

The Systems Thinking Tool Box

Dr Stuart Burge

“.. bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head. It is, as far as he knows the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.”

Winnie the Pooh - A. A. Milne

18 Words Statement

What is it and what does it do?

The 18 Word Statement is a simple tool that helps a team or individual to succinctly define the purpose and context of a system. All systems have purpose and context and a clear and concise definition greatly helps system understanding.

The box below contains an example 18 Word Statement for a Company Marketing System:

To market the products and services to existing and future clients by the most appropriate cost effective means.

The purpose is *“to market the products and services”*. The constraints are:

- existing and future clients.
- most appropriate.
- cost effective.

In the 18 Word Statement, the purpose is captured as a statement of what the system does – its capability. This must contain a verb phrase (verb noun combination describing an action on an object). Expressing those few key overarching constraints can capture the context. By aiming for 18 words, helps ensure conciseness, yet has sufficient words to provide clarity.

Why do it?

People who use, or are part of a system are often totally unaware of its purpose and context. Moreover, when asked, different users have different, and even sometimes conflicting views as to the exact nature of the purpose. The 18 Word Statement provides a way of achieving clarity and a common understanding as to the purpose and context of a system.

Where and when to use it?

The 18 Word Statement is extremely useful at the beginning of a project or activity to obtain a common and clear understanding of the System of Interest.

Who does it?

An individual or team can undertake the construction of an 18 Word Statement. In general, the outcome is more complete if performed by a team. It is important to emphasise that the quality of the outcome is dependent upon the experience of the team or individual.

How to do it?

If team-based, a good approach is to:

Step 1: Every member of the team drafts their own purpose in less than 18 words

Step 2: Everyone reviews the drafts and together develop a better and agreed version.

In developing the 18 Word Statement it is important to recognise:

- It takes time and care to develop a good 18 Word Statement.
- A good 18 Word Statement is SMART:
 - Succinct and Specific
 - Measurable
 - Achievable
 - Relevant
 - Time bound
- Should be about 18 words long:
 - Too long (above 25) and it will not be easy to remember
 - Too short (below 10) and it will not be SMART.
- It is very rare for the first attempt to be 100% correct.
- Always be prepared to modify and improve the statement of purpose and context as more is discovered about the system.

What Goes Wrong: The limitations of 18 Word Statement

There are two issues when attempting to construct an 18 Word Statement. The first is concerned with people viewing it as trivial or an unnecessary task. I frequently encounter; “we all know what the purpose is”. They rarely do. They all have a view but they will be different and the whole purpose is to arrive at a common understanding.

The second issue is excessive “wordsmithing” that can lead to a bland statement that has the “committee” feel. The key here is to get people to use imperative (command type) verbs. It also important to avoid verbs like:

- Maximise
- Minimise
- Optimise
- Improve

These verbs indicate a direction but not a level or target and therefore are difficult to confirm.

Success Criteria

The following list represents a set of criteria that have been found to be useful when developing an 18 Word Statement. Ignore them at your peril!

- Team size between five and eight.
- Team constitution covers system life cycle and potential technology.
- Use an experienced independent facilitator, particularly when attempting to combine individual’s efforts.