

## Setting the Task

The beginning is half of every action.  
–Greek Proverb

The way you state the task is important. (Now, there is an understatement!) The task acts as a baseline from which you jump. It should represent the culmination of a considerable amount of thinking by the task owner or owners leading up to the formation of the task. Two points:

1. Careful definition of the area for invention will often encourage a clear option to emerge.
2. A quick start into invention, without a careful definition of the task, often results in defining the task.

We believe that if you get nothing from this exercise other than a clarification of your objectives, the time will have been well spent. You want to make sure that you are working on the right problem.

Specific phrasing of the task is important. It should reflect exactly what you want to do. If the statement is too narrow, it will limit the search for ideas; if it is too broad, it will not give you the direction you need to begin your work. The task should be as complex as necessary but understandable. It should be something you can dream about.

And consider this thought from Elmer Sperry:

As long as you're going to bother to take on a challenge, why not make it one in which you can make an impact.

### EXAMPLE

- Invent new products that utilize existing manufacturing equipment and resources.
- Devise a new way to meet consumer needs for food preparation on the kitchen counter.

Work hard to create a statement that provides direction without setting the expectations. Take for example this task: Try to come up with even more ways to make up for plant inefficiency by building things for which consumers might have a need. This statement may be a good expression of your feelings; it may even be reality but it indicates your need for a good vacation, not an invention session.

And remember...K.I.S.S.

**Keep It Simple ...**

## Selecting Your Task

Develop a task statement for your effort. It often helps to start with words that invite invention, words like Develop a way to..., Invent a strategy for..., or simply How to...

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If you feel uncomfortable with your task statement, the questions below will help you cross-check your task.

Quickly write answers to these questions:

What is really happening? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What isn't happening? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What doesn't happen? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is interfering? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who is interfering? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How do you feel about the situation? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now look at the answers to the questions above and create a list of possible task statements. These can be sub-problems.

Feel free to play around here. We want to make sure to look at the situation from the meta-level as well as narrow down to compile a range of statements.

Use the words "How to" to begin each task statement. For example: "How to target the right customers"; "How to target young customers"; "How to hire more product development managers".

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\_\_\_\_\_

Now ask the question "Why" after each of the statements and write down the answers. Use the answers to form additional task statements.

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\_\_\_\_\_

Finally, change a word in the statements you like the most and see how it affects the meaning. For example: Change "How to target older customers" to "How to market to older customers"; "How to capture older customers" or "How to advertise to older customers".

Look over the possible statements you have listed. Using this work as a guide, craft the statement that best addresses your situation.

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Ask yourself these questions after you have finished.

- Is it broad enough?
- Is it too broad?
- Does it address the problem or only a symptom?
- Would solutions to the problem really meet the need?

## This is Important

Ask yourself why you should do this. Write out why you own the task.

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- If your answer is something like: "Because my boss handed me this book and told me to," you're in pretty good shape.
- You're in good shape if you are a project engineer or product manager and this fits your job description.
- You're in great shape if you are an individual contributor in any area and have the freedom and resources to pursue your thinking.
- You're in trouble if you're the assistant manager in accounts receivable and you want to show marketing and sales at the next receivables review session that you can't collect because they are selling lousy stuff.

This is the start of your invention process. Before you go on, plan your time. Remember, start by setting aside eight hours, ten if there are two of you.

Date (Today): \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Targeted Working Time

PLANNED				ACTUAL
DATE	START	FINISH	TOTAL	TOTAL
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

Mark this schedule on your calendar. Make this a commitment. Keep the basic element of time management in mind, **"The urgent usually gets in the way of the important."** We know this is important. Work to create a sense of urgency around your task.

### A. The Task Headline

The Task Headline is a one-sentence statement that reflects what you are about to do. Give the invention process an action orientation. I suggest that you start it with words like:

Devise a way to...  
 Develop a strategy for...  
 Generate alternatives for...  
 How to...

Take a look at your Task Statement. It should still feel appropriate. If not, change it.

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### B. Early Analysis

The following pages are designed to provide enough analysis to get you going and yet not so much as to shut down new ideas. We are not suggesting that this is all you need to do in every case. We are suggesting that often there is so much information presented that it clogs the creative arteries.

Try this approach as an option. Set aside your questions for the time being. Use the information you do have and take your questions and turn them into ideas:

"Didn't we do an idea development session on this 3 or 4 years ago?"

Can become the idea:

"I wish I could find the notes on all past brainstorming sessions"

Which can become a next step:

1. Research past idea sessions.
2. Propose getting a summer intern to build a concept database.

An interesting addition to the analysis can be the tried and true, five Ws and an H from journalism. Remember—who, what, when, where, why and how? The section called "Mining the Trends" in Chapter 3 provides a good tool for the creative use of information.



3. Why you should be working on this task:

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4. Example of ideas of things that you have already thought of or tried – one or two examples are sufficient:

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5. What are you hoping to get out of this time? For example, are you seeking a lot of focus on one option or many options? What are your goals?

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Now, what would really excite you?

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Go on at this point. There is good reason to believe that over-analysis will create more barriers to thought than it will open—Paralysis by Analysis. On the other hand there are excellent structures like that of the Kepner and Tregoe model that focus heavily on analysis and task definition. For now try accepting that there are things you don't know. What you don't know, your naiveté, may turn into an idea of value.

*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*  
–A. Einstein

And then again, it may not. You still will be ahead; you will not have wasted time. You will have started your exploration.

Note: Use the Analysis section as a second double check for your task. After answering the 5 questions in Analysis, if you find you are working on the wrong problem - repeat the exercises and craft a new statement.

### **CASE: OXO VERSUS MIKE YUROSEK**

The Task Statement makes a Difference

Sam Farber of Oxo set out to redesign vegetable peelers for people with arthritic hands. Their design solution changed the peeler market. The Oxo business was purchased for less than \$300 million.



Mike Yurosek set out to find a use for the oversized carrots he could not sell. They baby carrot was born and crated the 'good for you' snack industry which now includes \$1 Billion a year in baby carrot sales and revolutionized how carrots are grown and sold



What is your task?

- Develop a carrot peeler for boomers
- Develop a way to reduce carrot crop waste
- Develop a 'good for you' carrot snack

