

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Identify different tools to help with problem solving
2. Describe common issues in communication and projects
3. Understand the difference between identifying and diagnosing an issue

How to Identify and Diagnose Issues Tip Sheet

Knowing there is a problem or issue is one thing, but being able to correctly identify the source of the issue and how to fix it is another. Below are some common situations you might encounter that arise within a team and can stifle progress. Review items below to see what you can do to identify and diagnose potential issues in a timely manner.



To visit each Issue in more depth, see the next few pages.

Accountability

Everyone has their part of the project that they are responsible for, even if they're not directly on the study or working directly with participants.

Common signals that may indicate jobs are not clearly defined, are phrases like

- "I don't know who's doing that"
- "I didn't think that was my responsibility"
- "I thought someone else was taking care of that"

If you are getting the impression that roles are unclear or people don't know what falls within their scope of work, consider asking some questions to get started on finding a solution:

- How can you provide clear roles/responsibilities/expectations? *Refer to roles and responsibilities check list*
- Was a team members assignment/job/task not completed?
 - Would it be helpful to create regular status check in's?
 - Should the team get together to re-evaluate the roles and responsibilities and what that means?
 - Are there new tasks or jobs that have come up that need assignment?

As soon as you recognize there may be confusion about responsibilities, take action to set up appropriate meetings or write up standard operating procedures to address what has been identified.

Accountability Changes

Suddenly changing expectations/responsibilities of one person (or more) in the project happens all the time. This could mean being encouraged to take on something unexpected or asking someone to shift tracks and take on something new that was not part of their original understanding of the role.

This can be confusing for team members and will likely require further discussion.

Common signals that may indicate scope of work may have changed, are phrases like:

- "That doesn't seem like it is part of my job description"
- "That feels above/below my pay grade"

If you're getting the impression that team members feel their scope of work has changed, consider:

- Identifying any changes – Use the roles and responsibilities checklist to evaluate if anything is different than what was originally discussed.
- Reacting to the change – If you feel the scope of your work has changed or new and unexpected demands are being put on you, try to find a way to explain that the shift in expectations are negatively impacting you and the overall goal of the project
- Anticipating work - If you know a change is coming but has not happened yet, you can use the roles and responsibilities checklist to re-evaluate role definitions ahead of the change. This will also help manage expectations and ensure you have buy in from the implementation team.

- Look to leadership – Typically there is a person in a position of authority that was included in the conversation where the original job scope was agreed upon. If you don't already know who that person is, find out, and go to them for help. Together you can review why the change was made and discuss the best ways to support the change.
 - Don't be afraid to lean on your leadership, they often are aware of additional resources or information that might be able to help. For example, if the job scope has changed, does the budget need to change as well? Talk to your leadership to understand how to best meet everyone's needs – especially your own.

Schedule Changes

If there is an unexpected change in the schedule of a project, it can have a domino effect on other work.

Common signals that may indicate schedule changes may be impacting the work, are phrases like:

- "We're not going to meet this deadline"
- "I need this urgent deliverable before the end of the day"

If the work starts to extend, or "creep", beyond what was originally intended, it's beneficial to pause and reflect:

- Who is in charge of ensuring the project meets new expectations so that the changes do not affect the overall timeline (if possible)?
- Did an issue arise? What was the impact on the timeline?
- What is the impact on the project?
- Have there been a lot of issues with meeting deadlines?
- Who can you talk with to brainstorm some options?

It can be helpful to track issues in a log to better understand if there are patterns or system level challenges. Refer to the issue log for a tracking template you can modify and make your own.

Disconnected Communication

Disconnected communication can mean a variety of things. This can be seen as one way communication, confusing communication, or unwanted communication. These types of communication mean that the team is disconnected or not communicating to the best of their ability.

Common signals that may indicate disconnected communication, are phrases like:

- "No one is responding to my emails"
- "This deliverable was different than what I expected"
- "Most of what that person said didn't even relate to what we were talking about"

If you're getting the impression that communication is disconnected, consider using the below questions to guide a conversation to productive answers:

- Is the communication one way?
 - Are the ideas collaborative in nature?
 - Are team members asked to provide feedback?
 - Is the team responding in a timely manner?
- Is the communication kind and clear?
 - Are people speaking positively toward one another?
 - Are people providing constructive feedback about the issue?
 - Does everyone understand what is being asked?
- Is there psychological safety to speak up?
 - Are peoples' feelings validated when they come forward with an issue?
 - Versus being told they're overreacting or imagining things
 - Are individuals responding or reacting to the ideas of others with respect and dignity?
- Is the language being used respectful?
 - Are people using "I" statements?
 - Asking questions like "I understood the assignment to be XYZ, what did you understand it to be?" can be effective.
 - Are leaders and the team keeping communication open?
 - Delegating is important but *how* the delegation is done, matters as well. Highly directive communication like "You should have done this yesterday" or "You have to do this immediately" risks disconnecting from others.
 - By not inviting a conversation, the leader can miss valuable information like competing priorities, causing multiple jobs or tasks to suffer. In those situations, people often feel like they are being communicated *at* rather than *with*. That can make them feel defensive and shut down altogether.

Getting Personal

When a problem comes up, it's natural to blame someone for causing it. However, that's usually a good example of identifying a problem but not diagnosing it correctly.

Common signals that may indicate personalizing an issue, are phrases like:

- "That person is lazy and doesn't want to do the work"
- "That person obviously doesn't care"

Focusing on *people challenges* rather than on *project challenges* is often distracting as a way of placing blame when, more likely, a solution needs to be found.

If you're getting the impression that people are getting personal and missing the real issue, consider:

- Describing the issue alone, separating it from those that may be responsible
- Was the issue avoidable?
- Focus on creating possible solutions for both the short and long term
- Remember that people are humans, they make mistakes. Most people want to do well and make things better. If something is going wrong, it's likely there may be more going on than you might realize. Take time to investigate.

Identify and Diagnose Issues Resources

- 12 methods to identify and fix communication problems
 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2020/02/13/12-methods-to-identify-and-fix-communication-problems-within-a-team/?sh=119aa6ed7dbc>
- Communication Problems
 - <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/communication-problems>
- Spot Communication Issues
 - <https://blog.planview.com/spot-communication-issues-team/>
- Signs of Poor Communication
 - <https://www.tenthousandcoffees.com/blog/signs-of-poor-communication>
- Workplace Communication Problems
 - <https://bloomfire.com/blog/workplace-communication-problems/>
- 6 Signs of Poor Communication Skills and How to Improve them
 - <https://kandidataasia.com/6-signs-of-poor-communication-skills-and-how-to-improve-them/>
- Graphic: Communication
 - <https://infographicworld.com/visual-communication-internal/>