



Simply Wright

Are We Solving the Right Problem?

A practical guide to looking beyond the presenting issue

A team may be struggling. Communication may be poor. Trust may be low. Decisions may be slow.

These things matter – but they are not necessarily the diagnosis.

The issue

Organisations are often under pressure to act quickly when something isn't working.

A problem becomes visible and attention naturally turns to the solution.

Poor communication? Improve communication. Low trust? Work on relationships. A struggling team?

Develop the team.

But what we can see is not always what is creating the problem.

Unclear decisions can look like poor leadership. Competing priorities can look like poor collaboration. Repeated change can contribute to low trust.

Better diagnosis creates a pause between what we observe and what we decide to do.

Systems thinking reminds us that behaviour does not happen in isolation.

What people do is shaped by the structures, relationships, processes and conditions around them.

Organisational diagnosis helps us look beyond the presenting issue and consider different explanations for what we are seeing, rather than moving directly from problem to solution.

Together, these ideas encourage us to treat what we observe as a starting point for enquiry, not automatically as the cause.

The aim is not endless analysis, but enough understanding to make a better-informed decision.

Key Question

Before asking “**What should we do about this?**”, ask:

What do we think is creating this – and what else could explain it?



From Presenting Issue to Possible Explanation

The same presenting problem can have very different causes.

What we might see or hear	One possible explanation	What else might be happening?
“Communication is poor”	People need to communicate more effectively	Decisions are unclear, messages conflict or information gets stuck
“Trust is low”	Relationships need repairing	Commitments have been broken, decisions feel inconsistent or change has been poorly handled
“Leaders aren’t working together”	The leadership team needs development	Accountabilities overlap, priorities compete or decision rights are unclear
“People don’t speak up”	People lack confidence	Challenge has been ignored; hierarchy is strong or speaking up feels risky
“Teams don’t collaborate”	Relationships need improving	Goals compete, resources are scarce or measures encourage silo working
“People resist change”	People need help adapting	The purpose is unclear, workload is high or previous change has failed
“Performance is poor”	Capability or accountability needs improving	Workload, systems, resources, priorities or role clarity may be getting in the way

The presenting issue tells us where to look. It doesn’t always tell us why.

The 5 Diagnostic Questions

A simple pause before moving from problem to intervention



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When something isn't working, it is easy to move quickly from identifying the issue to deciding what to do.

These five questions help create a pause between what we observe and how we respond.

What are we actually observing? Focus: Evidence

Ask:

- What is actually happening?
- What are people seeing or experiencing?
- What evidence do we have?
- What are we assuming?

What might be creating it? Focus: Explanation

Ask:

- What could be contributing to this?
- Are roles, priorities or expectations clear?
- Could systems or processes be influencing it?
- What conditions might be shaping what we see?

What else could explain this? Focus: Alternatives

Ask:

- If our first explanation is wrong, what else might be happening?
- Are there other plausible causes?
- Could several factors be interacting?
- Are we seeing a cause or a consequence?

What would help us know? Focus: Enquiry

Ask:

- What information are we missing?
- Who might see this differently?
- What would support or challenge our explanation?
- Where does the uncertainty really matter?

Do we understand enough to act? Focus: Proportionate diagnosis

Ask:

- Is there enough evidence to make a reasonable decision?
- Would another explanation change what we do?
- What is the risk of acting now?
- What can we monitor to test our thinking?

Better diagnosis doesn't mean endless diagnosis. It means understanding enough to choose a better-informed response

Making Better-Informed Decisions



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Good diagnosis is not about delaying action.

It is about making the thinking behind our action clearer.

Before deciding: Separate observation from explanation

- Describe what is happening without diagnosing it.
- Separate what you know from what you assume.
- Look for patterns and different perspectives.
- Consider more than one possible explanation.
- Ask what else might be contributing.

When choosing an intervention: Make the logic clear

- Be clear about what you are trying to change.
- Ask why you believe this action will change it.
- Check whether you are addressing a cause or a symptom.
- Consider what else may need to change.
- Decide what you would expect to see if you are right.

After acting: Keep learning

- Look for meaningful change, not just positive feedback.
- Check whether the original problem has improved.
- Notice unexpected effects.
- Revisit your explanation if change does not happen.
- Use what you learn to inform what happens next.

Before reaching for the intervention, pause and ask:

“What are we actually trying to change – and why do we believe this action will change it?”

Sometimes the first explanation will be right. Sometimes looking a little deeper will reveal something quite different.

The aim isn't more diagnosis. It is better-informed action.

Evidence base

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking encourages us to look beyond isolated events and consider the relationships, patterns and wider conditions that shape what happens within organisations.

Senge, P. M. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (Revised ed.). New York: Currency/Doubleday.

Organisational Diagnosis

Looks across purpose, structure, relationships, rewards, leadership and supporting mechanisms, emphasising that organisational issues need to be understood across interacting parts of the organisation rather than treated as isolated problems.

Weisbord, M. R. (1976). Organizational Diagnosis: Six Places to Look for Trouble With or Without a Theory. *Group & Organization Studies*, 1(4), 430–447.

Organisational Performance & Change

Describes relationships between organisational factors including external environment, strategy, leadership, culture, structure, systems, climate, motivation and performance.

Burke, W. W. & Litwin, G. H. (1992). A Causal Model of Organizational Performance and Change. *Journal of Management*, 18(3), 523–545.

Double-Loop Learning

Distinguishes between correcting a problem within existing assumptions and questioning the assumptions, policies and underlying reasoning that may be contributing to the problem.

Argyris, C. (1977). Double Loop Learning in Organizations. *Harvard Business Review*, September 1977.

Evidence-Based Management

Argues for organisational decisions to be informed by the best available evidence rather than relying primarily on established practice, assumptions or managerial preference.

Rousseau, D. M. (2006). Is There Such a Thing as “Evidence-Based Management”? *Academy of Management Review*, 31(2), 256–269