

Free Book Excerpt

CYCLES: The simplest, proven method to innovate faster while reducing risks
A work from Bryan Cassady and 22 Innovation Experts

CHAPTER 11

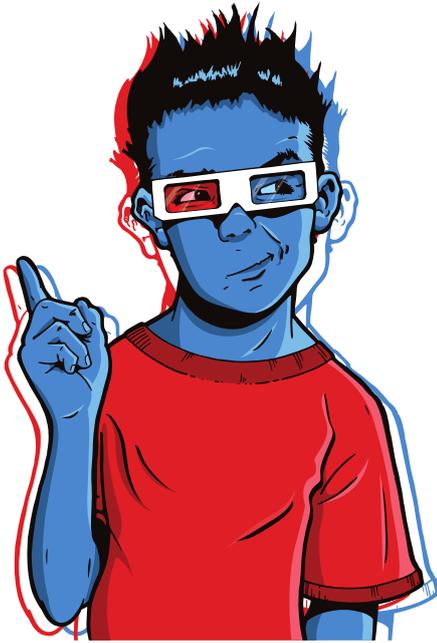
DEFINING YOUR INNOVATION CHALLENGE: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM YOU NEED TO SOLVE?

“
We all like to solve problems, but that isn't always the most effective way to make things better.
”

FRITZ SEIDEL

CO-AUTHOR OF THE BOOK CYCLES



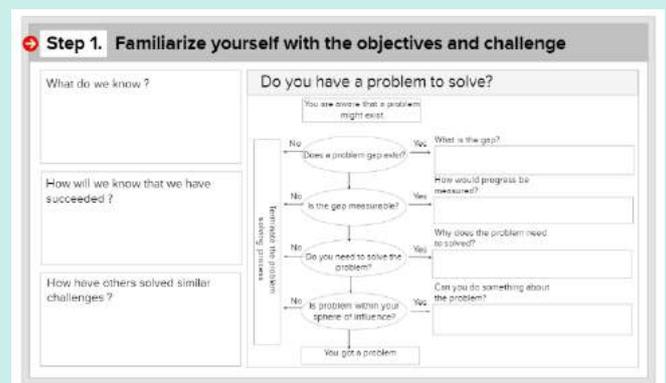


WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THE CHAPTER

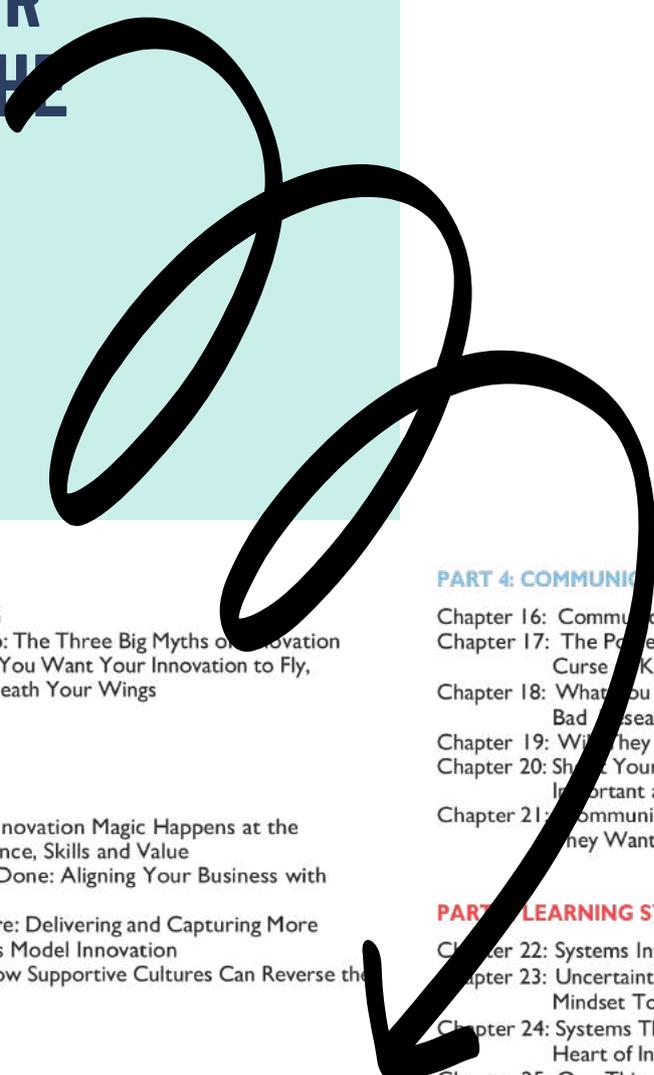
KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- **Do not rush to find a solution** – first, use problem structuring to make sure you really understand the problem.
- **Try reframing the problem** – sometimes, looking at the problem differently can lead to it not being a problem at all.
- **A solution is not always the best answer** – dissolution is usually best, but absorption and resolution are also viable options for dealing with a problem.
-

YOU WILL ALSO GET A LINK TO SOME USEFUL CANVASES



CHAPTER FROM THE BOOK CYCLES



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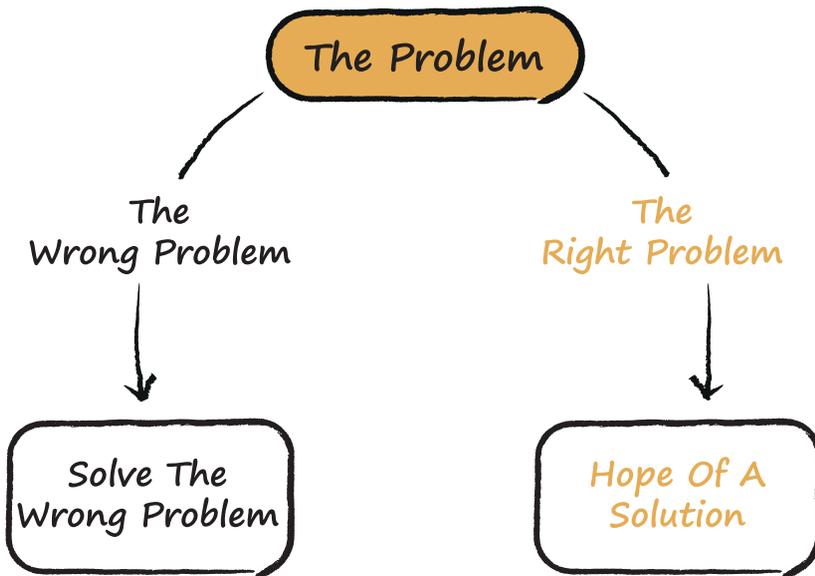
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CHAPTER 11: DEFINING YOUR INNOVATION CHALLENGE: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM YOU NEED TO SOLVE?



We all like to solve problems,
but that isn't always the most
effective way to make things better.

“The Lines Are Too Long!”

Waiting in a line that seemed to go on forever, stretching along a sunbaked sidewalk, little Suzie was unfazed. She was captivated by Cinderella talking to all of the little girls; her brother Johnny was not interested in princesses. Before he could pull Suzie's hair again, Buzz Lightyear arrived, and it was Johnny's turn to be starstruck. Both Dad and Mom breathed a sigh of relief.

This chapter was co-written with Fritz Seidel.

“The lines are too long ... was the complaint regularly received from otherwise happy customers at Walt Disney Company theme parks. Disneyland in both California and Florida, while hugely popular, both suffered from the same problem; the sheer number of visitors meant that queues for rides were consistently long.

When tasked with finding a solution, the team chose to focus on the problem and determined that reducing the queues’ length was a seemingly impossible challenge. For safety reasons, they could not change the number of people admitted at a time, and space restrictions did not allow for additional rides. It was then that the Disney “Imagineers” took a completely different approach; instead of trying to eliminate the queues, they set out to make them part of the enjoyable theme park experience.

Art and murals were added to queuing areas, and as technology developed, they installed videos and interactive games to keep their guests distracted. They sent the Disney characters to interact with the anxious parents and their over-excited but impatient children, keeping them entertained during the long wait. The queues did not get shorter, but customers stopped complaining as being in line was now part of the fun and offered welcome relief to parents. Sometimes tackling a problem head-on may not be the best approach, but viewing it from a different perspective could provide the perfect solution.

Dealing with business problems is not just a matter of looking for solutions. That may sound counterintuitive, but there is a better, more systematic way to approach problems that has been shown to produce good results consistently.

Instead of rushing to provide a solution, spend time looking at the problem. In the Disney example, the obvious approach was to shorten the queues. Instead, changing customers’ perception of the queuing experience was the key. Looking at problems differently can help avoid the issue that faces many managers who find themselves solving the same problems repeatedly.

In this chapter, you will learn that it is not just about finding solutions but learning a more effective approach by looking at the whole problem-solving process in new ways.

We All Love to Solve Problems...

**“If I had an hour to solve a problem,
I’d spend fifty-five minutes thinking
about the problem and five minutes
thinking about solutions.”**

ALBERT EINSTEIN

There is a perception that one of the leading roles of management in any organization is to solve problems. It may offer some truth, but there is a danger that managers come to see their roles as wholly defined by their ability to solve problems as promptly and efficiently as possible.

The desire to quickly find and implement a solution is understandable, but it can solve the wrong problems or find neither effective nor permanent solutions. Reactive problem solving can be a barrier to innovation. The temptation is always to use the solution that worked last time, even though this implies that a solution to the original problem was never found.

Of course, managers must solve problems! But learning from those problems offers a more long-term benefit to the organization. If they take the time to really study the problem and consider all alternative angles, it can provide even more benefit, thus generating better and more innovative solutions.

Problems facing organizations are rarely simple. Most are the outcome of complex causation chains and separate but connected sub-problems. Trying to solve a problem without fully understanding the underlying issues is equivalent to bailing water out of a small leaky boat. It may help keep you afloat in the short-term, but it would be better to understand why the boat is leaking and to fix that instead.

There are many different terms used to describe complex problems, but one of the most common is “messy”, first used by author Dave Hancock in his book *Tame, Messy and Wicked Risk Leadership*. According to Hancock, messy problems are “clusters of interrelated or interdependent problems, or systems of problems”. These are approached by first attempting to understand the scope and reach of the problem entirely and only then attempting to resolve their complexities and look for solutions.

Even if taking the time to understand your problem seems like a lot of work, it is important not to skip this step. If you want to be an artist of creativity, you can follow the advice of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Creativity and problem finding in art*. He shows what separates good artists from great artists is seldom their ability to find solutions, but rather their ability to identify the right problems.

Problem finding is what makes expert idea builders

Average Idea builders

- Let's get started
- Where have I seen similar problems
- What solutions come to mind

Pattern Seekers
Solution Addicts

Expert Idea builders

- Why is this a problem?
- Do we understand the challenge correctly?
- Are there other ways of looking at it?

Pattern Breakers
Problem Finders

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Getzels, J.W (1988), *Creativity and problem finding in art*.

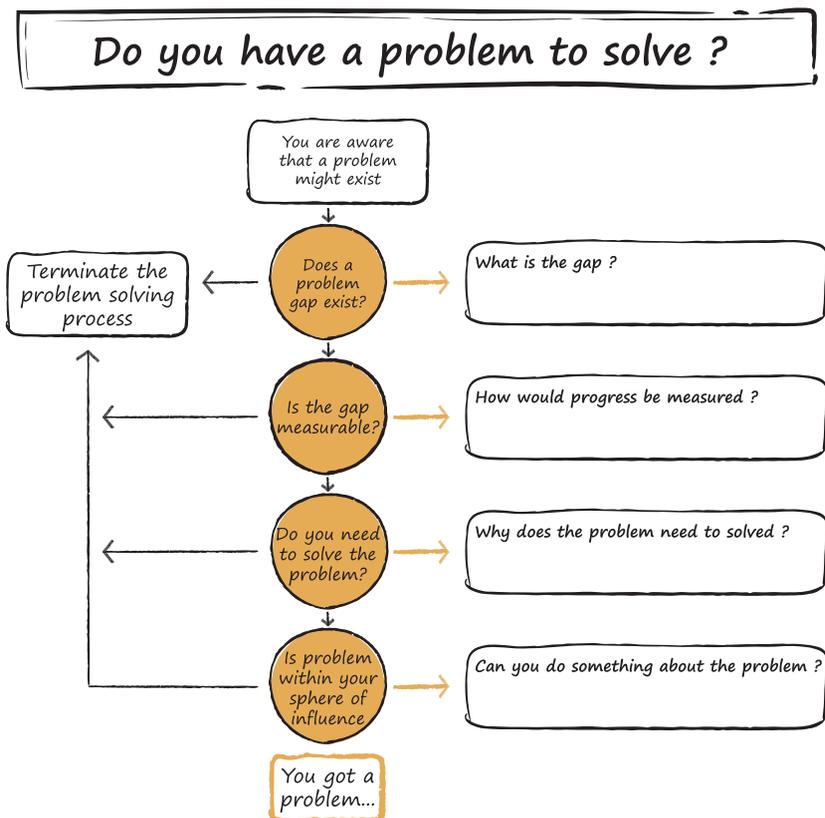
Do You Have a Problem?

Yes? The start is not about solving a problem; it is about identifying if you have a problem. At first glance, this seems like a weak question, as we can all recognize a problem when we encounter one. However, if we are going to consider how best to approach problem-solving, we also need to spend a little time thinking about just what we mean by a problem.

In very general terms, a problem is a mismatch between how things are at the moment and how we would like them to be. Arthur B. VanGundy, in his book *Techniques of Structured Problem Solving*, proposed a more formal definition. A problem, he claimed, consists of five distinct preconditions:

1. The existence of a gap between what is and what should be.
2. An awareness that a gap exists.
3. The motivation to decrease the gap.
4. An ability to measure the size of the gap, and,
5. The ability and resources required to close the gap.

This formal definition may be helpful because we can then break down how we decide if we have a problem by looking at each of these conditions in turn. In this way, the process may look like this:



Doing the Wrong Thing, Righter.

“We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem.”

RUSSELL ACKOFF

Once we decide that we have a problem, the next issue is precisely describing what that problem is. We often base problem-solving on the mistaken assumption that all the issues around that problem are already understood by merely identifying a problem, and all we then need to do is focus on these to identify a solution. Unfortunately, this is rarely true. Messy problems are the most common in large organizations and are generally complex. Unless the real nature of a problem is understood, solutions are likely to be superficial and ineffective.

When looking at a problem, do not just accept the information you are given; think about other factors that may not yet have been identified. Think about the perception of the problem; sometimes, meaningful change can come not from seeking solutions but from changing perceptions. Think about underlying causes, objectives, and motivations. Are these fully understood? If not, can a change in thinking negate the problem or lead to a different solution?

If we attempt to solve problems quickly, without an understanding of the underlying issues, there is a danger that the solutions we provide may actually make things worse. Solving a problem as if it were entirely separate from everything else that goes on in an organization may create more serious problems. Even asking stakeholders what they need may not help. Henry Ford is reported to have said, when asked about the design for his first automobiles: *“If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.”*

The reality is the problems your users are raising, or your experts are talking about are often not the real problems. Part of what you need to do is to empathize more deeply to understand the problem entirely. With a more in-depth understanding, you can take different actions. Instead of delivering faster horses, you can focus on designing better ways to commute, like improved motored vehicles.

Here are some questions that will help you gain a more in-depth understanding of the problem:

- WHAT is it about?
- WHAT are the barriers or constraints?
- WHO has the problem?
- WHO is the real user, or what does the real user need (not what they are saying, but the job they are trying to do)?
- WHEN does it occur or not occur?

- WHERE does it occur or not occur?
- HOW would we measure if it was improved or solved or made worse?

A deep understanding of the problem is essential. Without this, we may tackle the wrong problem or the right problem in the wrong way. The title of this section comes from a quote by Russell Ackoff:

“The righter we do the wrong thing, the wronger we become. When we make a mistake doing the wrong thing and correct it, we become wronger. When we make a mistake doing the right thing and correct it, we become righter.”

Providing a quick-fix solution may mean that we continue to follow the wrong approach and get better at it. That is doing the wrong thing, righter. Far more effective is using a *problem structuring* approach to find the right thing and then learn how to do it better.

Problem Structuring.

The main purpose of structuring is to reduce a problem to its essence and, as far as possible, unclouded by personal bias. Only when we are at this point can we begin to consider what to do about the problem itself.

Problem structuring is best done not just by one person but by a team who brings their perspectives to the process. We all tend to react to problems subjectively based on our own experience and expertise. Suppose we are trying to resolve a complex, multidisciplinary problem. In that case, we are more likely to fully understand it if we have a range of different experiences and expertise involved in the process.

Using a team to undertake problem structuring also helps avoid personal bias. It can affect how we see any particular problem, and it often arises when we are very familiar with a specific part of an organization or a particular process. Russell Ackoff tells a story which illustrates this perfectly:

A much-loved elderly woman attended a newly established free health clinic to have a check-up. She had health issues which involved her heart. On her way back up the stairs to her fourth-story apartment, she had a heart attack, collapsed, and died on the stairs.

The new clinic team was horrified, and the Head of Medical Services lamented the lack of doctors; *“If only we had more doctors, we could arrange home visits, and this wouldn’t have happened.* The Head of Finance disagreed; *There are lots of doctors, but the problem is that they’re all in private practice, and she couldn’t have afforded a home visit.* The Head of Support Services disagreed with both; *If we had installed an elevator in that old building, this wouldn’t have happened!* The Head of Social Work didn’t agree with any of them; *If she hadn’t been alienated from her son who owns a large bungalow, she could have lived with him, and this wouldn’t have happened!”*

What kind of problem was this? Was it a medical, financial, architectural, or social work problem? The answer is that it was simultaneously none of these things, and all of them – labels like this do not help define the real nature of the problem; they simply reveal the experiential bias of the people applying them.

How do we recognize when our structuring of the problem has gone as far as it can? One way of checking this is by asking a series of fundamental questions about the problem:

- Do we agree that we have all the information we need to structure the problem?
- Are we all agreed that we have an understanding of the real essence of the problem?
- Does everybody involved understand the problem in the same way?
- Are we all agreed that we are defining the right problem?

Only if the answer to all of these questions is “yes” can we assume that we have a good understanding of the problem and the structuring phase is complete. However, we are not yet ready to think about solutions. Instead, we need to consider whether we have framed the problem in the best way?

Framing the Problem.

“The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution...”

VANGUNDY

Framing is how we describe and interpret a problem, including the context within which the problem exists. It is essential because framing a problem poorly can be a barrier to finding an effective solution. Even more useful, reframing can itself sometimes suggest a solution.

Behavioral scientist J. W. Getzels published an article titled *The Problem of the Problem*. This article included an anecdote that neatly encapsulates the benefits of framing / reframing problems. The story, as related by Getzels, goes like this:

On their way to a seminar, two people in separate hire cars are driving on a deserted highway. The first car has a puncture, and the driver stops. On checking the trunk, he discovers that no jack has been provided, so he cannot change the tire. He formulates the problem as “*I need a jack*” and he begins to walk back towards the nearest town, hoping that he will be able to hitch a lift and find a shop where he can buy a jack.

A short time later, the second hire car also has a puncture along the same stretch of the deserted highway. The driver stops and also discovers that no jack has been provided. However, this driver formulates the

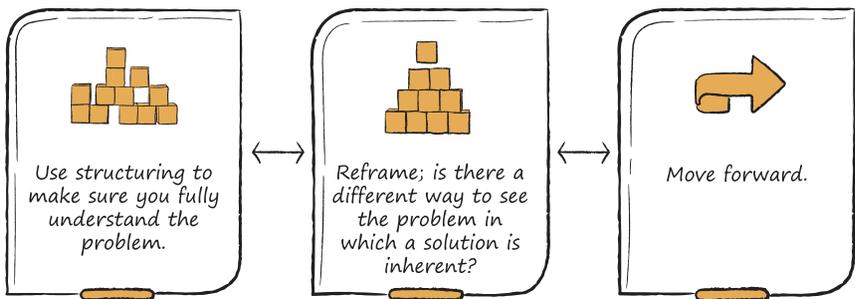
problem as “*I need a means of raising the car.*” This driver sees an open barn a short distance away with a block and tackle, used to raise heavy bales of hay. This driver takes the car to the barn and uses the block and tackle to raise it to change the flat tire.

The result is that the second driver is on his way to the seminar while the first is still walking back towards town to search for a jack. In each case, the situation was the same, but by framing the problem differently, the second driver saw an easily accessible solution close at hand, which the first driver missed because his focus was on a narrower view of the problem.

Sometimes, reframing suggests a solution that is contained within the problem itself. It has been described as a “*Problution*”, a term first used by VanGundy to “*symbolize the close relationship between problems and solutions*”. The act of reframing the problem in different ways can produce a framing in which the solution is inherent, and this combination of problem and solution is more common than might be expected.

Reframing not only helps to find ways of dealing with a problem but can also make the process more positive. Ronald Lippitt at the University of Michigan observed that when groups begin tackling a situation by focusing on problems, they get depressed. Setting out to solve a problem overwhelms people and drains their energy. By contrast, Lippitt saw that when groups began working towards a vibrant vision of a “*preferred future*”, they had more energy and motivation. Remember the Disney example; finding ways to make queues move faster would probably not have been an exciting piece of work, but creating a more enjoyable queueing experience provided the *Imagineers* with satisfaction and fulfillment. Do not focus on problems; focus on where you want to be once you fix them.

Reframing is not something that is done just once, it is part of an iterative cycle:



I suggest you repeat this process at least four times or until you find a *problution*.

If, after four attempts, you have not been able to reframe in a way that negates the problem, it is finally time to think about what can be done to deal with the problem itself.

Making Problems Dissolve Away.

“Give a hungry man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”

CHINESE PROVERB

Most of us think that the best response to a problem is to find a solution. However, Dr. Russell Ackoff described four different ways of dealing with problems, of which only one involves finding a solution. All are valid approaches, but all have particular applications and benefits, and these four ways are generally considered as a hierarchy, from least to most effective:

We will use the example. Your partner is complaining that you never cook nice dinners anymore.

Absolution means ignoring the problem in the hope that it will become less important over time. If we accept that a problem is a gap between where we are and where we want to be, absolution means modifying the view of where we want to be. It is probably the most common way to deal with problems in an organization – unless the problem is sufficiently serious, we learn to live with it and work around it. Absolution can work well in a static environment, though where there are constant changes, an ignored problem can become more rather than less significant over time. It may also work well where a problem has a fixed and known duration – there is no point in undertaking a six-month program to examine a problem that is likely to last only three months.

Example, absolution would mean simply ignoring this complaint and hoping that it will be forgotten. (ps. From personal experience, this is not a suggested solution)

Resolution means looking into the past to find ways of dealing with a current problem. It does not necessarily mean that you will find an optimum solution, but there is a strong temptation to believe that it may work again if it worked previously. This approach involves qualitative judgments, trial, and error, and may provide an answer that is “*good enough*” and takes us back to a previous state where the problem did not exist.

Example, resolution would mean that you would once again cook a meal for your partner that had previously turned out well.

Solution means precisely what it says, finding a course of action that negates the problem as far as possible. It is what we are conditioned to do, but there is a danger that a solution that is not fully considered will provide only short-term answers or may even create new problems. It is also worth considering that no problem ever truly stays solved in a

dynamic organizational environment. Problems exist within a particular and ever-changing context, so even though this may seem the best approach, it will only provide a temporary solution.

Example, a solution would be if you went ahead and cooked something new and appetizing. However, your partner may then expect you to continue cooking interesting new meals.

Dissolution means redesigning the system in which the problem exists to remove it or change perceptions or approaches to negate the problem. It is the best approach and the most effective way to create lasting change.

Example, you take your partner out for a pleasant meal in a restaurant rather than cooking yourself.

Often, restructuring or reframing a problem can help find ways to dissolve it. However, that is not always possible. In that case, a solution should be sought. If a solution cannot be found, it may be possible to consider a resolution for the problem. If none of these are workable, we may have to absolve ourselves of responsibility for finding a response and instead learn to live with it. Let's take a look at a particular, real-life example.

Refrigerator doors can open from the left or the right. Demand for either type varies according to the customer's personal preferences and where the refrigerator is to be placed in relation to other units and appliances.

In the 1950s, the Appliance Division of General Electric was one of the largest suppliers of refrigerators in the US market. Stocking both right-hand and left-hand doors caused major inventory problems. Both types had to be stocked, and demand variations often led to an excess of one type and running out of another. It directly affected sales, as if a customer could not buy a GE refrigerator with the door opening they wanted, they were likely to buy another brand.

The initial response to what was seen as a stock-control problem was absolutism, simply ignoring the issue, but this had a marked and negative effect on sales. Next was resolution, and they asked the sales teams to use historical data to forecast future demand for stocks of both door types. This solution was partially successful, but the variations in demand continued to be a problem.

The final answer to the problem was dissolution. GE redesigned all of its refrigerators with doors that could be hung on either side. Customers no longer had to choose between one or the other and, even better, if the refrigerator was moved to a new location, the door could be rehung to open the other way if required. GE sales of refrigerators improved, and the problem dissolved.

In this example, reframing changed the focus so that this was no longer seen as merely a stock-control problem and helped lead to dissolution as the most effective response. However, that is not always possible. If the problem cannot be dissolved, you may have to look at solutions.

We Have a Problem...

If you have identified a problem and decided that absorption, resolution, and dissolution are impossible, you will want to start looking at potential solutions. In general, problems fall into two distinct categories:

Engineering problems are relatively simple, and the solution will involve a defined and limited change to a technology, a process, or a system.

Non-structured problems are more complex, and their solution will involve a high degree of creativity.

If you are dealing with an engineering problem, you can develop a hypothesis that will lead to a theory that can be tested, prototyped, and refined. You may need to involve engineers and specialists in developing your hypothesis, but this should allow you to create a theory reasonably fast. In general, finding a solution to an Engineering Problem is relatively simple.

If you are dealing with a non-structured problem which may include nested sub-problems and cut across several processes and systems, your solution must be a creative one. This type of problem, also referred to as “messy”, will be complex and most likely require a complex solution. Developing such a solution can be made easier by using the “*True North*” concept introduced earlier.

Using the *True North* approach provides a framework to allow you to define your approach to a problem. It is important because whatever approach you take is probably not going to be simple. Having a coherent way to express the problem and what you intended to do about it is extremely useful in planning and communicating this to others.

TRUE	Truly Simple	A headline that is suggestive of the mission.
N	Narrative	WHY this is VERY IMPORTANT. The story should be so clear, people will understand 1. “why we want to get started” and 2. Know enough to get the “how” right...
O	Objective	Finish the sentence with ONE mission, “we need ideas for...”
R	Restrictions	Design, time, resources, investment, regulations, people, etc., etc.
T	Tactical Constraints	Design, time, resources, investment, regulations, people, etc., etc.
H	Here is the place to start	Areas to look for ideas to accomplish the mission including any relevant live project work that is already going on.

Solving problems is an essential part of innovation. But innovation does not just happen when we solve a problem; innovation *is* the solution that results from taking a structured approach to problem-solving.

Key Take-Aways



- **Do not rush to find a solution** – first, use problem structuring to make sure you really understand the problem.
 - **Try reframing the problem** – sometimes, looking at the problem differently can lead to it not being a problem at all.
 - **A solution is not always the best answer** – dissolution is usually best, but absolution and resolution are also viable options for dealing with a problem.
-



Next Steps: Expert idea builders are better at defining and reframing problems. Be like Einstein and take a hard look at your problem before working on the solution. The following 2 canvases will help you to: 1. Determine if you have a problem to solve, and 2. Challenge you to rethink/reframe your problem(s).

Note: As you do this work, you might want to go back and update your TRUE NORTH

Chapter 11A

Defining your Innovation challenge - What is the problem you need to solve



60
Minutes

Objectives

To start thinking more deeply about your problem and clearly define if your problem has all 4 elements of a problem. (1. A gap, 2. a way to measure if the gap is closed, 3. a reason to work on the gap , and 4. something you can work on)

Deliverables

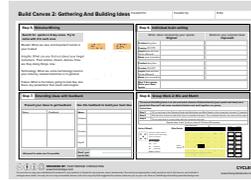
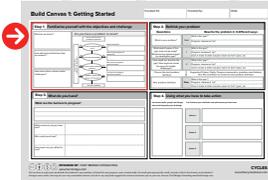
A simple “yes/no”, do you have a problem to solve.

How to

Start by familiarizing yourself with your problem Then work on identifying if you have a problem to be solved.

The Full Build Canvas

This Chapter



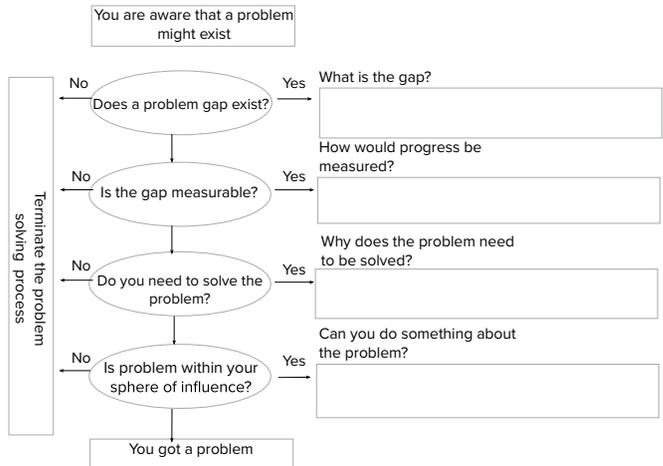
Step 1. Familiarize yourself with the objectives and challenge

What do we know ?

How will we know that we have succeeded ?

How have others solved similar challenges ?

Do you have a problem to solve?



How do you know if you have done this canvas right ?



CHECK LIST

- Think about WHAT is your problem BEFORE thinking about how to solve it
- Clearly define how you will know the problem has been solved. This might be hard,
- Make sure you really have a problem before proceeding. It might look obvious, but it might not be.



tiny.cc/M-build-template

Chapter 11B

Defining your Innovation challenge - What is the problem you need to solve



60
Minutes

Objectives

To rewrite your problem statement by asking a series of questions.

Deliverables

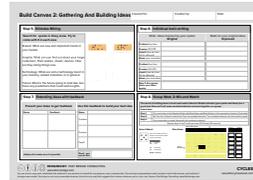
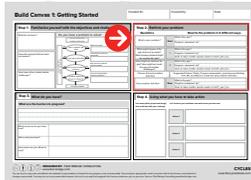
If possible, find a better problem definition that makes it easier to find a solution.

How to

Look at the questions on the left one by one. Using these as prompts, see if there are ways to rewrite your problem to make it easier to find a solution.

The Full Build Canvas

This Chapter



Step 2. Rethink your problem

Questions

Rewrite the problem in 2 different ways

What is your problem ?	START	What is the gap? Progress measured by?
What might happen if the gap does not go away? What missing element might be causing the gap?	1	What is the gap ? Progress measured by? Does it make a better solution easier to find? []yes []no
How might we dissolve the gap? How might we break the gap into smaller challenges? Choose the best problem definition	2	What is the gap? Progress measured by? Does it make a better solution easier to find? []yes []no
		Suggested Criteria: Clarity, Progress measurable, promotes new thinking Hint: Mix and Match to create the best problem definition
New problem definition	NEW	What is the gap? Progress measured by? Does it make a better solution easier to find? []yes []no

How do you know if you have done this canvas right ?



CHECK LIST

- The core of a problem is a gap and a way to measure progress. Were they clearly defined when you started? Don't dismiss the questions as easy questions. Think deeply and rewrite things.
- If this works sparks ideas, continue writing alternative problem definitions someplace else. The more you have, the more likely you will be able to find one that helps you reach a solution faster



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Next Up: Problem-solving is an essential part of innovation; innovations are often solutions to problems. However, the process of building ideas into commercially viable products or services involves much more than just solving problems. In the next chapter, we will look at an approach that the most effective innovators use to turn their ideas into business opportunities.

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Fritz loves structuring, leading and advising change to build up high performance teams and increase the innovation performance of businesses based on a future-proof strategy. Exploiting the full potential from both, staff and the company itself is what he burns for. With 15 plus years as Leader, Internal Consultant and Interim Manager in FMCG & ICT, he is still in a constant beta phase of learning and experimenting for the better.

Realizing that constant change within a trusted environment is the best way to win the hearts of peers, customers and shareholders lead him to more agile work methods and a passion for behavioral psychology and ethics. Throughout his career, he first and foremost worked in transformation projects, building up or reshaping departments or areas to succeed more in the everchanging business world.

Remodeling areas like Customer excellence, Classic & data driven Marketing, Sales (Retail, B2C & B2B), Training & Coaching, Category- & Product Mgmt. within the corporate world made him feel he is ready to enter the even more agile Startup universe. He launched a learning project (www.Zwitch.app) and finally brought www.Day8.io to life to help other startups and corporates to fully live up to their potential when it comes to innovation performance and staff engagement.

LEAD AUTHOR

BRYAN CASSADY

(Oostende, Belgium)

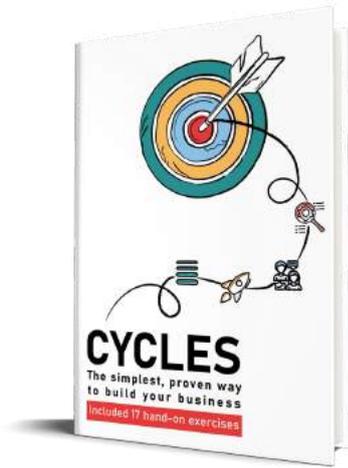
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Bryan is a passionate believer in anyone's ability to innovate and build new businesses. He has personally built 11 companies in 6 countries, with eight of these making money. For the last eight years, Bryan has been coaching startups and scale-ups and trying to help larger companies regain the spirit of startups. He has taught at the KU Leuven, The Solvay business school, EDHEC, ESCLA, and been a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago, INSEAD, Cornell, Berkeley, and many other schools.

He has also led programs like Founder Institute Brussels and the European Innovation Academy. This book results from four years of research with over 400 companies on what really drives innovation success.



BOOK CYCLES

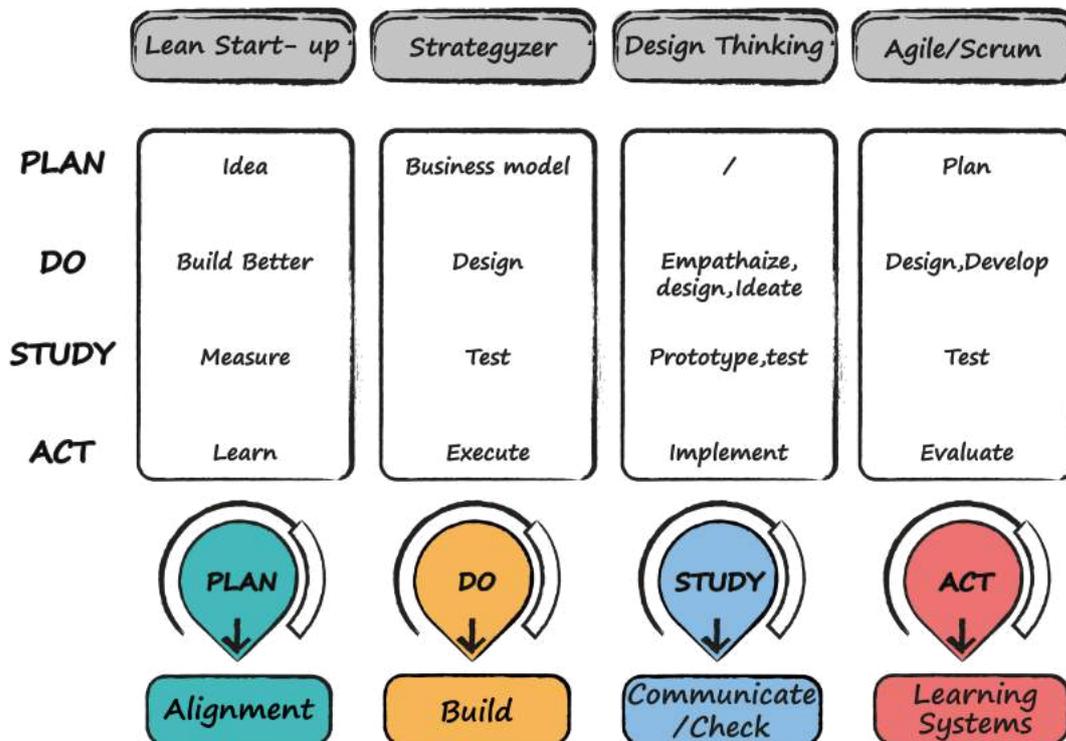
Standing on the shoulders of giants...

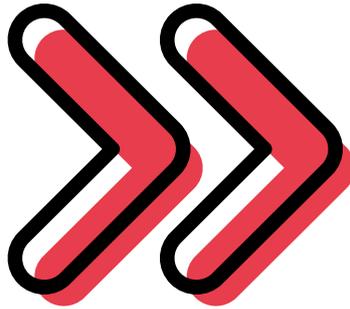
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