

TOOLKIT #3

The Root of Recurring Problems

The same problems keep coming back because they share a cause. Map how your symptoms connect, and find the one problem worth solving first.

A Lever & Core toolkit

Based on the Current Reality Tree, a Theory of Constraints Thinking Process · Eliyahu M. Goldratt

---

Every complex organization is inherently simple.

01 · WHAT IT IS

Many symptoms, one root

Late reports, tired staff, confused donors, programs that fade out. Teams usually treat these as separate problems and fix them one by one, and a few months later they are back. Very often they are branches of the same root. This toolkit helps your team find it.

What it is

A **Current Reality Tree** is a one-page map of cause and effect. At the top are the things the team dislikes about how things are today, the undesirable effects. Below them, linked by simple "if… then…" arrows, are the causes that produce them. Following the arrows down, the branches converge on a small number of causes, usually one: the **core problem**.

Solving the core problem removes many symptoms at once. Solving a symptom removes one, for a while.

When to use it

- The same complaints come up in every staff meeting or review.
- Previous fixes worked briefly, then the problem returned.
- Departments blame each other for the same breakdowns.
- A new director or board wants an honest picture before acting.
- You need to explain to funders or the board why change is needed.

The NGO translation

In mission-driven organizations the core problem is rarely a lazy person or a bad tool. It is more often a **policy, a habit, a measure or a shared belief** that once made sense: "we never turn down funding", "every program must be new", "overhead is bad". The tree makes that visible without blaming anyone.

TIME	WHO	YOU'LL NEED
2–3 hours for a first tree with the core group; a short follow-up to check it with others.	4–8 people who know the work from different angles, including someone who will challenge.	Sticky notes in two colours, a large wall or whiteboard, markers, the worksheet.

Source. The Current Reality Tree is one of the Thinking Processes of the Theory of Constraints (TOC), developed by Dr. Eliyahu M. Goldratt and presented in his book *It's Not Luck* (1994). This toolkit is a simplified, original adaptation for NGO teams by Lever & Core.

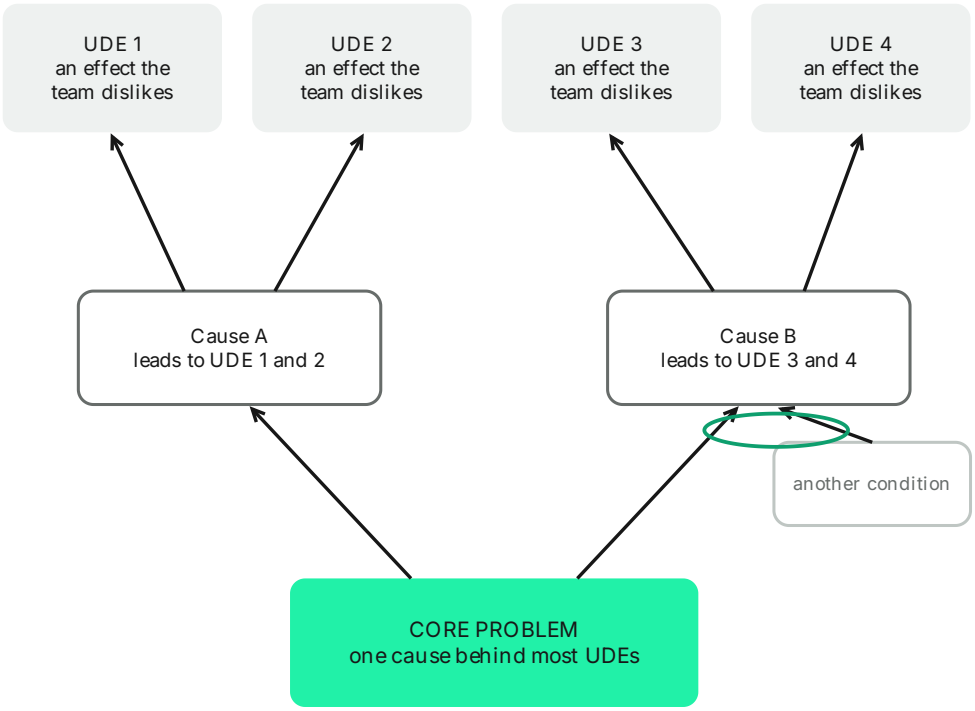
02 · THE FRAMEWORK

A tree you read from the bottom up

WHAT WE SEE
Undesirable effects (UDEs)

WHY IT HAPPENS
Intermediate causes

WHAT DRIVES IT
The core problem



Arrow = "If (bottom), then (top)." Read the tree upward.

Ellipse = both causes are needed together.

Three building blocks

Undesirable effects (UDEs): real, current situations that hurt the goal. They are what people complain about.

Causes: the conditions that produce those effects. Each arrow says: if this exists, then that follows.

Core problem: the cause at the bottom that, directly or through others, leads to most of the UDEs, and that you can influence.

Four checks for every arrow

- **Clear?** Would an outsider understand both statements?
- **Real?** Does the cause actually exist today? What is the evidence?
- **Enough?** Does the cause produce the effect on its own, or is something else also needed? If so, add it with an ellipse.
- **Only cause?** Could something else explain the effect too?