TOSCA Framework for Problem Solving

The TOSCA framework is a simple tool for **defining a problem before trying to solve it**. It was described by Bernard Garrette, Corey Phelps and Olivier Sibony in their work on strategic problem solving. The name is an acronym of five elements: **Trouble, Owner, Success criteria, Constraints and Actors**. By answering five short questions, a team turns a vague, emotional situation into one clear core question that everyone can work on together.

Why Problem Definition Matters

Many teams rush to solutions. A meeting starts with "sales are down", and within minutes people are discussing a new advertising campaign, a price cut or a reorganization. Often they end up solving the wrong problem, or a problem that nobody asked them to solve. Experienced problem solvers spend more time on the question than beginners do. A problem well defined is half solved: the right question limits wasted effort, reveals hidden assumptions and helps people agree on what success means before they start.

1. Trouble

The trouble is the **symptom** that tells you something is wrong: the gap between what is happening and what should be happening. Describe it as a fact that can be observed, such as falling sales, rising complaints or delayed projects, not as an opinion ("the team is lazy") or a hidden solution ("we need a new system"). A clear symptom keeps the team focused on what really needs to change.

Example: "Customer complaints have risen by 40% in the last two quarters."

2. Owner

The owner is the person or group who **owns the problem and will decide on the solution**. Knowing the owner tells you whose goals, priorities and point of view really matter. Different owners can see the same trouble very differently: a finance director and a customer service director may want different answers. If the owner is unclear, even a brilliant solution may never be approved.

Example: "The owner is the head of customer operations, who reports to the chief executive."

3. Success Criteria

Success criteria describe **what success will look like, and by when**. They should be clear and, where possible, measurable. Agreeing on them early stops teams from arguing later about whether the problem was really solved. They also help to compare options fairly.

Example: "Reduce complaints to last year's level within six months, while keeping customer satisfaction above 85%."

4. Constraints

Constraints are the **limits any solution must respect**: budget, time, laws and regulations, company policies, technology or values. Constraints are helpful because they rule out some options early and save effort. Be honest about them, but also test whether each one is real or only assumed.

Example: "No additional headcount, a maximum budget of 50,000, and no change to the current software platform this year."

5. Actors

Actors are the **other people affected by the problem or able to influence the solution**: customers, employees, partners, suppliers, regulators or other departments. Ignoring them is a common reason why good solutions fail during implementation. Talking to them early builds support and reveals hidden risks.

Example: "Front-line agents, the IT team, the quality department and key corporate customers."

The Core Question

The five answers lead to one sentence: the **core question**. A good core question is:

- **Specific:** it names the result, the scope and the time frame.
- **Open:** it does not contain a ready-made solution.
- **Focused on the owner's need:** it reflects what the decision maker must achieve.
- **Respectful of constraints:** it makes the limits visible.

Example: "How can we reduce complaints to last year's level within six months, without new staff, a budget above 50,000 or a change of platform?"

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Applying TOSCA at Work

- **Project start-up:** run a 30-minute TOSCA session before the first planning meeting.
- **Consulting and internal requests:** use TOSCA to clarify what a manager is really asking for.
- **Management meetings:** write the core question at the top of every problem-solving agenda item.
- **Crisis situations:** even under pressure, spend ten minutes agreeing on trouble, owner and success.
- **Training:** teach new leaders to ask the five questions before proposing any solution.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Skipping the definition step because "everyone knows the problem".
- Writing a solution into the question, for example "How can we implement a new CRM system?".
- Forgetting or hiding the constraints until the solution is almost ready.
- Working alone, without checking the core question with the owner.
- Choosing success criteria that cannot be measured.

Measuring the Benefit

- **Clarity:** team members can state the core question in the same words.
- **Speed:** fewer meetings are needed before agreeing on a direction.
- **Approval rate:** more proposals are accepted by the problem owner.
- **Rework:** fewer projects are restarted because the problem was misunderstood.
- **Results:** the agreed success criteria are met on time.

Example: Long Hospital Waiting Times

A hospital noticed that patient waiting times in its outpatient clinics had doubled. The first reaction was to hire more doctors. Using TOSCA, the management team defined the **trouble** as longer waits and more complaints, the **owner** as the hospital director, **success** as waits under thirty minutes within six months, the **constraints** as no new staff and no extra budget, and the **actors** as doctors, nurses, receptionists and patients. The core question became: "How can we cut waiting times to thirty minutes in six months, without new staff or budget?" The answer turned out to be better appointment scheduling and a simple triage step at reception, not more doctors.

Quick Checklist

- Have we described the trouble as a fact, not an opinion?
- Do we know who owns the problem and will decide?
- Are the success criteria clear, measurable and time-bound?
- Have we listed the real constraints?
- Have we identified the actors and talked to the most important ones?
- Can everyone repeat the core question in one sentence?

Key Takeaways

- TOSCA stands for Trouble, Owner, Success criteria, Constraints and Actors.
- Defining the problem well saves time, money and frustration.
- The five answers combine into one clear, open core question.
- Never write the solution into the question.
- Revisit the core question whenever new facts appear.

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