Seeking the Right Problems to Solve: A Podcast with *What's Your Problem* Author Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg

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Featuring Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg and Tom Ehrenfeld

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg makes a bold promise in his new book, What's Your Problem? (Harvard Busines Review Press, 2020.) He seeks to upgrade people's ability to solve problems by understanding how to solve <u>the right problems</u>. Learning to reframe problems can help people to stop chasing the wrong solutions, better understand what they are grappling with and, in some cases find radically better solutions.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Welcome to the LEI podcast. It is an honor to have Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg here today. He has written a recent book with the Harvard Business Review Press whose title is *What's Your Problem? To Solve Your Toughest Problems, Change the Problems You Solve*. Welcome, Thomas.

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg:

Thank you, Tom. Thanks for inviting me.

Tom:

Let's kick it off. I'd love you to read a short passage from your book, from page 22, to give us the sense of the framing of why you think this discipline is important.

Thomas:

This is part of my enumeration of reasons why we need to get better at problem framing, and it goes like this.

> "Finally, reframing also matters to the continued functioning of our society. Solving conflicts in a sustainable way requires people to find common ground with their adversaries, and that often starts by figuring out what problems people are trying to solve rather than fighting over solutions. As I'll show, reframing has been used to find new solutions to deeply entrenched political conflicts. At the same time, learning to reframe is also a useful mental defense system because research has shown that framing can be weaponized. Take a careful look at how people from warring political

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parties talk about a hot topic, and you'll see how they use reframing to try to influence your thinking. In this sense, reframing can be seen as a central civic skill. By boosting your problem-framing literacy, you'll become better at detecting when somebody is trying to manipulate you. A population more fluent in framing is a population better protected against demagogues and other people with ill intentions, and that, dear reader, is why you should recommend this book to your allies while softly slandering in it to your political opponents."

Tom:

Thank you, and I want to preface this by saying this was not an effort to relate this book to current political events. Readers can take from that as they want, but it's more a function of the fact that I was struck by your optimistic tone about problem-solving. Indeed, you note that the basic trait of good problem-solving is people's optimism, and let me ask you a very basic question. What is the problem that your book solves?

Thomas:

It's that attempt to supply a missing link or a missing skill in problem-solving, if you will, because what I found is that people are generally good, of course, in problem-solving. They're also pretty good at analysis, and we have a lot of good frameworks for that out there, but there is that third, and in my view, higher level skill of problem framing, or problem finding you call it in academia, effectively making sure you are solving the right problem to start with before you delve into analysis. And that's just something I found through my work that people don't master. People may know about it. They may have some Einstein quote they'll throw out there, but when you look at the nuts and bolts of this, we don't have the... compared to the really, really strong solid frameworks we have around analysis, there's nothing really comparable on that front with problem framing.

If you ask me, "Where do you go to learn problem framing?" If this was negotiation, I'd say, "Well, there's this one-day negotiation course you could take that's really great, or here's a great book, *Getting to Yes*," so one of the descendants from that. But when it comes to problem framing, we don't really know too much about how to dig into that black box of how to do it, so that's really what my book is trying to solve for.

Tom:

The more I read in your book, the more I was struck by its human aspect, in that it increasingly deals with the messy problems that emerge when one tries to take a productive approach to problem framing. And I would suggest that perhaps what's simple is nothing simple, and that it quickly becomes messy. So, a few questions. Boil it down in five minutes or three minutes what you mean by reframing, and then tell us why is it so hard.

Thomas:

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I think the high-level introduction. Yeah, I love to just share the classic, the slow elevator problem, because that's a good anchoring kind of example to refer back to. To elucidate, what do we mean when I talk about framing versus analysis for instance? Then I'll get into the hard part and why we may not have gotten this right yet despite having known about it for so long. So, the slow elevator problem. You are the owner of an office building. The tenants are complaining about the lift that it's too slow, and they threaten to break their leases if you don't fix that. Now, what's noticeable here is that the problem has already been framed for you.

Namely, the problem is that the lift is slow, and what inexperienced people do there is they jump straight into solution mode and say, "How do we make it faster?" People who are better at problem solving, they know they need to analyze the problem first, and then they ask, "Why is the elevator slow?" But crucially, that may be the exact wrong question to start with because there are ways of approaching this that have nothing to do with the speed of the elevator, and the classic example is, of course, if you ask a wizened landlord, well, they're going to suggest that you put up mirrors in the hallway in order to distract people. That example is really like a very simple way of remembering what is the difference here between analysis, why is the elevator slow versus going in and saying, "Is the speed of the elevator really the right problem to focus on or might there be a better problem out there to delve into and address?" In this case that people perceive the wait as annoying.

So, I'd say that's the high-level example, and to be clear, the mirror, it's not the ultimate solution here because whether a mirror will really work depends on what's going on in the real world. If people are running late for important meetings, then the mirror is just going to be a distraction, but it is capturing that essential idea of the discipline we need to get better at, namely, the initial framing of the problem. Now, what you just said, I'm excited by this angle around the human aspect because I thought about, "Wait a minute. Reframing isn't new. We have known about it since the days of Einstein, Peter Drucker, and so on." The first empirical research pops up in the '60s around this. So, why aren't we better at it yet?

I think part of this answer comes down to the fact that many of our existing problem-solving methods have come from a specific environment, namely the manufacturing floor. That is the discipline that has created the bridgehead in terms of really understanding how we solve problems. Now, if you think about it, the problems we encounter on a manufacturing floor, like suddenly, there's defects in what's coming out on the other end. That universe is a scientific universe. It is a systematic rigorous process. We know to an amazing degree of exactness what happens in step five when you put a car together. So, those are what sometimes called algorithmic problems. There's a clear structure or a pathway for how to solve it.

Now, to be clear, like algorithmic doesn't mean easy. As you all know, if you've ever tried to assemble a LEGO model or an IKEA bed, or God forbid, a LEGO model of an IKEA bed, that can get really complicated, but essentially, they are systematic rigorous universes. Now, in that context, reframing doesn't play that big a role because we know what the outcome we want is

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where you understand, "Okay, we have to track down what went wrong here." That though is only one type of problem. Like many, many, many of the problems that we face in reality, sometimes also in manufacturing environments, they're human problems. They are fussy. We don't have an exact guideline for how to do this on a systematic basis.

They are, I like the word, heuristic problems. Think of raising your kids or think of putting together a good business strategy or driving a team so it performs optimally. Those are not very well-structured problems. They're messy, and that means very often that there are many different ways of trying to tackle them. So, I think when you ask, "Why is it so hard? Why have we not been better at it?" I think that part of that explanation is historical. I'd be curious to hear your own... I mean, with your knowledge of lean and everything, what's your take?

Tom:

I think that categorizing it as a manufacturing domain issue is... I would push back on that label, and I think above all, it's a cultural challenge, and I think you can see manufacturers, which historically have analyzed problems and made decisions in a very top-down, pre-existing way where they make decisions that are structured to support existing values, something like Roger Smith at GM deciding that robots are the answer. That's just an edict, and I think he was making a type of decision like that at a time where Toyota was kicking everybody's ass by making countless daily decisions about how to make better cars, less expensively and with higher quality, by engaging the people who were doing the work in improving the work, and the foundation for their ability to do that was based on a culture of problem-solving.

I think there's altitudes that we could fly at with this because I think that to go global for a second in the greater economy, it's very much what this journalist Rana Foroohar describes as makers and takers—that we're increasingly oriented towards financial engineering and massively extracting massive amounts of capital immediately in the short term, which is the "solution" as opposed, to patiently understanding how to make better things daily. So, to actually create profits by creating value as opposed to extracting them.

Thomas:

What I love right now about this conversation is that we are applying this meta perspective to reframing like, "What is the problem of problem solving?" What I'm hearing you say that a couple of reflections I think that the top-down approach, AI is now the solution. That's a very typical pattern that somebody has fallen in love with a solution, and it's now pushing that down over everything, which is inherently problematic. I think it can make sense in some contexts where you want to explore what AI can do for us and so you assign part of the business, and say, "Folks, let's dig into this." The second it becomes an intended panacea to everything, then you start misapplying it to or not understanding what to solve. I think... Yep. Yeah.

Tom:

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Well, I don't want to get too meta, but I guess the question I would ask is does this reframing approach run the risk of becoming another hammer that gets applied to all problems? So, let me ask you to once again tell listeners what that really means, reframing, and then address the hazard of, say, defaulting to it as-

Thomas:

Of the hammering.

Tom:

Yeah.

Thomas:

Yeah, the hammer, I think it's such a useful metaphor or idea for remembering the dangers in some of these areas, and I love going meta by the way. So, let's please do that. I think fundamentally reframing is the practice of going in. Whenever you have a problem, instead of solving or even analyzing that problem, you start by challenging whether you are understanding the problem correctly from a framing level, like that question of, "Do we really need to solve for the speed of the elevator or might there be a different way of approaching it?" Can this become another hammer? Yes, absolutely. I like to think about what's our goal here. It is to enable more efficient problem solving and effective problem-solving across whatever we're dealing with, and sometimes, you don't want to go in a reframing direction.

There are many problems we solve perfectly well without reframing, and I tend to joke that if you happen to know people who are coaches, they can sometimes overapply that lens. You go up to them and say, "Hey, by the way, do you know where the coffee machine is?" They go, "What's your real problem?" There's a point at which you just want to know where the coffee machine is. What I think is essential here with reframing is to understand that it can be a very rapidly applied practice because what is the danger of the hammer? The danger of the hammer is when you try to use it for so long that you lose the opportunity to change course in the appropriate time frame, meaning if you think every problem needs to be reframed and you think the solution is to go off two weeks to the mountains and think deep thoughts, well, that's going to be problematic. You're going to waste a lot of time and resource. You're probably going to get stuck in paralysis by analysis kind of mode.

Whereas if you can practice the idea of reframing in increments of 10 minutes, literally going in and being very focused on trying to challenge our understanding of the problem and our assumptions about it, then it is a hammer that it's not that expensive to use, and I think that that's what I've... I think you asked earlier, "Why aren't we better at using this already?" I think it's that misperception of the notion that reframing necessarily has to take lots and lots of time. That famously misattributed quote, Einstein quote, which he never said about if you have an hour, spend the first 55 minutes understanding the problem. No, that's a recipe for paralysis by analysis. That'll be a disaster.

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Tom:

Okay, so earlier you mentioned talking about how this relates to lean, and you have John Shook's book, *Managing to Learn*, which details his understanding of the A3 process, which he was taught while working at Toyota, and it strikes me that for productive problem-solving to happen on a regular basis, there's a number of preconditions that have to exist. So, you need managers who are oriented to practice what Ed Schein calls humble inquiry, which you cite in your book. You need trust and patience and a willingness to experience great progress through small steps, and again, as Managing to Learn shows, an orientation to frame problems as gaps between a current state and ideal state and then express it in an improve-able manner, and my question is what do you think are the essential prerequisites for useful problem solving to happen?

Thomas:

I think what you just mentioned, those things are correct, and I know you've had Amy Edmondson on earlier, right? Having that not just the trust but also the willingness to challenge each other while feeling you can do that safely. The key I found here is to not try to boil the ocean because I found... There are some people who start by saying, "Well, in order to get this right, we need to change our entire culture of the company." That makes it a very difficult problem to solve because cultures, how do you do that quickly?

What I've seen work well is to start figuring this out in much, much smaller units where you get the people you work with, like your closest couple of colleagues when you start getting them aboard because there, you have much greater leeway to start creating more the psychological safety, getting the inquiry kind of attitude for. You can lead that personally and then gradually building out from there, starting to do it with another team you collaborate with a good deal, potentially with a client you have a trusting relationship to, and so on.

So, I think that insight helped me understand how to integrate it properly and even ideally, like start where you already have a trace of those things. Instead of starting with the team that's furthest away from the goal, start with the one that's pretty close so you start seeing, "Okay, this is the point of the method. How do we make it work in our world?" And then trying to build it from there.

Tom:

We start with a model line just to get it going in one place and then build on that.

Thomas:

Yeah, and I would also say... You mentioned here this notion of gaps, like the current and ideal state. That is a very powerful approach. What's interesting to me is that those things tend to be relatively easier to define, again, and what I think of as the manufacturing environment. Not easy, but at least easier. Whereas if you look at human problems, I don't want to say that manufacturing problems aren't human problems. They are as well. One of the psychologists, I

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talk about Steve de Shazer, found that people in who enters a therapy session for the first time, in two out of three cases, they can't actually explain what their goal is.

So, of course, before you talk anything about reframing, getting those basics in place and just saying, "Okay, you say you're unhappy. Let's talk about what a more specific goal might be here and what that gap is." So, I think there's a huge value with fussy problems. Before you get to the reframing part, Just going in and framing it clearly and being clear about what is our goal here. Well, how do we think about it?

Tom:

Right, right. Just to play a cheap trick, how has reframing helped you personally? Are there problems or approaches that you've applied this to?

Thomas:

Nothing cheap about that trick, I feel. I mean, the most immediate example is probably the book itself. When I started out with this, I figured we need to have everything. In this book, there's research and practitioner experience with reframing from almost any field you can imagine that's delved into this issue of how do we frame problems better, and I started out classically. Being academically-oriented, I said, "Okay, how do we get everything in here?" Then luckily enough, the way I developed this is through over a period of roughly seven years, working with companies, trying to solve real problems and frame those problems correctly, and it just became super clear to me that my challenge was not to put everything in but to strip almost everything out, because I found the second you make the process or the framework too complex, it just gets used a lot less.

There's almost a spectrum here from very rigorously taught and systematized processes that experts can apply. They can be immensely powerful, and then to the other end of that spectrum where it's something that you don't need special training for. You don't need to have taken the Six Sigma whatever color belt you want. You don't need all of the setup and the expertise there. You just have this one thing that you can potentially apply in a meeting on a Wednesday afternoon without a lot of preparation. That was the problem I wanted to solve for because I felt in that first end, the system, and again, we have it covered fairly well.

If you get a good lean practitioner in the room, they're going to catch this probably. Whereas the vast majority of people and the vast majority of the problems they solve, that's not the resources we have. We have to figure out how do we make this viable to teach really broadly in a manner where non-experts can get this.

Tom:

But the existential question facing lean in the lean movement is how to teach it and how to sustain it. That is how to build on the gains that people have reaped from it because it's very

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much, I think, a human challenge. It's just really hard to teach what it is in a way that people see the relevance to their daily work and become not just compliant but willing and really energized to own it. Now, that does happen, and that's... I mean, the folks at LEI feel like we're on a mission, and I mean, we all to a person deeply believe in this, and it's just very hard to teach and to teach in a way that people apply it and build it.

So, I guess my question is... Where have you had useful failures? I mean, your book makes the argument by sharing 100% successes and solutions and ahas. So, where did you encounter resistance or frustration that hopefully proved useful?

Thomas:

I mean, all along the way because I had the pleasure of sitting in with both individual teams sitting and struggling with it, and I could sit and see, "Oh, wait. We're getting off track," or we're falling into rabbit holes and also on a corporate level, there are a number of my clients where I've tried to cascade it to a much larger group, like training 300 people in it. We then are supposed to give that training further down, and I'd say the last problem is the one I've struggled the most to solve. I think there's a couple of interesting things here. One, like you say, well, we go out. What are we doing in the space that we're sitting in? Are we really sharing new ideas with people? In my view to reframe that, I'd say we're sharing old ideas with new people.

So, one of these things is to draw in all the existing knowledge we have and figure out how do we just distill the best practices from that that are already existing and get it out there? One of the things I've figured out was necessary was, well, you give people the tool, the methodology, but you also create space for them to figure out, "How do we start using it in our context and given what we already have?" So, there's an integration job that I think many other tools and frameworks are blind to. They're just like, "Oh, great. Here's the hammer. Go forward." No, you actually have to give people time to figure out how to modify the hammer and how to use it in their context.

One other thing I found, and this is the sustaining thing, which to me is really interesting. I started with professional problems, and I ran into that challenge that, okay, we work through a professional problem, and then when I revisited that client two months later, I didn't really see a lot of evidence that they had latched on to it. Same mistakes they're making. What I found to be crucial beyond all the tools we know about, "Oh, well, you have to create processes. You have to train somebody in it. Yada, yada." It's actually to move it over to a completely different domain, namely the personal. A breakthrough for me was when I started in teaching people this, I have a core module of two and a half hours where I teach the methods people. We actually start by applying this to personal problems.

So, I deliberately say, "Forget about work for a second. Tell me about an issue you have with your kids. Like right now, it's COVID. You're homeschooling. You have... " like whatever that is,

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and then you train people on those. What I found is first it brings it home more effectively than if it's just work, you want to do the work problem as well, but later. But crucially, you start to get people into a mindset where they apply this to all the problems they run into. When they think, "Well, my wife and I have struggled with something here. Maybe we should think about what the problem is and do that together, or we have this issue with the neighbors," or whatever it is, these very small quotidian problems once you get people into the habit of just taking that step back and say, "Wait. Do I understand this problem correctly?"

Then you're on the way there, but what have you seen? What would you say in terms of that sustaining challenge or other reflections?

Tom:

Let me put pause on that for one second. I did want to ask you for an example or two because your book has some and just to, again, help somebody understand how this applies, say, in reframing a personal problem.

Thomas:

I have a good friend Tania Luna who is the surreal name. She's married to Brian, and early in their relationship, they're married. They had a lot of fights and fights over inconsequential things. Great marriage, but that was just a big issue, like who walked the dog? Who handled whatever. Those things, and in the beginning, they were doing the classical Freudian thing of saying, "Well, what's really going on here? Well, I'm from a different culture than you. We were raised in different ways with different people, personalities," and all of that might have been true but was not really helpful. Those things are difficult to change.

What made the difference here was Tania's observation of a bright spot or a positive exception, this root cause analysis thinkers are familiar with to. They suddenly had one morning where they had a discussion around a normally really sensitive topic, and it was painless. So, that prompted Tania and Brian to recognize that part of the problem might be different styles, personalities, backgrounds, but part of the problem was they tended to have those discussions after 10:00 in the evening when everybody was tired. You know that old advice you sometimes get from your divorced uncle at a marriage like, "Never let the sun go down over your anger"? Horrible advice because that means you have fights at that or conflicts at that point where they turn into fights. So, super, super simple example of how, A, you can have struggled with an issue for a long time.

We all walk around with problems that we tried to solve before. We haven't made headway on them for months or years, and then how sometimes by questioning the nature of the problem, by trying to identify different aspects and framings of it, you can make radical leaps at times. Tania Luna will tell you they literally solved something like 80% of their problems. They just disappeared. They still have some, but an 80% reduction in the tough fights, that's amazing.

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Tom:

It was simply a question of reframing by asking the question. It's, "Oh, what are the circumstances for these fights? When do they happen and might there be other things contributing to them? And can we have them at a different time when we might be more disposed to resolve them?"

Thomas:

Yeah, exactly, and interestingly enough, that particular problem I saw replicated almost exactly in a professional context. I work with an innovation team that their big problem was their team spirit was being destroyed by these fights they had over which ideas to kill, and when I spoke about it, it turned out, well, they were scheduling those for late in the afternoon instead of handling it either right after lunch where people are stocked up on protein or something similar. So, that brings into something else. Of course, once you start getting this problem literacy or framing literacy I'm talking about in the personal domain, you start seeing the same patterns, of course, in work problems because they are not always that fundamentally different.

Tom:

So, develop a problem literacy, which you mentioned in the book, which I think is brilliant. So, to circle back to your question back to me, I think it's important to understand something Taiichi Ohno, who was a developer of the Toyota Production System, wrote what he called it nothing more than the application of powerful common sense, and I think that applying this systematically over time is a profound challenge, but ultimately, one needs an environment where people are willing to let their guard down and trust each other and be willing to enable the best approaches to emerge from collective thinking.

Thomas:

Yeah. If you talk to people in the entrepreneurial space, I mean, there are some areas where it's just accepted that you lie. If you ask people, "Okay, so how many customers do you have?" It is completely normal for them to double or triple that number. That's just like, "Oh, yeah. We have this many and this many," and it's just all considered part of, "That's how we do business." Now, I think that partially works probably, but it's a little disconcerting to me that there is, which I think links to your point about the short quick win mentality versus, "How do we get these things structurally right? How do we build for long-term sustainability?"

Tom:

I think that my experience with lean has shown me that the patient, humble daily work, it's a flywheel that absolutely builds and self-reinforces, and that's how you create value for customers, which in turn creates value for valuable companies, and I think it does start at an elemental level with... What did Schein call them? Schein humble coaching.

Thomas:

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Yeah.

Tom:

And people who have been shown that they have a voice and a stake, it's combined with what Amy Edmondson writes about, which is psychological safety because I think that the hazards of any prescribed problem-solving or improvement approach, like that in your book or like lean is that it's implemented by solution bringers, by authoritarian male type of thinking in which people tell others how it is, and it's a tough contradiction though because Toyota can... I've read that it has been brutal. It deeply abides by its principle of respect for people, and yet that doesn't mean always asking polite questions. There's a flip side of a very challenging aspect to it. Respect is about asking people to do the best.

In fact, I think one difference between what I've learned of lean and what I saw in your book is your book's more optimistic. Your book is very hopeful in terms of having a way to help foster more productive problems to more productive solutions to tough problems, and I think one thing I would want to see more of is more operational methods and mechanisms. So, I guess I'm rambling, but are there prescribed methods and contextual tools that support what you are writing about in your book?

Thomas:

I tend to say that there's a lot of those, and it's really a question of exploring. So, the back of my book, I have a good deal of references in it, and there online as well. If your listeners don't actually want to buy the book, it's for free on the book's website.

Tom:

Tell them the website please, clearly.

Thomas:

It's howtoreframe.com, and I think... a couple of reflections. I think that optimism is interesting because I had a conversation with people in the political space for instance who are very like, "Wait. I know what reframing is, but I've always thought of it as the weapon, like this is how we spin our solution to be chosen in front of the opponents," versus this, which is a constructive approach, which is like, "How do we collaborate to really understand the problems and then hopefully solve them together?"

Tom:

I think the key work on that is by Lakoff. Don't think of an elephant.

Thomas:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Exactly.

Tom:

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But he's not presenting it as a weapon. I think he's more going backwards and assessing how this has become so prevalent.

Thomas:

Well, I think Lakoff's book is really interesting because, as you know, he's a self-declared liberal, and he almost wrote that book to a liberal audience saying, "Hey, folks. The conservatives are really good at using this. We need to get better at it." So, I'd say overall, that's the framing, but when you then get into it, yes. He has what you might think of as a constructivist hopeful approach. I do think there's something to your reframing about what is the essence of getting this right. It's so easy to think of these things as processes like, "Oh, we need to have a process for reframing." I think you should, but equally, we're talking about a cultural challenge about a local culture challenge in your team and ultimately maybe what you're saying about identity, like who do we want to be? How do we want to move forward in the world?

Having said that, I would say they are also tactical challenges, like one thing is getting this right with your team and those folks you can work with on a day-to-day basis with those incremental improvements. On the other end, there's a situation where you run into a new client, and they are like, "Hey, can you do the solution for us?" You need to make them step back and reassess their problem, and I think there, it's legitimate to go in more tactical and like, "How do you handle that?" Well, one of the things I wanted to do with the book is actually to legitimize the method, so people who know what this is can go in and say, "Hey, there's a Harvard book on this, and hey, take a look at this, and this is why we want to talk to you about your problem instead of just going out and delivering that solution you want." So, legitimacy to me is one of the big issues I'm trying to solve for as well.

Tom:

Excellent. I'm going to ask probably for the third or fourth time and forgive me for this, but again, what should people do? Is there one question? A set of questions? What are the most effective ways to put the advice in your book to practice?

Thomas:

Yeah, I'd say at a very high level, think of this as a habit, and the habit is the following. Whenever you have a problem, that isn't immediately yielding a solution or whatever. Then you do the following. First, you just state the problem. Write it down separate from the solution that you may have in mind. Then you gather a couple of people, and you ask them to challenge your thinking on the problem. Deliberately tell them, "Don't try to help me solve this. Try to challenge my thinking here. Try to come up with different perspectives on what really might be going on. Do we understand our goals? Do we understand the other people who are involved here and their problems or whatever is going on?"

Then at the end of that process, you want to figure out, "Okay, what's our next step?" Because that, again, especially with smart people, we can get stuck too long in that thinking phase when

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it's really about getting a quick jab into the gut of your assumptions, if you will, and trying to check if we are awake. I got tunnel vision and focused on the speed of the elevator instead of asking, "Wait, what are the tenants actually really trying to achieve? Are they just whiny or are they running late for something important?" Which are very different types of problems to solve for.

So, that habit, like when you run into a problem, frame it, gather a couple of people to help to challenge it, and then figure out how do we move forward and keep momentum in the problem-solving process.

Tom:

Brilliant. Yeah, and I think the biggest takeaway I had from... I edited that John Shook book, *Managing to Learn*, and working with John was just a masterclass in understanding this, and the big takeaway for me was to work backwards, not forwards with problems, and that rather than try to get validation by solving it quickest and best, to really work what they call the left side to just do the hard work of better understanding the problem, bring in other people to challenge your thinking, and I think the third piece, which I think is operational or tactical is to work on clarifying the gap you're trying to close and find a way to express that gap in improvable ways, and doing that work can often point you in the direction of meaningful countermeasures.

The term is countermeasures, not solutions, because the assumption is that every solution creates new problems, and that's not a bad thing, but it's all about countermeasures, and yeah. Then I think your book does have extensive operational suggestions, and you talk about coming up with numerous options for instance, and I mean, you have a number of...

Thomas:

Yeah, I want to touch on something you bring up here, which is when you say this is an issue of, "Okay, how do we actually measure that gap? How do we make it tangible and quantifiable to work with?" In my mind, that's where we start to get into the analysis and more the solving part of the work. What's key here though, exactly what you said, is that that loops back into the framing. It's not the case that this is a three-step process where you go and you frame it correctly first and then you are off to the races. This is, of course, an iterative process. You have a hypothesis. You go out. You analyze it. You may try and experiment. You talk to people. You do the gemba thing, and then you come back to your understanding of the problem and say, "Given what we just did, do we need to rethink whether we're solving the right problem or not?"

So, this is a process that, of course, is intertwined with all the work we're already doing pretty well. We just need to remember not to forget that part lest we can become trapped in too early in a specific solution or analysis.

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Tom:

For the sake of this podcast, I want to respect length, both yours and the listener. I'll say that, and we'll cut this out. I'm happy to say on and chat more, but I think that's a good place for us to stop for the podcast, and let's remind people. The name of the book is What's Your Problem? by Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg. It's published by Harvard Business Review Press. The subtitle is To Solve Your Toughest Problems, Change the Problems You Solve. Tell them the website again.

Thomas:

Howtoreframe.com.

Tom:

Thank you, Thomas.

Thomas:

Thank you, Tom. Thanks for having me on.

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