Working on Problems

Problems of one kind or another stand between us and the achievement of anything of value in church and community work. Avoiding them contributes to their destructive power; owning them begins the process of controlling them; tackling them starts to give us power over them; dealing with them purposefully enables us to seize the opportunities they block off. Moving from the avoidance of problems to dealing with them is releasing, creative and satisfying. This is illustrated in the first part of this chapter by an experience I had of helping a group of people to get on top of a problem which, after a prolonged period of avoiding it, they had decided to face. This will lead me to examine the generic approach to working on such problems and some of the factors involved in using it. Lastly, I shall consider the nature of problems and what is involved in orientating ourselves to them in the constructive way to which I point in this paragraph.

I. A PROBLEM: COPING WITH A PERSISTENT SENSE OF FAILURE

A four-hour seminar on "coping with failure" held in Liverpool attracted an ecumenical group of twenty people who had not previously met. Most of them were working in areas of acute need and deprivation in Aintree, Dawley, Liverpool, Oldham, Runcorn or Telford.*

A discursive discussion in the full group showed that everyone agreed that *the* problem that the members of the group wanted and needed to tackle was how to cope with continual and persistent feelings of failing and being a failure. Having got that clear, we discussed how we were going to examine this problem. There was agreement that we should identify and work on the issues that emerged from our various experiences of the problem rather than focus on one or two specific examples. By doing this and using sub-groups we would draw upon everyone's experience and insights, including those of the three seminar leaders. At this stage I stimulated a discussion about whether in our analysis we should try to pursue the historical sources and causes of the

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* The members of the seminar comprised one Anglican lay person and four priests; one Baptist minister; three Methodist lay people and three ministers; two Roman Catholic lay people, three religious and one priest; two YMCA staff members—five women and fifteen men.

problem *or* concentrate on the things that sustain it as a problem in the present. (I discuss these distinctions later in the chapter.) We were of one mind that we should concentrate on their experience of the problem in the present and what was making it a problem for them now—unless, that is, our examination of the problem showed that it was necessary to consider the initiating as well as the sustaining causes. We felt that the changes we wanted were more likely to come through this approach than the other. Turning from approach to method, we felt that tackling the following questions in the given order would help us to work at the subject systematically and a little more objectively than we would otherwise do.

(a) What is the failure with which we have to cope?

(b) How and why do we classify it as failure?

(c) What effects, positive and negative, does this have on me and my work?

(d) What are the specific changes that would help us to cope better?

(e) Have we tried to make these specific changes and if so with what results?

(f) What can we/I do towards making these changes?

(g) What are we learning about coping with failure?

We worked at the first six questions in sub-groups and considered the findings periodically in the full group. The final question was tackled in a full group with buzz sessions, i.e., people talking for a few minutes to those sitting beside them.

(a) What is the failure with which we have to cope?

(b) How and why do we classify it as failure?

Responses to these two questions were intertwined. Five different areas in which the members of the group felt that they failed were identified. First, they felt that they failed to comprehend the situation in which they were working. An intellectual grasp of it eluded them. They knew that they were not getting at the heart of things. Consequently they were not clear how to work for change. They found this frustrating, confusing and demoralizing. Second, they said that they failed to contain their work load within manageable limits. This led to their not being able to cope and allowing quantity to compromise quality. Then again they said that they were failing to make realistic evaluations of the changes in people and their environment that could be attributed to their interventions. They worked on impressions and crude indicators. They simply did not know whether they were achieving their objectives—nor did they know how to find out. Consequently they could not tell whether persistent feelings that they were "not getting anywhere" were reliable guides or not. Understandably, these feelings depressed and drained them.

Relationships were the fourth area of failure. They had failed, they said, to achieve and sustain the kind of working relationships which they knew that they and others needed in order to be able to do the difficult work in which they were engaged. They had got people involved in programmes that undermined their self-confidence, already low, and broke down trust between people and workers. They felt that they had failed to build up the confidence of the people to do the job and to make the relationships to support and care for each other in times of difficulty. Finally, they said that they had failed to live up to their expectations of themselves; for instance they said they had become insensitive. And they had not been able to deal with the unrealistic expectations others had of them.

(c) **What effects, positive and negative does this have upon me and my work?**

The compound negative and positive effects of these failures - the failure to comprehend, to control, to evaluate to build up working relationships and to live up to their expectations were considerable. Negative effects were that they:

— doubted their ability;
   ("I failed to do what I set out to do." "Am I really any good at all?")

— became alienated, vulnerable, lonely, disorientated and ambivalent;
   ("Can I face 'them' again?" "Who can I turn to?")

— became drained, frustrated and angry;

— became cavalier;
   ("I bash on regardless." "I case-harden myself, which helps my equilibrium but I become insensitive.")

— became complacent and cynical;
   ("It's all a waste of time anyway." "What the hell?!")

— felt guilty;

— lowered their targets and "became emphatic about insignificant achievements";

— blamed other people and the system indiscriminately;

— engaged in diversionary activities that were more satisfying.
   ("I escape to my books." "I take too much time doing things that I can do to avoid the things I cannot do.")

On the positive side, they said that, provided that they drew out the learning soon after the events, they learnt more about themselves and their abilities and about how to do their work from their failures than from their successes. They

felt that they were becoming more gentle and tolerant with others and possibly with themselves. And, in spite of all the negative effects, they were determined to do better and to organize themselves better and get more resources—and these were their reasons for attending the seminar. Also, they were becoming clearer about what really mattered to them, namely the spiritual growth and development of people, individually and collectively.

(d)   What are the specific changes which would help us to cope better?

(f)   What can we/I do towards making these changes?

In the event members considered the changes and how to make them at the same time, i.e., (d) and (f) rather than (d) and (e). But, as will be seen below, a profound action insight came later. By now the problem was being expressed differently: "How to break the hold of a persistent and debilitating sense of failure so that our sense of satisfaction is enhanced and our sense of failure reduced whatever progress we feel is being made or not". Members of the group were now beginning to see that the problem had to do with distortions in the interplay between subjective and objective realities. Work performance affects feelings and vice versa. Clarifying the problem* helped to identify the changes required and to think how to make them. They badly wanted to be better able to maintain their psychological and spiritual poise, or as they said, their equilibrium. It was too easily disturbed. They wanted to overcome the oscillation of mood and morale which they found so painful, disorientating and dysfunctional. Kurt Lewin's[1] concept of low- and high-force equilibrium helped the members of the seminar to understand what was happening to them. Low-force equilibrium is when people are kept in balance by low internal and external forces; high-force when they are high. Lewin represented it as depicted in Figure 2:1.

The disturbance of low-force equilibrium leads to mild adjustments, whereas the disturbance of high force leads to violent change because the forces released are so much greater. A familiar illustration of high-force equilibrium is when a barrier holding people back is suddenly released and they surge forward out of control. Ireland is experiencing a high-force equilibrium on socio- religious issues; England, Wales and Scotland a low-force equilibrium. Members felt they were in situations of high-force equilibrium so they were easily disturbed by small changes in their energy levels or their circumstances such as the loss of one local voluntary helper.

The forces are dynamic, not static as the diagram might suggest, so the

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* Definitions of problems often contain solutions. That is why defining problems accurately is progress towards solving them. Care has to be taken because definitions can point to non-solutions. A simple example is: how to get "x" to do "y". Getting "x" to do "y" is a solution to some problem or other. But "y" possibly should not be done and even if it should be done "x" should not do it. And if "x" should do "y" perhaps we should not try to get him/her to do it. Definitions of problems can beg all kinds of questions.
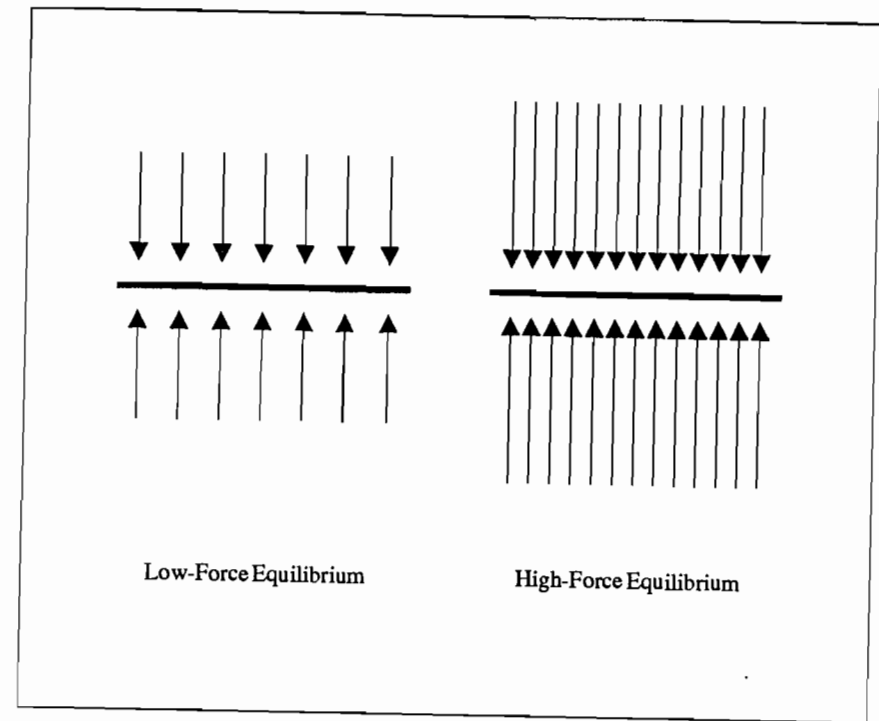
FIGURE 2:1. LOW AND HIGH FORCE EQUILIBRIUM

equilibrium required has to be dynamic rather than static—more like riding a bicycle than holding a dead weight. Support, they felt, from individuals or groups independent of them and their situations who could offer disciplined and rigorous work-consultancy help of the kind that they were experiencing in this seminar would help them to maintain their equilibrium. Such support would introduce a counterbalancing force.

Several other changes, they said, would help them to maintain their equilibrium. Concentration was one of them. No matter how busy they are they need to give themselves to people and events and to slow the pace down so that they can concentrate: telling others that they are losing their concentration could help to regain it. The way in which we describe our experiences and feelings affects our equilibrium. Statements express feelings but more importantly they engender a particular frame of mind which can break people down or build them up. For example any one of the following responses could be made to several unsuccessful attempts to do something: "I cannot do that." "I have failed to do that." "So far I have been unable to do that." "I wonder why I cannot do that?" "How could I do that, I wonder?" "I feel I have failed." "I am a failure." Some of these statements are factual, others judgemental and self-condemning. Some make one feel bad and ineffectual, others help to explore the experience creatively. To say that one is a failure, as some members felt inclined to do, inhibits a proper understanding and evaluation of the situation.

Even an indefinite number of failed attempts do not necessarily indicate that a person is a failure. Many other things need to be taken into account, such as the difficulties inherent in the task, before even beginning to define ourselves as failures—and in any case what is the reason for and the purpose of doing so? To be precise about the reasons for the failure contributes to the proper analysis of the problem and obviates spurious feelings of guilt. Members felt that they needed to change the way that they describe and explain failure to themselves and others because this critically affects its power and effects. They saw that it also helps to accept the inevitability of some degree of failure without being complacent in work with people for human and spiritual development. An awareness of it is necessary: a sense of failure is not pathological, a total lack of it certainly is.

This discussion, essentially about understanding the situation and therefore about the first area of failure, took up much of the time. Other changes can be described more briefly in relation to each of the areas of failure identified earlier. With reference to the need to **comprehend**, they said that they needed more time for relaxed reflection on their goals, beliefs and the subtleties and nuances of their situations *and* analytical tools such as the ones used in the seminar that would enable them to search out the critical factors that they might otherwise miss. With reference to **control** they focused on establishing more realistic goals and on accepting work only when they had made a realistic assessment as to whether they had time to prepare for and follow through the face-to-face work involved: all too often, they said, they took on work only on the basis of the face-to-face commitment that it involved. With reference to **evaluation**, they said that they needed to define more precisely what constitutes "failure" and what constitutes "success" over a given period and to agree this with those with whom they worked and also to agree on ways of assessing them. With reference to **relationships** they said that they must do all that they could to be open with people about jobs and to ensure that they take up work freely and willingly—and especially when they are asking them to do jobs that they themselves hate doing! (Job dissatisfaction has bad effects on working relationships as well as on the work done and can be a major contribution to failure and a sense of failure.) Also, to make sure that everyone has the moral, spiritual and technical support they need. Combined, all these things helped to establish more realistic **expectations within and between people**.

(e) Have we tried to make these specific changes and, if so, with what results?

This question, a *non-sequitur* by the time that we came to it, enabled members of the seminar to say that the problem of failure had been a constant source of worry to them but they had not previously faced it as they had in this seminar. They had tried to escape from it or to harden themselves against its effects. Some said that they talked to themselves about it and determined to do better

next time. One person said that she tried to restore her equilibrium by making promises to herself. Such devices had enabled them to survive but they were no solution. Indeed, they contributed to the problem and strengthened the hold it had upon them.

(f) What can we/I do towards making these changes?

We turned to this question even though much had been said in response to it. It was useful to do so. They said: "Give over wallowing in our failures. Internalize that I am not necessarily a failure because I fail to do something and that a sense of failure is required, it is not pathological. Assimilate all that I am learning from this diagnosis. Slow down. Establish criteria for assessing failure and success." But the idea that really got them excited emerged when we turned to the final question.

(g) What are we learning about coping with failure?

Spontaneous response of the whole group to this question was, "We must get this kind of discussion going amongst the people with whom we work!" A dramatic change occurred in the group. Everyone was most excited. The energy level soared. The emotional profile of the seminar shows the significance of this moment of disclosure. Tackling the problem had not been easy. Thinking about it again had had a depressing effect. It evoked memories of failure which cast doubt over the exercise on which they were embarking: Would this seminar be another failure and therefore compound their sense of failure? Thoughts and feelings raised by the very thought of the subject palpably debilitated them. To begin with they simply could not put their finger on what generated so much emotion, and intensified the feelings of failure. An important part of the problem was clearly coping with these feelings. If anything constructive was to be done about them it was necessary to identify their source and recognize the strong emotions they generated.

These emotions tended to strangle the ability of the members of the group to think straight. It took a lot of energy and persistence on the part of the staff to get the members thinking the problem through. Our assumption was that the difficulties were created by the working situation rather than by psychological inadequacies of the workers. What emerged indicated that this assumption was valid and our approach relevant. Morale of the members gradually increased as we worked systematically at the questions and structured and summarized the material as it emerged. We all felt we were getting somewhere. The insight about getting those with whom they worked using the same approach and method took us to another plane of feeling and doing. People were deeply involved in the discussion, totally engaged. Excitement was in the air. At first, I am bound to admit, I was a bit disappointed with what seemed an obvious idea, because I wanted to get out the criteria for success and failure! What they had

seen was that the way we had tackled the problem together was a way of rising above it, taking a creative hold of it and generating the ideas and the energy to do something about it. The process was as essential to the solution as the product of their thinking. They analysed what had enabled them to have this kind of discussion, so different from anything they normally experienced, as though their lives depended upon it. They plied the staff and each other with questions as they examined just what we had done to facilitate the discussion and read off the implications for themselves. They wanted to clarify the questions we asked and particularly the one that led to the breakthrough; they wanted to discuss initiating and sustaining causes (see next section); they wanted to trace out just what had raised their spirits. All in all, it was a very rewarding seminar.

Now we move from a particular problem to problem-solving generally.

II. FACILITATING PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Problems encountered in working with people come in all shapes and sizes. No two are exactly alike even when they are in the same family of problems. So, dealing in set and standard solutions is a hit and miss affair. Each problem is unique and needs to be treated as such. The principles and procedures described below enable people to do that and to determine what action they themselves are going to take.

1. Cycles in the Life of a Problem

The life of a problem has three stages: the latent period when the difficulties are incubating; the active and disruptive period; and the post-active period. (The ecumenical group were considering the problem of failure in its latent and post-active stages but were drawing upon experiences of it in all the stages.) Each stage, differing as it does from the others, requires different treatment. My experience is that we all have a tendency towards ignoring problems when they are latent, in abeyance and temporarily resolved, and attending to them only when we have to, i.e., when they are active or as soon after that as possible. Some problems, of course, cannot be foreseen and have to be tackled and solved when they are active. Sometimes it is better and more effective to tackle human-relations problems when they are active than to store up a series of incidents for a future confrontation. But some problems cannot be solved when they are active, they can only be contained: tackling them root and branch is for another time. Therefore, watching for and acting upon early warning signals is an important part of problem-solving. Failure to solve problems when they are active often leads people to conclude wrongly that they are insoluble; they may be insoluble when active but soluble earlier or later. Workers need to follow carefully the life cycles of problems and seize the

opportunities when they can tackle them to best effect and with least hassle. *This method and the six basic questions that follow are ways of tackling problems at any and all stages of their life cycle.* Working at and to all the stages in the life cycle of a problem multiplies the possiblities for containing, resolving, preventing and curing it.

2. Six Basic Questions

Six basic questions help workers to examine problems systematically and to decide what they are going to do about them. They are:

1. What is the problem?
2. What has been tried so far?
3. What specific changes are required and why?
4. What are the causes and sources of the problem that we need to examine?
5. What are we/am I going to do about it?
6. What are we learning from our study of this problem?

These questions relate to three activities: definition, diagnosis and action decisions. Questions 1 to 3 help to define but they also help to diagnose; question 4 helps to diagnose; questions 2 and 5 are action questions, respectively about what will not and what will work. The order is not invariable; 2 and 3 are readily interchanged. What matters is that they are all considered. Now we shall look in more detail at what is involved in working through these phases using these basic questions and subsidiary ones.

Basic Question 1: What is the problem? A clear and accurate definition of problems in concrete terms is crucial. Sometimes problems defined are problems solved. Too often we tackle and solve the wrong problem. As I have already indicated, more often than not "solutions" are implicit in statements of problems. Take, for example, the problem, "How do I get the church council to do a parish audit?" Doing a parish audit is a solution to some other problem; it may or may not be the right one. What is the problem behind the problem? Is it "How to get the council to examine the ministry of the church in relation to the realities of the parish community?" Or is it "How to get the council to consider things in a systematic and technical rather than a purely 'spiritual' way?" (And that could be about a conflict of approach.) Or is it to get the council to be in fashion? Tackling the "audit" problem, therefore, may avoid or compound the substantive problems. It is essential to get to the substantive problems and that is not always easy. One of the ways of getting to the heart of the matter is to approach the basic question from different angles through a

range of supplementary questions such as:

— What makes this a problem for you?
— How often does it occur?
— How long does it last?
— How does it affect you, other people and your work?
— What does it do to you?
— What does it prevent you from doing?
— Why is it important?
— For whom else is it a problem, and why?
— What is the nature of the problem?
— How do you normally think and talk about it?
— How do you see it now?
— Is it one of a group of similar problems?

These questions clarify the nature, scope, effects, frequency, intensity, duration, and the context of the problem and those who suffer from it.

Gradually, answers to these questions make it is possible to define the problem, i.e., to answer the question, "What is the problem?"

Basic Question 2: What has been tried so far? Answers to this question can help to understand the problem by considering the problem of dealing with the problem. They reveal something more of the nature of the problem, its depths and its intransigence. It helps to list each idea that has been tried so far and what ideas have been thought of but not tried. Having done that, it is helpful to examine them in turn to identify how and why they failed and to draw out the learning. Supplementary questions that help to do this are:

— Why do you think the idea did not work?
— To what or to whom did you attribute the failure of the plan?
— How do you explain to yourself what happened?
— How do you explain your explanation?
— Have you had any ideas for tackling the problem which have not yet been tried?
— Why have they not been tried?
— What would have to happen before they would be tried?
— What would enable them to work or prevent them from working?
— Would you try them and if so why, how and when?

Investigating previous attempts to solve the problem before making any suggestions is a brilliant idea put forward by Watzlawick and others.[2] On many occasions I have got into an impasse when each suggestion I and others made was countered by statements such as, "I have tried that and it didn't work". "That would simply not work in my situation". "If you knew the kind of people I am dealing with you would know that that simply would not work". Almost always the replies were unconvincing. Sometimes, I felt that a parody of what was suggested had been tried and predictably found wanting; at other times I felt that they simply did not understand the suggestion and/or how to put it into effect. Suggestion-parrying builds up defensiveness which kills dead attempts to get any further. With hindsight I realize that much of this could be avoided by looking first at anything that has been tried or thought of, i.e. by starting at the point at which they had arrived in their experience and thinking. Amongst other things, this can give valuable clues about the nature of the working situation, what the workers are capable of, the intransigence and subtle dimensions of the problem, or the kind of suggestions that could be relevant and acceptable. Greater sensitivity in presenting ideas is needed so that they are most likely to be accepted if suitable and rejected if not.

However, important as all this undoubtedly is, dwelling on past failures can demoralize and impede the analytical process. A penetrating and profound analysis that leaves people devastated is highly undesirable. Maintaining or building up the confidence and courage required to tackle difficulties is an essential part of working to good effect on problems. People need to be affirmed by non-judgmental understanding and help. Sensitivity and judgement are required to keep morale and analysis in creative tension. In the seminar the morale increased as they saw that they were getting somewhere and this eventually led to a disclosure experience. As people gain confidence in the method it is possible to undertake a more searching analysis because people know that any drop in morale is likely to be temporary and that the process will lead to insights and possibilities that have good, genuine and trustworthy effects.

Basic Question 3: What specific changes are desired and why? This is another defining and diagnosing question. Stating the changes required involves contrasting the actual with the desired. It defines the nature and scale of the transition to be realized. It shows up the actualities of the undesirable state and therefore may throw new light on the problem. Statements about objectives, purposes and beliefs and needs are proper responses to the question "why?" Other reference points are discussed in Chapter 5. This helps to set the specific changes in a wider context and to check them out.

Basic Question 4: What are the causes and sources of the problem that we need to examine? This question takes us into the diagnosis of the problem.[3] A problem has causes and sources in the past (initiating causes) but it is kept

going by causes in the present (sustaining causes)—these can be in the reactions, perceptions and emotions of those involved or they can be in the circumstances in which they live and work. The initiating cause may be what is keeping it going now. On the other hand the links between the initiating and is keeping it going now. On the other hand the links between the initiating and sustaining causes may be more significant than those between the initiating causes and the problem. Indeed, the initiating cause may be irrelevant. I represent the overall pattern of causes and sources and their possible connections in the following diagram, Figure 2:2.

FIGURE 2:2. SOURCES AND INITIATING AND SUSTAINING CAUSES OF PROBLEMS
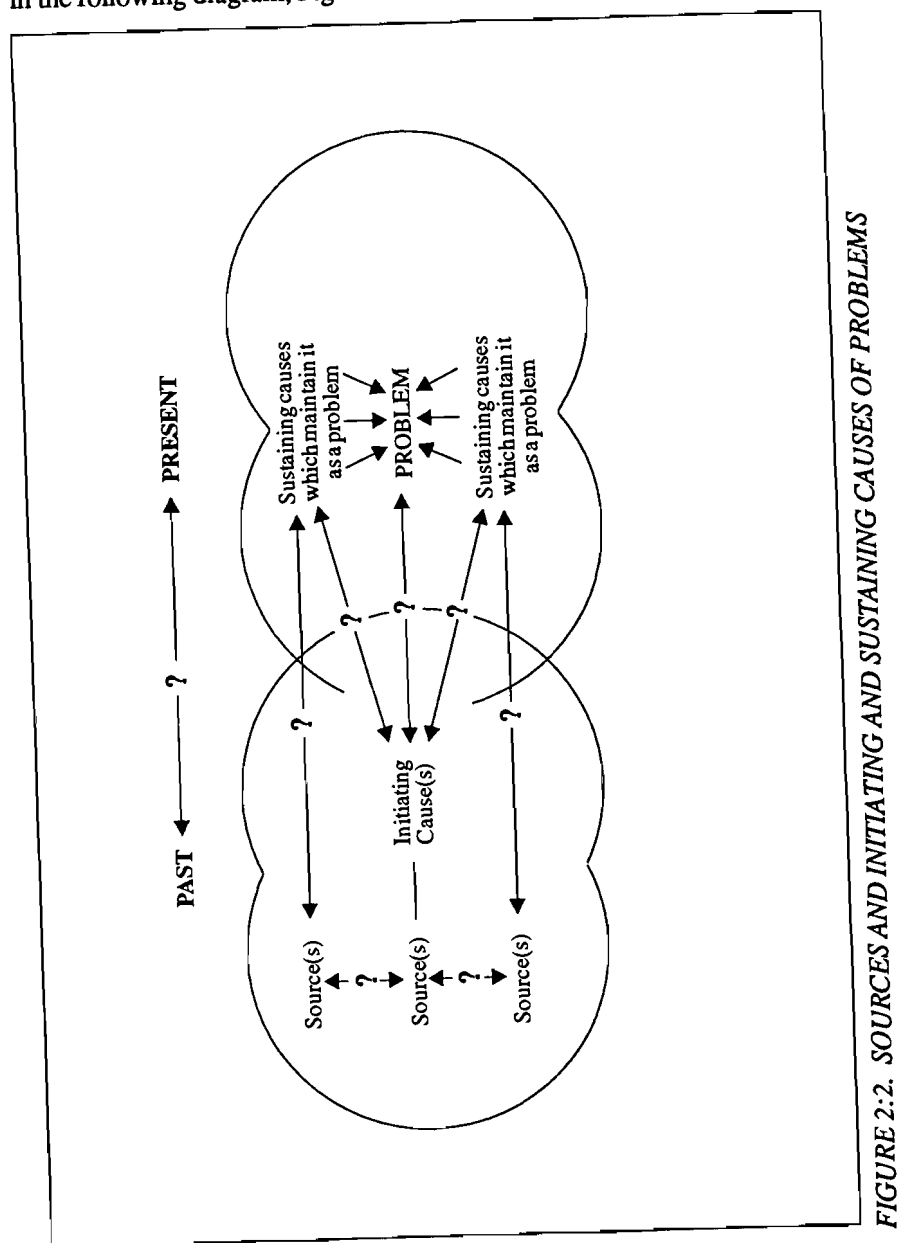
The respective effects of these various causes and sources will vary from problem to problem and their effects upon a particular problem could change from one part of the life cycle of the problem to another. The sustaining causes could be in some issue, difficulty or relationship otherwise unrelated to the specific problem—a rogue cause or source.

The Irish Troubles illustrate these distinctions: undoubtedly economic, political, cultural and religious aspects of the faction derive directly from historical events which are the initiating causes; present attitudes, feelings and actions of significant minorities kept the conflict devastatingly active and were therefore sustaining causes; those who sustain the problem are diversely influenced by historical causes (or, more precisely, by a historical "mythical consciousness"[4] of these causes). So in this case powerful historical, psychological and spiritual links between the initiating and sustaining causes and the present problems constitute complex problem-sustaining systems. In church and community development work in Ireland I have found it best to concentrate with priests, clergy and laity on analysing the sustaining causes in relation to their parish work and ministry and deciding with them what they can do about them.

Thus there are critical choices to be made in deciding how to diagnose a problem. Is it necessary:

— to examine the history of the problem and the initiating causes?
and/or
— to analyse the sustaining causes currently operative, and then, if it proves necessary, their initiating causes?

It might be that the problem cannot be eased without looking at its origins, or past attempts to overcome it, or both. If, however, the initiating cause is not what is keeping the problem going now, analysing it could distract, at times intentionally, from the search for answers, and inhibit fresh thinking.[5]

Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch argue and demonstrate that the "why" of a problem, i.e. the explanation and understanding of causes and their source, is not necessarily a pre-condition of change. Indeed it can deflect one away from resolving the problem. (They claim for example that even a plausible and sophisticated explanation of insomnia usually contributes nothing towards its solution.[6]) In deliberate interventions into human problems the most pragmatic approach is not the question why? but what?: What is being done here and now that serves to perpetuate the problem and what can be done here and now to effect a change.[7] And one thing might well be to tackle initiating causes or myths about them. They claim that such an approach is extremely effective in promoting change, especially second order or transformational change. Their experience is in psychotherapy but what they say is applicable beyond psychological problems. I have found it to be relevant to the church and community development work in which I am engaged.

Some of the questions that help to examine initiating and sustaining causes are:

— What effects do they have upon whom and what?
— When are they most/least effective?
— What brings them into play? When? How frequently?
— What nullifies them?
— Where are they located in the scheme of things?
— What are the main links that fix them in the system?

So, diagnosis is greatly helped by differentiating between initiating causes and their sources *and* those that sustain it. Making a good diagnosis depends upon making an appropriate choice between (a) examining the initiating causes and their sources; (b) examining the sustaining causes and their sources; (c) proceeding directly to what action to take, i.e. to question 5. Sometimes it is clear which course to take. Choice (c) is appropriate when a solution has emerged from steps 1 to 3. Deciding, however, can be tricky. Prolonged consideration of which route to take can cause frustration. When there is an impasse it is often advisable to decide intuitively or at random to pursue (a) or (b) or (c), to get on with it and to review the choice if and when it is not proving to be helpful or at some other agreed point. Attempts to establish criteria that help to make the choice have not been very satisfactory. However, I find it is necessary to explore initiating and/or sustaining causes and sources when participants *either* feel intuitively that they must get to the "bottom of the problem" *or* find that route (c) does not take them to ideas for effective action.

Also, it is generally unwise to pursue (a) or (b) if doing so

— takes participants further and further away from the immediate problem into a self-contained historical exercise which is not yielding clues about how to tackle or solve the contemporary problem;
— takes the participants into unhelpful realms of speculative thought, into diversionary consideration of things about which they can do nothing and reveals work they cannot handle;
— engenders paralysis of thought and action.

Four questions that need to be kept constantly in mind are:

— Is looking at the history and initiating causes helping or hindering us from making progress with this problem?
— Is examining sustaining causes helping or hindering us from making progress with this problem? In what ways?

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— Why is it helping or hindering?
— What must we now do?

Note: In the discussion about a sense of failure I gave a strong lead, which was accepted by the group, that we should concentrate on what in the here and now made it a problem for them, i.e., on sustaining rather than initiating causes because I believed that a historical examination of the sources and causes would not have been as profitable.

Questions, questions, questions...! But they are powerful tools!

Basic Question 5: What are we going to do about it? Now we are into the activity that we have called action design. Later we consider this in more detail. What is important is that the emphasis must be upon what *I* am going to do about this problem, what *we* are going to do. It is all too easy to discuss what *they* should do. That is a waste of time unless we decide what we are going to do that is most likely to lead "them" to do what they need do. (Even if we have the power to command it is largely irrelevant to the work being discussed here.) A cluster of questions such as those that follow can help people to inch their way towards realistic action decisions:

— What can I/we do about it?
— What are the choices?
— What are the pros and cons of each?
  (It is vital to look at both. "Selling" things involves heightening the "pros" and minimizing or obscuring the "cons".)[8]
— Where is the balance of advantage?
— How can we ameliorate the disadvantages inherent in our choice of action?
— What action am I/we going to take, to what end, why, with whom, how, when?

Attending to minute detail and being specific is on the side of successfully completing this step, generalizing and vague decisions are on the other side.

At the end of the analysis the conclusion may well be to decide not to do anything. That is doing something of considerable importance. It is taking decisive inner control of the situation/problem. Revising the work on earlier stages in the light of the work on the later ones is quite normal. The use of reference points is discussed in Chapter 5.

Basic Question 6: What are we learning from this problem and our study of it? Addressing this question caused the group working on the failure problem to see just what they must do about it—engage others in the activity

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in which they had been engaged. The question distanced them sufficiently from doing what they had been doing to be able to look at what they had been doing. From that perspective they saw the significance of the process, a significance that had eluded them whilst they were busily engaged in the process. By breaking the sequence of a closed analytical sequence, this question, which I discuss more fully in Chapter 5, enables people to come at things from a new angle—always, in my experience, with profit.
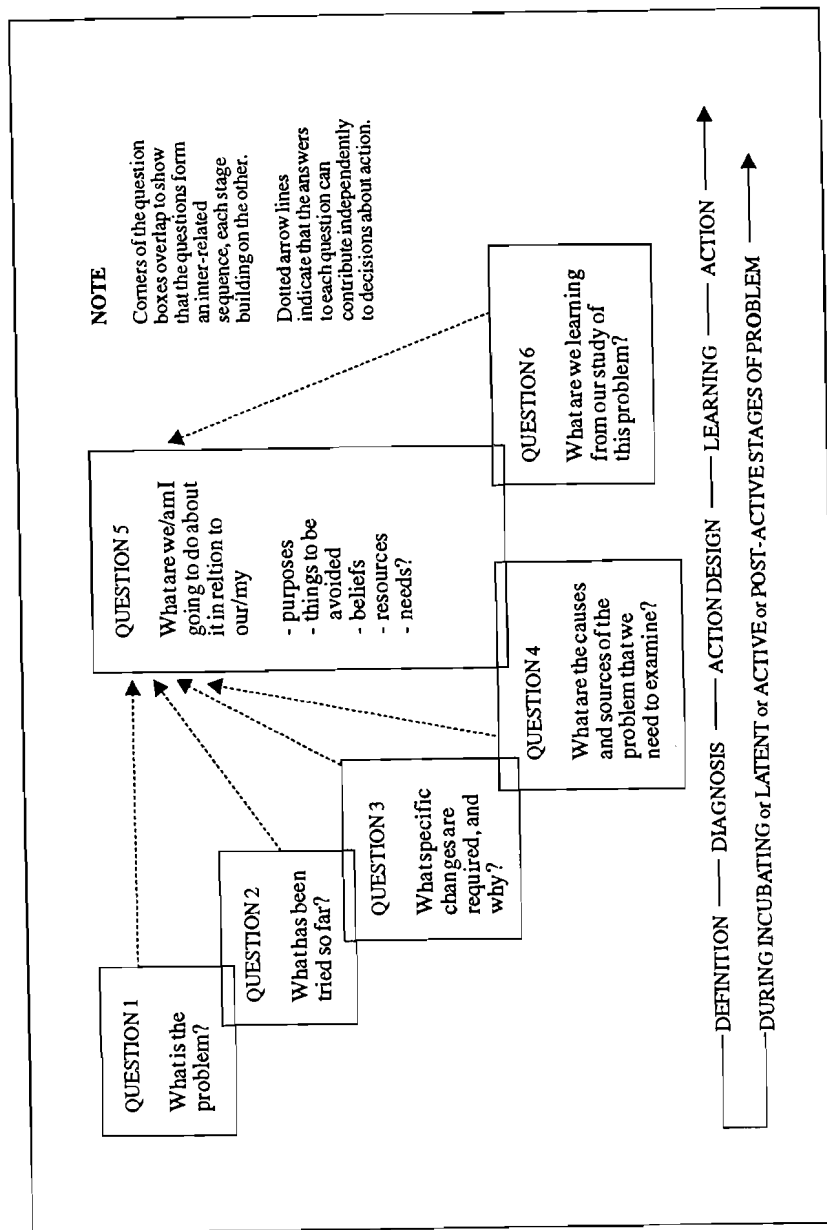
The basic questions are set out in Figure 2:3

FIGURE 2:3. TACKLING PROBLEMS: QUESTIONS, PROCESS AND STAGES

III. PROBLEM-CONSCIOUS NOT "PROBLEM-CENTRED"

Tackling problems in this way helps to overcome attitudes and feelings that prevent us from approaching difficulties in the best frame of mind and working at them creatively. I have in mind particularly those things that predispose us to associate problems with failure and to be negative towards and fearful of them, to assume that people with problems are problem people, to be preoccupied with apportioning blame and inducing guilt. Several things in the nature and structure of the approach we are considering are antidotes to these things which debilitate us. Negative feelings and thoughts of failure are displaced from the centre of attention by the persistent thrust towards constructive action built up by pursuing the problem-solving procedure step by step. In analysis, the questions and methods focus on the nature of the difficulties, why they occur and what went wrong rather than upon culpability, blame and guilt. In designing future action, attention is focused upon finding things that work and making things work better and therefore upon success rather than failure.

Then again, the approach helps us to distinguish between different kinds or orders of problems by paying attention to sources and causes. One set of problems, for example, results from things in the past that have not gone to plan because of chance factors that could not have been anticipated, things beyond the control of those most involved or because of human error or sin. Yet another set of problems are the things we need to do but cannot yet do to achieve our purposes and to translate visionary thinking into creative action. They mark out the difficult ground still to be covered between the actual and the ideal. They derive directly not from our fears and failures but from our hopes and dreams. They are the unanswered "how" of our ambition.

Thus, the attributes of this approach mean that its use does not induce the kind of "problem-centred approach" that rightly receives much criticism. On the contrary, facing and tackling problems becomes an integral and constructive part of the process of development. The following things help to achieve this positive orientation through using this approach:

First, it is sometimes necessary to avoid using the word "problem" because of the negative feelings it can engender. On one occasion, whilst talking to a Parish Church Council about the ways of tackling problems described in this chapter, the Vicar, who was in the chair, a man of commanding presence and well over six feet tall, sprang to his feet in a small crowded room, towered over me and bellowed at me, "Dr Lovell, we do not have any problems in this parish", and, addressing the members of the Committee, he added "Do we?" They meekly agreed. I made conciliatory gestures and said, "But do you face any difficulties?" "Yes", he said, and for the next hour or more he and his council spoke with deep feelings about one difficulty/problem after another!

Second, it can help in trying to face up to the challenge of difficulties to realize that the scale of the problem is a measure of the disparity between us, our ideals and the actualities and complexities of the situations in which we

want to achieve them. It is increased or reduced by the material, human and spiritual resources available to us and the kind of opposition we encounter. Another critical factor is the climate of opinion within which the problems have to be dealt with—it can support or undermine. (Sometimes, of course, a negative atmosphere can engender very determined action—but at what cost?) Putting all this in a different way, the problems of climbing Everest are of a different order from those associated with climbing Ben Nevis. It is one thing to climb either when you are healthy, well-resourced and supported; it is another when you are unwell or handicapped, ill-equipped and unsupported.

Third, whilst problems seem to have a life of their own, they are intrinsic parts of complex systems with many initiating and sustaining causes. Moreover the same factors create different kinds of problems for people located at various parts of a system. For instance, the sense of failure experienced by the workers in the problem discussed in section one creates different but no less acute problems for their spouses, the people with whom they work, their bosses, and their spiritual directors. Realistic action results from accepting the complexity and working to as much of it as possible.

Fourth, notwithstanding what has been said above, analysing problems inevitably leads to making judgements about human culpability. We are inclined to judge and blame ourselves and each other, struggle with feelings generated by our incompetence, look for scapegoats, try to excuse ourselves. One thing that helps me to work at such feelings constructively is to remember that failure is relative: there is simply no way in which people who hold to their beliefs and to high purposes and continue to struggle with seemingly impossible circumstances can be said to fail, no matter what the outcome of their endeavours might be. Another thing is that apportioning individual and collective responsibility and "blame" for problems in human affairs is an extraordinarily complex business—sometimes necessary, but often unproductive in tackling problems. It is all too easy to take more or less responsibility for problems than it is right for us to do. Identifying, facing and accepting our own proper responsibility as far as we are able to do so is necessary and productive. Blanket acceptance of culpability and responsibility may appear to be helpful in the short term; it is never so in the long term. Yet there is a widespread propensity to see problems as *my* failure or *their* failure. And, as we have seen in the problem discussed earlier, a sense of personal failure easily becomes confused with feeling a personal failure.

What has been said above about the complex causation of problems not only helps me to apportion blame more accurately but also engenders in me a much healthier frame of mind about blame: I feel more objective and philosophical about it. Analysing problems, whilst it involves identifying what went wrong and who and what were responsible, is substantively a development task, not a trial. Securing this orientation is vital.

Fifth, I try to avoid the words "solve" and "solution" in discussing problems because whilst some problems can be solved, others cannot; some problems

"go away" without returning, others do not. However, to say that there is no solution is not to say that there is nothing that can and should be done. Always there is something that can be done, even if it is to say, "I must live with this problem because there is no other way." Inasmuch as the analysis is correct, such a decision can have profound effects.

Tackling problems is, in fact, about finding ways of thinking and acting in relation to them which have good all-round effects upon people and the situations in which they live and work.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Kurt Lewin was an experimental social psychologist (1890–1947) who developed a "field theory" of human behaviour. I first met this idea through a lecture by T. R. Batten in 1967.

2. Watzlawick, Paul; John Weakland and Richard Fisch, *Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 110 ff.

3. The origin of the ideas in this section was in the book by Watzlawick and others quoted in 2 above and an article in the Journal *Human Development*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall 1980: Amadeo, Linda, and James S. Gill entitled "Managing Anger, Hostility and Aggression". The diagram is mine.

4. I am drawing upon the work of Grant, Henry, *Understanding Ulster* (unpublished manuscript, 1983), Chapters 2 and 3. He published an article on this work in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (Summer 1983) entitled "Understanding the Northern Irish Troubles: A Preliminary to Action".

5. Some of the thoughts here derive from unpublished notes by Peter W. Russell entitled "A Way of Approaching Problems".

6. *Ibid.*, cf. p. 86 and cf. Chapter 3.

7. *Ibid.*, cf. p. 83 f.

8. Cf. Batten, T.R., & M., *The Human Factor in Community Work* (London: OUP, 1965), p. 182, point 7.