

Excerpt from *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2017, “Are You Solving the Right Problems,” by Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg.

“When asked, most people quickly identify some solutions: replace the lift, install a stronger motor, or perhaps upgrade the algorithm that runs the lift. These suggestions fall into a cluster of solutions that share assumptions about what the problem is—in this case, that the elevator is slow.

However, when the problem is presented to building managers, they suggest a much more elegant solution: Put up mirrors next to the elevator. This simple measure has proved wonderfully effective in reducing complaints, because people tend to lose track of time when given something utterly fascinating to look at—namely, themselves.

The mirror solution is particularly interesting because in fact it is not a solution to the stated problem: It doesn’t make the elevator faster. Instead it proposes a different understanding of the problem.

Note that the initial framing of the problem is not necessarily wrong. Installing a new lift would probably work. The point of reframing is not to find the “real” problem but, rather, to see if there is a better one to solve. In fact, the very idea that a single root problem exists may be misleading; problems are typically multi-causal and can be addressed in many ways. The elevator issue, for example, could be reframed as a peak demand problem—too many people need the lift at the same time—leading to a solution that focuses on spreading out the demand, such as by staggering people’s lunch breaks.”

Resources

Adams, Marilee G. and Marshall Goldsmith. (2015). *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 12 Powerful Tools for Leadership, Coaching, and Life*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Daly, Peter H. and Michael Watkins. (2006). *The First 90 Days in Government: Critical Success Strategies for New Public Managers at All Levels*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Herman, Amy E. (2016) *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Wedell-Wedellsborg, Thomas. (2017) Are You Solving the Right Problems? *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, pp. 76-83.

Videos:

- Downtown Dog Rescue, Los Angeles, CA (2:00)
<http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/23/us/cnn-heroes-weise/index.html>
- Human Walking Program, Melbourne, Australia (2:00)
<https://vimeo.com/92823193>

Reframing Your Own Problem

1. What is the current problem? Describe it in a sentence or two.
2. What do you want to accomplish by solving the problem?
3. What are your assumptions about the problem and its possible solutions?
4. What might you be missing?
5. Who else can you involve to help you analyze the situation?

Seven Practices for Effective Reframing

1. **Establish legitimacy.** Educate others in the problem owner/solver group about the reframing method so they can understand it and, hopefully, be willing to give it a test drive. You can do this by sharing the “Are You Solving the Right Problems?” article and by relating the slow elevator problem. It’s a powerful way to quickly explain reframing and how it differs from merely diagnosing a problem.
2. **Bring outsiders into the discussion** in order to fully understand the problem.
 - a. **Look for “boundary spanners.”** The most useful input tends to come from people who understand but are not fully part of your world.
 - b. **Choose someone who will speak freely.** Consider turning to someone whose career advancement will not be determined by the group in question or who has a track record of (constructively) speaking truth to power.
 - c. **Expect input, not solutions.** Outsiders are there to stimulate the problem owners to think differently, not to solve the problem. So when you bring them in, ask them specifically to challenge the group’s thinking, and prime the problem owners to listen and look for input rather than answers.
3. **Get people’s definitions in writing.** Before a discussion, ask problem owners to write out in a few lines and in sentence form their individual definitions of the problem. This will provide an opportunity to notice different perspectives on the problem and to identify similarities, themes, etc. Next, copy the collected, unattributed definitions onto a flip chart so everyone can see them and react to them in a meeting. Receiving and analyzing these multiple definitions will sensitize you to the perspectives of other stakeholders of the problem.
4. **Ask what’s missing.** When faced with the description of a problem, people tend to delve into the details of what has been stated, paying less attention to what the description might be leaving out. To rectify this, make sure to ask explicitly what has *not* been captured or mentioned.
5. **Consider multiple categories.** Invite the problem owners/stakeholders to identify specifically what category of problem they think the group is facing. That is, is it an expectations problem? An incentives problem? An attitude problem? A training problem? (e.g., lack of knowledge, skill, ability) Encourage problem owners/stakeholders to step back and explicitly examine *how* they think about the problem. They may be missing an approach to a solution because they’re thinking about the problem in a habitual or rote way.
6. **Analyze positive exceptions.** To find additional problem framings, look to instances when the problem did not occur, asking, “What was different about that situation?” Exploring such positive exceptions, sometimes called bright spots, can uncover hidden factors whose influence the problem owners may not have considered. Analyzing positive exceptions can also make the discussion less threatening to the problem owners, especially in a large group or public setting.
7. **Question the objective.** Pay explicit attention to the objectives of the parties involved by first clarifying and then challenging them. For example, the success of the animal shelter intervention program hinged on a shift in the objective, from increasing adoption to keeping more pets with their original owners.

Avoid creating a diagnostic checklist; it tends to discourage actual thinking.