How to frame a design challenge

Innovation projects start with a good, meaty challenge. Before we get into the process of solving, we need to first figure out what exactly it is that we are trying to solve, and whether or not the intended scope we have for our solution makes sense.

A problem statement can be written in many forms, but we find it to be most helpful to write our challenge statements to meet a few, simple criteria, in order to make them effective starting points for our innovation process.

Step 1: Write out the problem you're trying to solve.

1. *My team operates in silos.*
2. *Employees do not volunteer enough.*

Step 2: Write it as a "How might we…" statement.

Phrasing your challenge in this way might seem gimmicky, but it actually can trick your brain into thinking that there is a solution that can fit the problem.

1. *How might we help our team to break down silos?*
2. *How might we encourage employees to do more volunteering?*

Step 3: Include who you're designing for. Who are your intended users?

1. *How might we help our team to break down silos?*
2. *How might we encourage employees to do more volunteering?*

Step 4: Don't include a solution in your statement.

If you already know how to solve your problem, then you're really just working on an execution challenge, which isn't necessarily an innovation challenge.

For example, *"How might we create a newsletter to more effectively communicate across our teams?"* implies that the answer is execution. Just create the newsletter.

Step 5: Is your statement generative and inspiring?

How might we help our team to break down silos?
- *Why do you want to break down silos?*
    - To better understand what each other is working on
- *Why do you want to better understand what each other is working on?*
    - To avoid duplication and better share knowledge

Resulting "How might we…" options:
- How might we avoid duplication and better share knowledge on the team?
- How might we encourage our team to build stronger communication practices?
- How might we increase collaboration across the team?

Step 6: Refine your challenge. Is this truly what you're looking to solve?

How might we encourage employees to do more volunteering?
- *There are lots of kinds of volunteering. Is there a specific kind we need more of?*
    - Long-term, skills-based
- *Why are you looking specifically for long-term, skills-based?*
    - To avoid high ramp-up cost of volunteers and ensure employees can see impact of their work

Resulting "How might we…": How might we encourage employees to do more long-term, skills-based volunteering?

Final "How Might We" statements you could design for:
1. Original: *My team operates in silos.*
   Final Options:
    a. How might we avoid duplication and better share knowledge on the team?
    b. How might we encourage our team to build stronger communication practices?
    c. How might we increase collaboration across the team?
2. Original: *Employees do not volunteer enough.*
   Final Option: How might we encourage employees to do more long-term, skills-based volunteering?

Test your knowledge!

Here are a few more examples of "How Might We" statements. Can you identify which of the following 3 makes the best challenge statement?

Imagine that we were tasked with redesigning the ice cream eating experience. How might we phrase our challenge?

- *How might we create a cone to eat ice cream without dripping?* What do you think of this challenge?
- *How might we redesign dessert for everyone?*
- *How might we redesign ice cream to be more portable for small children?*

Answer: The first statement involves a solution and does not include a user group. The second statement is too broad for a structured brainstorm. The third statements strikes the right balance - open to multiple solutions while focused on an identified challenge for a specific user group.

Other Examples

- How might we increase mobile adoption by elderly Americans?
- How might we encourage recycling in elementary schools?
- How might we redesign the way high school students learn about higher education?
- How might we incentivize Google Maps users to contribute feedback?
- How might we improve the refugee camp experience?