

# Separate and Clarify

## Introduction

Sometimes the concerns on your list will be very specific and you'll be able to resolve each one with one easily identifiable action. For example, if you're asked to recommend a packaging supplier, you know that Decision Analysis can resolve this concern. If this concern has high priority, you'll start the analysis immediately.

However, concerns like this are the exception. Usually, when you first recognize a concern, you know very few facts about it, or the facts you have are so jumbled together that it's impossible to identify the best way to resolve it. Your initial concerns may give rise to additional concerns on which you need to take action. Before you can begin to plan the resolution of most of your concerns, you'll have to separate and clarify them. This may require you to break them down into specific elements, or rewrite them until they are clear and specific, before you can define the action you need to take to resolve them.

## Why Should You Separate and Clarify?

"How do you eat an elephant?" This often-asked question and its equally familiar answer, "one bite at a time," symbolize the importance of separating and clarifying concerns.

In separating and clarifying concerns, you take a broad, general concern and break it down into specific elements. For example, if you're told to solve the "scrap problem," you would encounter difficulty naming an action that would deal effectively with the broad concern. However, if you break it down into its component pieces, you're in a much better position to address them effectively. The scrap problem might be separated into the following elements:

- There is a 20% reject rate on Press 1 and Press 2.
- We need to find someone to update the inventory records.
- The rejects piling up in the press room are causing safety concerns.
- We're having to pay a high level of overtime to keep up with demand caused by scrap.
- The production accounting is all "messed up."

Some of the elements of the scrap problem are very specific. Other elements require you to gather more information to clarify them. When you look at the list of concerns associated with the scrap problem, you see that different types of actions will be required to address each separate concern. You may use Problem Analysis for the 20% reject rate on Press 1 and Press 2, if the rejects from Presses 1 and 2 are identical and you don't know what is causing the higher rate. If the rejects are not identical, then you may need to do two Problem Analyses. You may use Decision Analysis to find someone to update the inventory records. You may use Potential Problem Analysis to take care of the safety concerns from the rejects in the press room. A concern such as "Production accounting is all 'messed up'" may need to be separated and clarified further. The concern about the high level of overtime pay may not require any process for resolution. Each of these actions requires a different thought process and, ultimately, a different approach.

Another reason to separate and clarify is that while you're breaking apart a concern you're gathering information that is relevant for resolving the concern. This allows you to better describe the concern and set priority on resolving it. It also helps people gain a common understanding of the concern. Once you have a good, clear list of concerns, you may be able to deal with some of them with one quick, effective action. Yet, until you know what the various concerns are, you cannot even begin to consider the types of actions you might take.

Separation and clarification of concerns is a major step in Situation Appraisal. However, the need to separate and clarify may appear throughout the other processes, particularly when developing Decision Statements, or Action Statements. Separation and clarification is also very helpful when listing objectives for a decision, and when identifying potential problems and potential opportunities.

## How to Separate and Clarify

Take the broad, general concern and separate it by breaking it down into several specific, actionable concerns. Or if the broad, general concern is unclear, clarify the concern by rewriting it until you know exactly how to resolve it. Each separated or clarified concern will need either an action or an analysis to resolve it. You can separate and clarify concerns by asking the following questions:

- What do you mean by...?
- What specific thing about... concerns you?
- How do you know...?
- What exactly is...?
- What else concerns you about...?
- What evidence do you have that...?
- What different defects or deviations are involved in this situation?
- What different plans need to be implemented?
- What specific opportunities exist with...?
- What else is actually happening? Who else...? Where else...? When else...?
- What do you see, hear, feel, taste, or smell that lets you know you must take action?
- What should the situation be after you take action?
- What outcome or result do you desire?
- What different actions are needed to resolve this concern?
- How should you break apart the concerns?

## When to Stop Separating and Clarifying?

Deciding when to stop separating and clarifying is a sticky question, and there's no standard answer. As a general rule, you should always be alert to the need to separate and clarify-if there's any doubt that one action can resolve your concern, then separate and clarify some more. Ask yourself, "Why do I believe that one action will resolve this concern?" If the current facts do not indicate that one action will work, then do more probing to separate and clarify the concern further.

You have separated and clarified enough when each concern can be clearly stated as either a problem to solve, a choice to make, an action to protect, or an action to take. The purpose is not so much to be exhaustive as to be clear about the concerns requiring actions in the near future.

Also be careful of moving into a detailed analysis of the concern. Situation Appraisal is by definition an appraisal, not an analysis. You'll be analyzing the concerns once you've set their relative priority.

There may be times when a complete separation and clarification is not necessary or even desirable. Not only should you be able to identify a concern, you should also recognize when it should be delegated to someone else for further separation and resolution. For example, a plant manager may recognize that costs have risen tremendously on both Product X and Product Y, but no one seems to know why. Before a Problem Analysis can be conducted, you'll need to know which costs are out of line. It makes sense for the production manager to continue separating the issue by breaking the problem down into labor and materials costs and then deciding which has the highest priority. If materials cost is crucial, ask which materials costs are too high. Problem Analyses may be done on some or all of the separated materials cost deviations, and a report or recommendation made to the plant manager.

Thinking about what action is required to resolve a concern may help you to separate and clarify the concern. Can your concern be resolved with an interim action, adaptive action, or corrective action? If you chose interim or adaptive action and you know what that action is, you'll not need to separate and clarify further. But if you chose corrective action, you'll need to do a Problem Analysis to find the root cause of the problem so it can be corrected permanently. This means that the concern should be separated and clarified until you have a cause-unknown Problem Statement. For example, you have a leaky faucet. You can choose to place a bucket under the leak as interim action. Or you can choose to shut the valve to adapt to the problem. Or you can choose to find the cause of the leak and correct it permanently.

Sometimes even when you have a concern that is stated clearly and specifically and you're sure you can resolve it with one action, carrying out that one action may not be sufficient to ensure success. Look for additional concerns after you have identified what action you'll take to resolve your initial concern. For each problem you'll be analyzing, ask:

- Do I also need to take interim actions to control the effects of this problem or buy time?
- Will a decision need to be made on corrective action or adaptive action once cause is known?
- If the answer to the second question is "yes," will a plan have to be made to carry out that action?

For example, you can select the best of four candidates for a given position, but if you do not plan your choice's entry into the job you may end up with a disgruntled employee and a reputation for poor judgment in selecting personnel. Besides your original concern-selecting the candidate-you should add to your list another concern: introducing and orienting the selected candidate to the organization and the position.

For each decision you'll be analyzing, ask:

- Do I also need to do a Potential Problem Analysis to ensure the successful implementation of my decision?
- Do I also need to do a Potential Opportunity Analysis to maximize the unexpected, additional benefits that may come from the implementation of my decision?

When an unexpected event occurs that requires you to respond immediately, you may identify an initial list of concerns and separate and clarify them, but then opt to take only the action that will contain the immediate situation. However, after the crisis has been averted you may need to revisit your Situation Appraisal to deal with the concerns you decided to put on hold. For example, a valued employee resigns suddenly. Your immediate actions may be to reassign his or her work, and/or find a temporary replacement. After having done this, you may start to plan for a permanent replacement.

It's also possible, while resolving one concern, that you'll recognize the need for action in a related area. For example, in the course of a Decision Analysis, you had a lot of difficulty finding information on the existing alternatives, you might list your data-gathering system as an area that requires some action. To be certain you won't lose these opportunities for action, it's a good idea to make a habit of asking, at the end of every analysis you do, "Do I now need to take action in any other areas?"

## **Barriers to Separating and Clarifying**

There are some common difficulties you may face in your attempts to separate and clarify complex concerns: overgeneralization of issues; confusion over the facts; domination of emotion over rational thought; and intimidation over the size of the problem.

### ***Overgeneralization of issues***

Information overload is a fact of life. To handle all the information you receive, you may tend to categorize each situation in general terms. These general terms, while easily recognized by everyone, rarely mean the same thing to different people. Overgeneralizing often confounds real problem solving and decision making by obscuring the specifics needed for effective action. It also tends to make concerns seem more intimidating than they actually are. You can spot situations that are being overgeneralized when you hear broad code words such as "communications problem," "parts problem," "organization problem," or "morale problem." To get more specific, use the following steps:

- Ask, "What do you mean by...?" to start breaking apart a code word.
- Follow up with additional questions such as, "What else do you mean by...?" or "Where else or when else..." to further separate and clarify a generalized concern.
- Ask, "What tells you that action is required?" The evidence you collect will help you identify specific threats, opportunities, deviations, or choices.
- Make the concerns visible by listing them on an easel, whiteboard or projecting them on a screen for everyone to see.
- Examine every component of a process map or activity flow as a springboard for investigating concerns. For example, asking, "What concerns do you have about the order processing system?" invites generalizations. Asking about each activity in the order processing system will give you more specific information.

### ***Confusion over the facts***

People are prone to forgetfulness, and to seeing and hearing things selectively. This can lead to differing perceptions about the same situation. You can spot this confusion when people argue about the facts when discussing the same situation. To clear up this confusion, follow these steps:

- Ask, “What evidence do you have?” to ascertain the facts.
- Clarify the facts with such questions as “What tells you... ?” and “What do you see, hear, smell, taste, feel... ?”
- Differentiate between what should be happening and what is actually happening.
- Go to the person closest to the situation for information. This is often the best way to resolve information disputes.

### ***Domination of emotion over rational thought***

Feelings can influence the way data is interpreted. When people are angry, upset, or fearful, reasoning is short-circuited. You can spot this when behavior becomes irrational, voices are raised, faces are flushed, or people become withdrawn and uncooperative. While you might want to wish these strong feelings away, you need to deal with them, however uncomfortable you may feel.

### ***Intimidation over the size of the problem***

A problem of overwhelming size can lead directly to inaction: the issues you’re concerned with appear too big to be handled by anybody; other people have tried and failed; no immediately apparent action can be taken. In cases like these, giving up and walking away is a natural temptation. You can spot this barrier when the topic is introduced and people say, “Oh no, here we go again,” or respond with deathly silence, which signals the reluctance to take any action. It may help to use Situation Appraisal to put the issue in perspective. If, after listing concerns and doing some separation, you feel the concern is still too big to handle, several techniques can help you to move on:

- Acknowledge that the mess is large and no easy answer is possible. But note that progress can be made by pruning the concern down to high-priority action items.
- Quickly review the list to see which concerns require action. Often feelings or general statements that don’t require action are on the list. Try to begin your concerns with action words such as “correct...,” “improve...,” or “develop...,” to separate actions from feelings.
- Screen the list to identify those issues that require action within the team’s area of responsibility. Occasionally, items will be identified that need to be passed on to someone else for action.
- Then set priority on the remaining items, determine what analysis and how much analysis is required, and develop a plan with action items, responsibilities, and reasonable milestones.

These five barriers can crop up with many of the concerns you seek to separate and clarify. Sometimes a few precise questions and the prominent display of the information gathered will be enough. Other times, persistent use of the techniques listed above will be necessary.

### ***Summary***

If you are conducting a Situation Appraisal you’ll uncover concerns that need additional clarification. These concerns may contain language that is confusing or too general, or may be they represent more than one concern each. Whatever the case, you can separate and clarify each concern by breaking it down into workable pieces that make sense. Asking questions such as “What do you mean by... ?” “What different plans need to be implemented?” and “What different action are needed to... ?” will probe the concern below the surface, and help overcome some barriers that threaten to derail your Situation Appraisal. The end result will be concerns that you can address with an analysis or with a single action.