# simple problem identification

This simple approach shows you how to illustrate (literally draw), discuss and solve problems in your working environment. These problems may be small, but can be frustrating and impact on performance, time and morale. This technique brings these problems out into the open, helping teams to identify and solve them.

## When to use it

If you feel that you and your team are working around problems day in day out, you can use this tool to make time to solve the underlying problems. Saving just minutes of time each day may allow you to do something more productive.

## How to use it

You should aim to do this over a couple of weeks, during a time when most of the team are around. You may find that it helps if the team understands the benefits of a visual and orderly workspace.

### Step one

Draw a plan of the workspace, department or area of focus on a large piece of paper. It doesn’t need to be a work of art, but should be recognizable to the team so they can label things easily.

### Step two

Discuss and agree with the other members of the team that, over the next few days, they will identify problems as they go along by putting a cross on the workspace plan with a short note to describe the problem. For example ‘no paper in machine’ or ‘had to get a X form’. Also consider issues faced working online, like ‘duplicate files in different places’ or ‘important unit information difficult to find’.

### Step three

Be flexible about the next steps. Give people the permission to solve problems as they emerge. Focus on creating interest and curiosity, making sure that you are positive about people, acknowledging small and seemingly trivial problems. Encourage people to use small tests of change to see if their ideas work in practice.

### Step four

Discuss at team meetings. Highlight how some of the solutions have become new habits and spot any problems. Some issues may need alternative solutions. Tools like brainstorming may help if ideas haven’t worked, or are hard to identify. Some tricky problems may need to involve other people, or may need to have a stronger project planning emphasis.

### Step five

Keep the picture of the ‘issues’ in a prominent place until most of them are solved, especially those that have a longer lead in time. You should be able to do most of the work within a couple of weeks.

## What next?

Review things to see if there is any slippage: the focus is ‘make time to save time’.

If there are issues that are outside your team, these may take longer to solve. However, there are a couple of strategies that you can try:

• Ask the right person outside the team ‘how can this team make your job easier?’ and then tell them how they can make your job easier.

• Build up a case for improvement by identifying the amount of time wasted.

## Other useful tools and techniques

Building trust can help staff to express themselves, whilst managing conflict can help if staff feel defensive about a problem in their area. Lean principles can help to eliminate duplication and steps that contribute to waste.

A number of other tools that help with building a visual picture of processes and departments may be useful as part of your next steps, for example, process mapping and spaghetti diagram. The spaghetti diagram focuses on flow through the workspace in a very visual way. 5S is an approach to organizing the workspace and helping to build visual prompts to reduce time wasted hunting for things which aren’t in the right place.