency to both community problems and systemic issues.
- In the first part of this exercise, we will be using the organization's mission statement as the basis for a discussion about the root causes of community problems.
- The second part of this exercise will explore the extent to which the organization's activities address community problems and the extent to which they address the root causes of these problems.

Exercise: Part I

- Explain that the goal of this part of the exercise is to explore the root causes of the community problems that the organization seeks to address.
- Make sure that everyone understands what the term "root cause" means. Ask for volunteers in the group to offer a definition or, if all participants are unfamiliar with the concept, refer to the [definition offered below](#).
- Hand out copies of your organization's mission or display on a large piece of flipchart paper or a whiteboard.
- Beneath the agency mission, write the following questions:
 - What **community problems** does our agency's mission seek to address?
 - What are some of the **root causes** of these problems?
- Give the group 20-30 minutes to discuss these questions. (If you have a large group, you may want to have participants first discuss these questions in smaller groups of three or four for 15-20 minutes before bringing them back together to share out as a large group.)
- List the responses on a flipchart or whiteboard.
- After the group has developed the list of problems addressed by your mission and their root causes, ask the group, "What keeps these problems from being solved in a meaningful and permanent way?" and "What other factors cause these problems to persist?"
- Record these responses as well.

Exercise: Part II

- Explain that this part of the exercise will explore how the organization's activities impact community problems and the root causes of these problems.
- Hand out copies of your organization's program summary or strategic plan (if one is available) as part of this exercise.

- Use these as an outline for detailing the agency's day-to-day activities in carrying out its mission. Record on flipchart or whiteboard.
- List the following questions on the board for the group to discuss:
 - To what degree do they address the **consequences** of community problems?
 - To what degree do these activities address the **root causes** of the problem?
- Give the group 20-30 minutes to discuss these questions. (If you have a large group, you may want to have participants first discuss these questions in smaller groups of three or four for 15-20 minutes before bringing them back together to share out as a large group.)
- List the responses on a flipchart or whiteboard.
- The facilitator should emphasize the importance of the agency's work, whether it addresses root causes or consequences (or both); staff and other stakeholders must not be left with the impression that their work is unimportant. Rather, this exercise is meant to get participants thinking about the ways the organization contributes to addressing the root causes of problems along with responding to the consequences of these problems.
- The exercise also helps participants assess where their work is having an impact. Not everyone may agree, but by deepening their understanding of the root causes of the problems that confront them, they will broaden their perspective on what the solutions might look like for their community. A critical awareness can prompt participants to acknowledge and speak about the conditions and systems in their community/society that keep people from reaching their fullest potential. This in turn can inform participants' assessment of the impact of their work and the work of the agency as a whole. In this conversation, participants are encouraged to ask themselves and each other, "Is it enough to work only on the consequences?"

Root Cause: Definition and Example

DEFINITION: What are "root causes?"

Root causes are the basic reasons behind the problem or issue you are seeing in the community. Trying to figure out why the problem has developed is an essential part of the "problem solving process" in order to guarantee the right responses and also to help citizens "own" the problems.¹

EXAMPLE:

Problem: Youth of color in urban areas have a high drop-out rate.

INDIVIDUAL/BEHAVIORAL CAUSE:

Youth make bad choices.

ROOT CAUSE(S):

¹ The Community Toolbox, http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1128.htm

One root cause is that in economically disfranchised communities, schools are under-resourced, lacking in experienced and qualified staff, and/or are in physical disrepair.

WHAT FACTORS CAUSE THE ROOT CAUSE TO PERSIST?

One factor is the lack of political power among poor and other marginalized communities to secure equitable funding, resources, and accountability within the school systems that serve their children.