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## Context to the conversation

Bill Burnett speaks about two kinds of problems where people often get trapped with. Gravity problems are those that you can't do much about and Anchor problems are those where a solution has crept into the problem without you realizing.

## Transcription

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**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ):** And talking about problems you talk about gravity problems and anchor problems and you say that this Sometimes these categories of problems can stump people. Can you can you talk about these two?

**Bill Burnett (BB):** Well, you know, again, you do coaching with some pretty high performance people. So you probably run into it all the time. It's like, you know, uh, I'm the CEO, but I don't want to be a CEO anymore. I really want to write poetry, but I still need to make, you know, \$750,000 a year. So can you coach me into a poetry position and make \$750,000 a year? And it's like, that's the gravity problem, dude. There are no, there are no poets who make a lot of money unless you're a rapper and you become a, you know, very famous rapper, you're Jay Z or something. You don't look like a rapper to me. look like a boring CEO. I think a lot of times, if you look at the psychology of it, or even the neuroscience of it, it's just fear-based. I don't like my job, and I want something better, but I'm not gonna quit. I think there are ways to make your job better, but basically, I don't wanna do this anymore, but I'm afraid to change. I have no solution to that. My partner, Dave Evans, who I write the books with, was fond of saying, you can't solve a problem you're not willing to have. So if you don't want to change, can't, know, none of my, none of the design stuff works. Design is about change, about positive change, you're making a better design. So people get stuck on stuff where, you know, the classic was, another one was coaching a young executive, had risen very rapidly in a startup that was growing very fast. And so, know, like he was one of the first people on the product team and that grew exponentially. And so then he was the first, you know, director of the product team. And then was VP of products and engineering, you know, and he just assumed he was gonna get promoted every couple of years. Well, companies gets bigger, growth slows down. We got lots of VPs. got lots of directors, don't need any more VPs. He's like, but I gotta get promoted or I'm, you know, I'm gonna be unhappy. And I'm like, well, your company's not gonna promote anybody for a while. So that's just a gravity problem. You either reframe and come up with, you know, you want a promotion because you want more impact, because you want more money, what do you want? And then we figured out what he really wanted. Yeah, what does he really want? And then he went and got the thing that he could get. So you got to let go of the gravity problems.

You know, I worked with a company that's a very famous company, privately held by the family. And frankly, if your last name is not one of the family's last names, you will never be the CEO. That's just the way it goes. So you're gonna work for a family company, and you're not the son of the guy who started it. It's a gravity problem. You run into this all the time. And people get all wrapped around being unhappy and can't have what they want, it's not fair, blah, blah, blah. like, no, it's just great. If it's not... changeable, it's just a circumstance. It's not a problem. get, like, and this is, you know, this is the old wisdom tradition. I think it's maybe even in the Bible, God grant me the serenity, God grant me the wisdom to change what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed. Right? It's like, yeah, just, and the wisdom to know the difference. Exactly. Anchor problems are a little different. The classic one is Dave who likes sailboats. goes, I really want to sail every weekend, but I can't afford a sailboat. How can I afford this? How can I get enough money to afford a sailboat? And it's like, well, wait a minute. Affording a sailboat is not the problem. You want to go sailing every weekend, right? Right. Let's drop the anchor. Your preferred solution has accidentally snuck into the problem. Drop the anchor for a second, maybe buying a sailboat's later. But how do you go sailing every weekend? Well, it turns out you can join a sailing club. You can co-own 10 boats with a collective, you can just go down to the docks, someone's always looking for someone to crew a boat. There's lots of ways to sail. You don't need to buy a boat to sail and you don't need to, you know, I wish I could do this but I can't do it until I can afford this or until I get this, you know, this training. People do this all the time. put a solution they can't have as the only solution to the problem and they anchor the problem on a bad solution, probably not even the one that would be the best for them but they can't see their way around it. So the reason we identified these two classes of problems is you can get stuck on these for a long, time. I'll give you one for me. It was truly an anchor problem, and I probably was unaware of my anchor for a long time. When I was young in high school and in college, I was a gymnast, and I was in great shape. Gymnasts are in great shape. I'm quite a bit older than that now. Just went to my 45th reunion. And now fitness is important, but I was always thinking, well, I gotta look like I looked when I was 20. And I don't know why I thought that, but no matter what I was doing, I never got to that place. And then I realized, wait a minute, first of all, that's silly. Second of all, it's impossible. And third, I looked at the McKinsey Health Institute, published a thing on what are the 23 factors of health that actually promote longevity and health and it's all about mobility and function It's not about looking like I'm you know 23 and have great, know tummy It's about can I move can I walk can I can I go everywhere? want to go can I do I have flexibility and mobility once I drop the anchor of looking like I used to look and I went towards the goal of functional health everything changed right? So I mean, I teach this stuff and it probably took me five years to get my head on straight.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

**DJ:** I like what Bill says. Gravity problems are just circumstance. You just need to acknowledge and move past it.

I came across an interesting anchor problem recently. I am coaching an individual who just moved on from a senior role in a pedigreed consulting firm. One of the things that emerged from the feedback was that this person may not enjoy building out a large people intensive business but would thrive in a small set up with high quality people solving tough problems. As we were evaluating various pathways, one option that we were evaluating was starting a boutique advisory firm. To which this person said, I am done with Services, I want to start a Products business! As I

listened to him describe this, it occurred to me that the mirror image of a services business is not necessarily a products business. May be it is a spectrum of things. Then we got onto a discussion about what it was about the Services business that really didn't sit well with him and then we realized that there were many feasible pathways that could play to his strengths and would be energizing, not just a products business.

## End of transcription

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### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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