



The Perils of Problem-Solving – & How to Dodge Them

Use these tactics to find the best solutions.

By Corey Phelps

It's the most important skill set you probably never learned: solving problems and selling the solutions.

How can you do it better?

Why Even the Smartest People Make Poor Decisions

We all solve problems. We couldn't make it through a day without tackling the steady flow of challenges life throws at us.

Technology can help solve our problems sometimes, but not always. Problem-solving is one of our most complex activities. It's a core part of what makes us human.

So how well do professionals solve challenging problems? Inside their fields, experts excel. But outside of these fields? Not so much.

Within their domain, experts have advantages.

For problems within their field, experts have advantages over novices:

- **They can better recognize** and understand issues, often by using analogies to past problems.

- **They use more effective problem-solving** strategies.
- **They more carefully evaluate** potential solutions against constraints.
- **They more effectively monitor** their problem-solving progress by refining solutions.

These advantages explain why seasoned tax accountants, when compared to novice accountants, can more readily draw on their understanding of tax law and accounting conventions to solve a client's tax problem. They also explain why a lean-management expert can walk into an organization and quickly spot opportunities to increase efficiency that employees missed.

Outside their domain, experts make problems worse.

When experts tackle challenges outside their expertise – or when conditions in their fields change – they often perform like novices. Or worse.

Experts' rich and detailed mental models often constrain their ability to understand problems and search for solutions when working in new territory. Mental models are rigid and resistant to change, particularly when associated with

“Experts are overconfident in their ability to understand problems.”

successful outcomes. In other words: experts become trapped by their expertise.

Psychologist Erik Dane finds that the more experience people gain, the more entrenched they become in a particular way of viewing the world. Compared to novices, experts are overconfident in their ability to understand problems outside their expertise, leading them to develop worse solutions.

In situations that seem familiar, expert performance is poor.

Reasoning by analogy leads experts to develop poor solutions when faced with new-but-seemingly-familiar situations. The process can be summed up like this: “I’ve seen something like this before, so what worked there may work here.”

Analogical reasoning can be a valuable source of insight and creativity. But it can lead to poor solutions when problem-solvers develop analogies based on superficial similarities instead of deep, causal traits.

How to Curb Problem-Solving Risks

The lesson? Experience can be a poor guide when working outside your area of expertise or when the nature of your work changes. But there are ways to sidestep these snarls:

1. Think like a consultant.

As outsiders, consultants don’t have a vested interest in solutions. Being neutral doesn’t eliminate biases, but it does minimize the political and financial pressures that make them worse.

If you can’t hire a consultant, try to get inside the mindset of one. Imagine how an outsider would view the problem you’re trying to solve.

Put your beliefs to a test. Check each one for contradictions. Consider other points of view.

2. Work in teams.

Consultants work in teams and are trained to challenge each other. The core values of top consultancies, for instance, include a “non-hierarchical atmosphere” and the “obligation to dissent.” These guiding principles help ensure that colleagues will call out team members who may be blind to their own assumptions, worldviews, or long-held beliefs.

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Beware Assumption-Based Problem-Solving

In *Cracked It* (cracked-it-book.com), Corey Phelps and his co-authors note that spontaneous approaches to solving problems often end badly, especially when we rely on assumptions and jump to conclusions. Their engaging, helpful book uses real-life examples to explore the main pitfalls. Here’s a simplified version of their five errors of assumption-based problem-solving.

1. Flawed Problem Definition: The first step should always be to state the problem. Be sure you’re focusing on what you really need to solve. Don’t waste time by posing the wrong problem in the beginning.

2. Confirmation Bias: Too often, people seize on a solution because it seems like it will be easy or because they already have the resources to solve it. Thus, they see only the facts that will confirm the solution they want. To counteract this tendency, view each solution as a hypothesis to be validated using factual evidence. Challenge your beliefs by running these hypotheses by many different sources.

3. Wrong Framework: The way we frame something tells us what to pay attention to, what’s most important, and how to understand it. It also tells us what to ignore. We look at what’s in the frame and don’t see what’s outside it. Be certain to structure your problem within the right frame. Ensure you’re seeing everything you need to see.

4. Narrow Viewpoint: Even if you choose the right frame, your perspective may be too narrow. To be sure your view is broad enough, look at the problem from the vantage point of the people experiencing it. Identify, interview, and empathize with those suffering from the problem – as well as those just outside this distribution of people. Ask: What must your solution do to help all these people?

5. Miscommunication: It’s useless to find a solution if you can’t convince decision-makers to adopt it. “This happens far too often in organizations,” the authors note. “How many consulting reports have been skeptically received, then archived and forgotten, producing no tangible result?” Take these steps when making your final report to decision-makers:

- **State your recommendation** briefly and clearly (in one sentence if possible).
- **Tell a convincing story** about how your solution will work.
- **Use compelling examples** and metaphors to bolster your message.
- **Be sparing with facts**, charts, graphs, and slides. Focusing on fewer points will help people understand your core message. Never lose sight of the big picture.
- **List concrete action points** (with time lines if possible). You want your report to trigger action. Remember: Taking action to solve the problem is your ultimate goal.

3. Practice PSAC.

The Problem-Solving Approach of Consulting (PSAC) teaches consultants to follow a disciplined, four-step process for all problems:

- **Develop a well-specified statement** of the problem.
- **Use theoretical frameworks and logic** to structure the problem by decomposing it into all possible solutions.
- **Analyze potential solutions** to identify the most impactful and feasible option.
- **Sell the solution** to stakeholders. To do so, start with the recommendation. Then follow up with the supporting rationale for it.

These steps don't guarantee that you'll find the perfect solution. But they do reduce the risks of problem-solving and increase the chances of coming up with valuable options. Following these practices can help you become top in your field. 

Corey Phelps is a professor of strategy and associate dean of executive education at McGill University. For over 20 years, he's helped organizations become more innovative and strategically agile. He is the co-author of Cracked It! How to Solve Big Problems and Sell Solutions like Top Strategy Consultants. Learn more at cracked-it-book.com.

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