



Guest

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg is the author of *What's Your Problem?* (Harvard Business Press, 2020), a book on how to solve the right problems. His research has been featured in Harvard Business Review, The Economist, The Sunday Times, The Telegraph, BBC Radio, Bloomberg Businessweek and the Financial Times. His work on innovation led HR Magazine to recognize him as a "Top 20 International Thinker".

I believe that we are taught how to solve problems in our growing up years but one of the distinctive elements of leadership is about knowing which problems to solve and which ones not to solve. How we frame problems and which ones we go after is arguably one of the meta-skills of the times we are in.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 92nd conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations from leading people from various domains on three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers. Just like businesses think about where to play and how to win in the context of their strategy, we all think about the two questions – where to go and how to grow at various points in our lives. These questions become that much harder in a world of abundance, multiplicity of options and limited feedback. Through this podcast, I hope to share some insights that might help you navigate these questions in a more thoughtful way.

While podcasting accounts for 10-20% of my time and effort, my primary vocation is that of an Executive Coach and a Sounding Board with CEOs/Entrepreneurs. I engage with leaders and organizations with a growth mindset and helping them play to their unique potential. You can learn more about the podcast and my work at www.playtopotential.com.

My guest this time is Thomas Wedell Wedellsborg. **Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg** is the author of the recently published book - **What's Your Problem?** (Harvard Business Press, 2020), a book on how to solve the right problems. I believe while in the early years, we are taught to solve problems well, leadership at senior levels is often about picking the right problems to solve and framing them well. You often have teams to take care of the problem solving. Your distinctive value add then is your ability to frame problems well. I hope you will find this as informative as I did.

Thomas holds an MA in Media Science from the University of Copenhagen and an MBA from IESE Business School. Prior to his business career, Thomas served for four years as an officer with the Danish Royal Guards.

Without further ado, let us dive into the conversation with Thomas.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Thomas, really excited to have you at the Play to Potential podcast. Thank you so much for making the time.

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (AF): Pleasure, Deepak.

DJ: And I know we went back and forth, so thanks for being patient with the scheduling process in this one. Would love to dive into your recently published book Thomas, What's Your Problem, but before that, I find it helpful to understand how people got here. So can you talk a little bit about the arc of curiosity that led you to writing this book?

TW: It was really anchored in my work with companies around innovation. So I live in the space between academia and practice and in 2013, I had published a book with Harvard Business Press called Innovation As Usual and that led me to be involved in a lot of companies coming in and doing training or keynote speaking or similar things with them. And more and more, I just noticed something curious about problem solving and the book, as the title indicates, is really about the need to solve the right problems what I call framing. And it just struck me very clearly that I was working with very talented people, they were in Fortune 500 companies, they were senior leaders, many of them, and yet at the same time, many of them were not very good at this skill called problem framing, and that really stood out to me. I think most clearly, I did a thing on the West Coast in San Francisco for a client with a Fortune 500 company in the tech space and they had gathered like their top 2% performers across different seniority groups. We had a week-long program with them and there are some really interesting people there too. I did a session on this skill of problem framing and that ended up being the highest rated session after the entire week. Now that was nice from my perspective of course, hey, I did a good session but at the same time, it really just brought home or it worried me because if we have these really talented senior people in a top company that are not good at this crucial skill, like, how come this is not something we already know, how come it is not something that somebody should write a book about that and then, my publisher, Harvard, they agreed with that, and that is really what led to it. So I think in a nutshell, it was the interaction with practitioners and seeing what type of mistakes they made, even the smart people.

DJ: Hmm. And very early in the book, you had my attention with your usage of the elevator problem and that is a great example of how sometimes reframing can lead us to a much better answer. So can you talk a little bit about just that problem and how that is a good case study for us to understand the impact of reframing?

TW: Yeah. Well, you imagine that you are the owner of an office building and that the tenants in the building, they are complaining about the speed of the elevator, it is too slow. What many people do there is to take the problem for granted, okay, the elevator is slow and then they swing into solution mode and say, how do we make it faster, do we put in a better motor or do we have to go out and buy a new elevator for that matter. What a clever landlord might suggest is instead that you put up a mirror next to the elevator because of course what happens is when people see a mirror, they look at themselves and they fall in love, they forget time and the underlying idea there is, what problem are you solving, that a mirror is not necessary a solution to a slow elevator and mirror is a solution to the problem that people think it is annoying to wait. So it is a simple example and it really encapsulates that difference between jumping into solution mode, going into and trying to analyze

the problem which is asking, why is the elevator slow, and then the crucial difference between analyzing it and framing it right which is a question, wait, is this really about the speed of the elevator or is there something else going on, is there perhaps a better problem to solve.

DJ: Hmm. And you go on to say in the book Thomas that as such, solving tough problems is not always about the details or about being particularly a systematic thinker, it can be equally about interpretation and sense-making about seeing what is already there but really rethinking what it means. Can you say more about the statement? It sort of suggests a certain level of perception, a certain level of listening and awareness to what is going on around you, but would love for you to expand.

TW: I really, in some ways, link this to the difference between the humanities and the natural sciences where I noticed many people who are good at numbers, good at analysis, well, they will tend to jump in there. Talking about the elevator problem, they might say, well, exactly how fast is the elevator, how many people are using it. And they are very skilled at that and they immediately start quantifying the problem and dissecting it and that is all great. But the other perspective I am talking about is really holding back from doing that, like, do not necessarily jump straight into that because then you become trapped in the first framing of the problem. What this skill set is about, it is almost taking a step back and noticing, hey, what is really going on here, we have a client who is complaining about something but is that really the issue that we are necessarily dealing with. So there is this strange, I almost like the physical metaphor of thinking, do you delve straight into the problem or do you actually first take a step back and try to see a broader context, try to reinterpret what you are being presented with, so to speak.

DJ: Hmm. And I love the way you connect it to our wiring or our training. I am an engineer by training and you are right, if you have a hammer, there is a temptation to see the world full of nails and sort of look for nails to hit but maybe there is something else to be solved, and really resisting the default wiring which gets you to see the world in a certain way and look at what else is out there. So I love the way you link it to the way we might be wired because of our training.

TW: Very true and you are exactly right with the hammer. I think it is Abraham Kaplan or Abraham Maslow who first says, it is like, yeah, if you give a kid a hammer, they see everything as nails. It really captures that idea I think.

DJ: Hmm. And you also talk about the myth of the false binary. Sometimes, as leaders, people are presented options as A or B, but maybe there is a C out there or D or E or F. So can you talk a little bit about how we ensure we do not get trapped in sort of a false binary kind of a context?

TW: The first step is really to recognize it. And so part of this work is built on another reframing thinker, Roger Martin who has written extensively about this. I really like the historical anecdote of Henry Kissinger, the U.S. statesman, he is joking and he is saying, well, how do you handle a President and how do you work as a civil servant with them. And he says, well, if you want a President to continue working with your current policy, then you say, Mr. President, we have three options, surrender, the current policy or nuclear war. It really beautifully encapsulates how the person defining the options, they have a lot of power that they may use for good or not for good necessarily. So it is really about recognizing, whenever you are faced with, hey, here are your two options, your immediate question should be, well, is there maybe a third option or maybe even the option of not choosing anything right now but delaying the decision for that matter. We know from a lot of studies of decision making that the second you go in and create more options for yourself, your tendency to make a good choice, it improves dramatically. So be wary of those kind of, here is A or B options that life sometimes presents us with.

DJ: There is a funny anecdote here. As a parent, I have a 12-year-old and an 8-year-old. With the younger one, we actually tried this. In the spirit of getting him to eat healthy stuff, we would present two healthy options as a choice, you know, you want carrots or broccoli, and he sort of fell for it a couple of times. The third time he said, I think there is chocolates in the fridge.

TW: Well, that is on you for having smart kids. It is a lot easier if the kids are stupid.

DJ: It is a double-edged sword, but you are right, I think much to be grateful for. I think maybe a more real life situation, actually, this happened to me when I went for a coffee shop, let us say this is a Starbucks equivalent and Indian equivalent of Starbucks, I remember walking up to the counter looking to order a coffee and the guy said, what do you want, medium or large. And I paused there and said, do you have a small. He said, yes we do. And then he gave me a small. But sometimes people, especially in retail, present options and they know that you are rushed and they want you to pick quickly and they give you an adverse selection of the menu.

TW: Certainly, and a beautiful example, even you can do this with very small things as well. I would not be surprised if that was not accidental. From that coffee chain, they probably, at some point, discovered, hey, this actually increases our sales if we ask, and it is benign clients, so customers still have the option of choosing the small one if they want, we are just nudging them.

DJ: Nudging, exactly. I was reading the book *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and he talks about the way you present options and how that leads to help people pick whether it is pensions or whether it is Netflix subscription.

TW: Exactly, right, it is a very good point. I would add to that, you can even sometimes do this with choices that seem binary. An example is, let us say, you do not have kids and you are trying to decide should I have kids or not, that is pretty binary by nature. But even then, you can go in and change the question to say, under what conditions would I want to have kids. Then you start to think differently about it versus as kind of a yes or no choice if you want.

DJ: It is a great point. And maybe just moving into this realm of external versus internal inquiry. One is about solving elevators and solving coffee chain problems but the other is reflecting on our journeys, our lives, our choices and understanding ourselves where clearly we have eyes to see the world but sometimes, the eyes that see ourselves are quite heavily tinted as you would appreciate. So one of the questions that come to mind is, given that there are multiple biases that come into play when we go on the internal inquiry, couple of questions, one is how do we try and stay objective in that pursuit, second is what is the plane at which we conduct the inquiry. As a coach, sometimes people come and ask me how do I play to my potential, sometimes they say, I have made all the money, what do I do with my time, sometimes they say, how do I choose A career versus B career or C career or sometimes they say, how do I make the biggest impact. And you can keep it tactical, you can keep it philosophical and you can sort of go as deep or as broad. So how do you think about getting the plane right to solve some of these lines of inquiry?

TW: Hmm, I almost want to break that up into two things, there is the external internal thing which you highlighted asking about how do we remain objective despite all of these biases. My answer to that is in brief, I do not think we can. Like, being aware of your biases is not the same as being capable of superseding them. So there is a shortcut to that which is to involve other people in your considerations. That is why I think coaching can be so powerful or even just having good friends whom you can draw on, there is something you cannot get objectivity, but you can get if you like inter-subjectivity, meaning, you pull different people in different biases and somewhere between that or among them, you start to get a more neutral perspective and maybe a slightly more distance

perspective on the problems that you are struggling with. So that is one of the reasons we have always had coaches because we instinctively understand the power of having somebody else involved in discussing an internal problem you are facing. I almost want to hear what your experience has been on that front as well. I mean you have worked with those two, do you have other pieces of advice?

DJ: Very true. That is a great point. The one of the pieces of insight I got was from a lady called Tasha Eurich who has written a book called *Insight* which is about how do you deepen your self-awareness and one of the things she says which has stayed with me is, she said, internal self-awareness and external self-awareness which is when you involve others are often orthogonal. You would think that they are highly correlated but her insight was that people can sometimes tell you things that are completing in your blind spot and that can be really powerful. A related point came up in my another conversation with a gentleman called Dan Cable, he is a Professor at London Business School, and he says that when you are trying to reinvent your career or take stock and move forward, get others to contribute to your highlights reel. He sort of uses the metaphor of sports and he says, just like you might have a highlight reel of a baseball game or a basketball game, what would your highlights reel look like in the last 40 years, 50 years, whatever. And you might be a poor judge of the difference you have made to other, so get others to contribute and that might tell you something about yourself that you yourself might not be aware of. So I guess all of these point to the roughly similar point, involve others in what shape or form, I guess it is a choice.

TW: I agree. And I think both Dan Cable and Tasha Eurich's perspectives are kind of hitting that same point. Whenever I think of Tasha Eurich's *Insights*, I am thinking about that person who goes to a two-week retreat in the mountains and thinks deep thought about themselves and really connects to what they are thinking while still being utterly clueless that most of their team think they are arrogant because you are not going to learn that on the mountaintop, you are going to have to talk to people in your life. I love Dan's approach because it is positive, hey, when did I show up as the best version of myself, when did I make a positive difference for you. That is just a great way to both get an outside perspective and also listen into, you know, give other people in your life a chance to guide you a little bit in your path.

DJ: True and lean into what makes you distinctive. Rather than trying to fix issues, I guess it is about us discovering what makes us distinctive and playing the game that lends itself to that distinctiveness. A more personal anecdote is when I was at the cusp of transition between McKinsey and Egon Zehnder about 13-14 years back, I remember a senior director, at that time, I was evaluating options like we see PE strategic planning roles, operating roles, etc., and one of the senior partners, a gentleman called Ramesh Mangaleswaran, looked at me and said, I have a sense that you have an attitude for executive search, have you thought about it. And at that time, I did not even know what executive search was as a profession, the fact that this could be a profession and the fact that I could be a fit. And then he said, I will introduce you to this guy at Egon Zehnder that led to a chain of events which eventually led me to joining Egon Zehnder. But the point is if I really trace back to the genesis of that pathway, it was that outside input that I could have never discovered in a mountaintop, you know, to your point.

TW: Yeah. There is something paradoxical about that because I think of it both as with identity who we are, what we are good at and with the specific problem you are trying to solve. In both cases, we can be too close to see things clearly, like you can have a problem that you have struggled with for, like in career or work or personal life or whatever, you have struggled with it for five years, you really know the problem in some sense and yet, what I found consistently, hearing somebody else's perspective, somebody who is further away from than you are can really be a game changer. It can give you exactly, as it happened to you it sounds like, suddenly a new thought where just like, oh, I

had not thought about that before despite having been you your entire life, we still need that outside perspective.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. When I work with leaders in the context of helping them play to their potential, I find it helpful to find the first 3-4 months really getting to the bottom of questions like When do you come alive, what makes you distinctive, when do you experience highs and lows, What matters to you and so on. I do that by indulging the leader in a set of journaling practices and by speaking to around 20 people around the leader at work at on the personal front whether it is close relatives or friends. When I play that back to the leader, that often widens the self-awareness and also gives the leader a certain set of criteria by which they can evaluate solutions sets as they appear. I still don't have a clean answer to what is the right way to frame the question as we go through life? The working version I have is "Am I playing to my full potential in all aspects of my life given my current context and given what I care about"? Needless to say this is a work in progress and am sure this will evolve as I move forward through life.

If this particular question intrigues you, you might like the recent conversation with Ravi Venkatesan, who has authored the book – What the Heck do I do with my life? We cover some of the ground in the context of this question.

Let's now get back to the conversation with Thomas. If you are deriving value from the podcast, do take a moment and leave a review for the podcast in Apple Podcasts or Spotify, wherever you end up consuming the content.

Now lets get back to our conversation with Thomas.

DJ: Moving forward Thomas, one of the things you talk about is, presented problems versus open-ended problems, and you go on to say there are three types of open-ended problems, something around a pain point, something around a nebulous goal or a solution someone fell in love with, you know, that is like a solution in search of a problem. So can you talk a little bit about some of these archetypes of open-ended problems and what that means for us in terms of how we frame the right problem?

TW: So one of the early thinkers around problem solving, a man called Jacob Getzels, he started really to notice that the types of problems we teach children in schools to solve, they are quite different from our real life problems in the sense that a problem you get in school it is like, here is a triangle, here are the sides, this angle, what is this, like the third angle or the length of the third side or whatever. So somebody has already very clearly defined the problem and what we need to do is to solve it. In real life of course, that is not the case most of the time. The vast majority of the problems we are faced with, we do not come across them as neatly packaged, clearly defined problems. We come across them as some sort of mess. And what I highlight in the book is really there are three typical versions of that. There is the undefined pain point which is just like, hey, I am in a bad mood and I do not know why, or, hey, I feel my career is not going in the right direction but I actually am not sure what the problem is. So that is kind of a classical, almost a proto problem. You do not have people come in sometimes with a goal that they are talking about, and this could be like, hey, I really want to be more successful, I want to be more impactful or whatever, but it is kind of fussy, like, okay, what does that mean. And this loops back to the other question you raised

before namely, how do you take something more nebulous or like large, kind of, and drill that down to a tangible problem you can work on. Before we maybe delve deeper into that one, the third version, and that is the one I always enjoy the most, is when people have fallen in love with a solution. So they literally have got, yeah, I want to do this or I want to build this thing or whatever. And when you ask them, wait, what problem is that solution going to solve for you, they are not necessarily clear on it. They have just fallen in love with the idea of, I do not know, maybe getting a degree in something or maybe some other thing they just are really excited about. And you of course see this in new product development too where somebody has come up with a very exciting product that they really want to build and nobody knows what problem it solves for customers, including the customers which is not simply a good starting point.

DJ: If I may relate a personal anecdote on the third one. At some stage, I was into running half marathons and the first level goal was to turn it under two hours, I did it. And then I said, I want to run it in a 1-45 and I started training for it. And at some stage, my wife asked me, why exactly are you doing it, you are not going to be an elite runner by any stretch of imagination, so treat it like a hobby and take a chill pill in life. And I think it was a good wake-up call. Sometimes, that was a case of me falling in love with something without really questioning the need for it.

TW: Yeah and I imagine I think you are a high performer. Of course when you get into something, you are like, no, no, no, I want to do even better. And I think it is such a powerful question to say wait, is the purpose of what I am doing, you know, it is like going on a vacation and trying to speed read the book you brought, kind of like, no, that is not the point, the point is to lie on the beach and slow read it.

DJ: Another guest on the podcast was a gentleman called Tom Vanderbilt, he has written a book called Beginners and how you can pick up something new and he uses this term about how cyclists in New York City sometimes get obsessive about some of these milestones and he has a term, he says there is a term for it MAMIL which is Middle-Aged Men in Lycra shorts who get obsessive about some of these goals but miss the bigger picture. But anyway, back to...

TW: No, I just love that. We should not stereotype but that stereotype is exactly correct. Sorry, yeah, I think that, well, you asked a little earlier, how do you work with somebody's problem when it is that vague and abstract, and it is really helpful to try to make it even extremely tangible. So this is not my research but that question called the miracle question which is imagine that you achieved what you wanted, your problem got solved overnight magically and you wake up tomorrow morning, what is the first thing you notice that is different. So you start to understand perhaps what success looks like, like, well, you know, I jump out of the bed versus just lying there for half an hour and checking the news. Why do you jump out of bed, well, because I am really excited about what I am going to do. Okay, then you start to gradually unpack whatever it is into almost specific either decision points or even using the highlights exercise or like, I call them bright spots going in and figuring out what has worked for me in the past, what got you to jump out of bed in the morning in the past and is there something there we can use to get closer to your challenge. Now, you work with people here, what other approaches do you use yourself when somebody comes in with a nebulous or unclear goal?

DJ: True. Sometimes, I find the sequence of whys helpful, you know, whys is important. One of the exercises I try and get the people I work with do, is to think about their life 5 years out, 10 years out, just do a simple exercise where you pick an identity, you know, as a father, as a mother, as a sibling, as a CEO, as an entrepreneur and pick one adjective, I want to be an affectionate father, be a responsible entrepreneur or be an ambitious entrepreneur, you get the idea, pick an adjective and an identity, just write that out, and take another page and just put those two words at the top, I

want to be an ambitious entrepreneur, why is that important to you, just list that down, and then, take each of these and say why is that important to you. Basically what you are doing is you are taking the, if you imagine the human being as an iceberg, you are going deeper and deeper down the iceberg. And of course, it is not a finite pursuit but the closer we get to what our needs are, what do we really care about, what do we value and what do we fear, the chances are we will end up solving problems which are relevant and more meaningful. And as you rightly say in coaching, one of the things we say is, are we solving a problem which if solved will have a disproportionate impact. When you come to a development area, when you look at the feedback for a leader, there are 20 things, you could be better at this, you could be better at that, but finally, you want to pick two things or three things which if solved has a disproportionate impact. So, to your question, I think the why exercise I find helpful both in terms of clarifying for myself every now and then but also clarifying for the leaders I work with so that we know where it comes from.

TW: I think that is really helpful because one thing I have noticed when talking to people about problems is, everybody can very quickly generate a list of 20 problems they are facing, and it might actually be the case that none of those 20 really are the important problems to solve. So I love the focus of kind of saying, not just hey what is the problem you are dealing with but what problem if solved would really be a game changer for you, let us talk about that problem, And it also requires some degree of vulnerability or risk-taking in the person because, you know, we are all comfortable talking about how we get too many emails, if it comes to your person and who you are, those can be tougher problems to start to dig into I would say.

DJ: Very true Thomas. Just moving forward, one of the things you say in the book which really caught my attention and I quote from the book, you say, designers distinguish between features and benefits, negotiators distinguish between positions and interests and policy wonks between outputs and outcomes, talk to us about what is the nuance here.

TW: To me, the insight here is that no matter what fields you work with, if you look at the professionals, especially professionals who solve problems for others, well, then they typically have some kind of language recognizing this. So in the policy world, you go in and you say, hey, we need to build a courthouse in this region and then everybody focuses on that because we can look at it when it is done, that is kind of the output, what is the ultimate outcome you want. And that is probably not a courthouse, that is better justice in the region which can be a different problem to solve for compared to the simpler one of hey, how do we build a building. So that is in one area, you see it almost, no matter what industry you work with, you will discover that there is some recognition of the need to unpack a goal or a problem like, okay, you want to become an author, why do you want to become an author. Well, there may be a component about spreading good ideas, there may be a component about wanting to get on talk shows, maybe a component about identity, I want to be somebody who is, like, recognized smart having written a book, still, like, the classic way of signaling in that and so on. And your why questions, that really needs to be surfaced before you can do effective problem solving, lets you just start attacking the most immediate thing that may not actually deliver on what you truly want.

DJ: Hmm, really powerful. And this came through in one of my conversations with a gentleman called Stew Friedman from Wharton, and he talks about four domains of life, how do you think about yourself which is your physical mental health, spiritual health, how you think about your time at work, how you think about your family and how you think about your community. And he says that you need to think about this four-piece jigsaw in a meaningful way as you go through life. But he goes on to say that it is one thing for you to figure out the jigsaw for yourself but your family might not be aligned with where you want to go and you want to carry them along and he says, how do you do that. There he says, you do not talk about positions, you talk about interests, you do not

say I will spend an hour with the kids, no, you really say, if I have to be an affectionate father, what are the different mechanisms and really solve for the primary need and not for the surface commitment which is maybe you might have a ritual saying I will have maybe one meal with the family in a restaurant every week but you do not want to take it literally, you want to distill it to what exactly is the need we are solving and maybe have a conversation with your spouse and with the other people around you to get into an equilibrium, so it came up in that context.

TW: I will share an example from my own life which is, I do not have children yet, I do have nieces and nephews and they live in a different country. They live in Denmark where I am originally from and I am based in the U.S. and so it is difficult to stay connected to them. And one thing I was tempted to do is go, well, whenever they have a birthday or Christmas, I will just give them a really nice present. But then, I realized that that is a nice symbol but really what I wanted to do was actually to connect with them. And so I started thinking of gifts that I could give them while we were together, so basic stuff but like taking them out shopping, go out and spend a couple of hours shopping with your niece and that was a gift to her and it was a gift to me and it is something we start suddenly trying, like, building a little bit of connection, even though that I am away most of the time and that problem, a lovely present wrapped in a nice paper whatever would not solve. So a simple example of thinking about the outcomes, your interests, if you will, versus what you said, the position or immediate stated thing we are looking at.

DJ: Very true Thomas. If I may share that triggers and other anecdote, I am a part of a WhatsApp group, multiple WhatsApp groups but couple of them are my batch mates from my high school, batch mates from my engineering college and so on, and typically, we would observe that people are wishing happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday on the day of somebody's birthday. Then one of them turned around and said, why do not we ask the birthday boy or girl to just write an update on their life once a year, you just write an update. The idea is for us to stay connected to each other's lives and understand what is going on. So why do not we just turn this bland meaningless ritual into something a little more purposeful. And then, we started people saying, we sing or we like cooking or we like sailing or we like hiking and then, that triggers a chain of real conversations around interests, around passions, around pain points in some cases. So you are right, there is an opportunity for us to question the rituals and really ask what are we solving for in that mode of interaction.

TW: And I love that example. That is such a good example of a super simple habit that has specific triggers, namely when it is my birthday, I write a short update on what is going on in my life, much better than what you are suggesting there. So this makes me think of something important I realize with problem solving that in some sense, we tend to focus on our biggest problems like oh, I have this either a strategic challenge I am facing right now or a very difficult key client or maybe this career consideration I am in the middle of. But really, problem solving is a thinking skill that if you get good at it, you can start to apply it to even very small things. And just by virtue of finding smarter solutions to small things, you start to generate a much better surplus to tackle some of the bigger problems as well. So to me, it is really ultimately a mindset that you go and you relentlessly apply to anything from strategic problems to how do we stay connected with my high school batch or the university batch you are dealing with, really interesting example.

DJ: Yeah. Building on this Thomas, you have been thinking a lot about how to teach reframing, if that is a mindset, one of the questions that emerges for me is, how does one as a parent think about inculcating that with children as they grow up so that it becomes a way of life so that they, over time, build the mindset of asking the right questions?

TW: I have seen many approaches to this, with a note that I am not a parenting expert, but I think there are parents that work deliberately with having children ask questions. So they say, not what did you learn today but what questions that you asked today. And kind of going in and thinking in that sense, this is broader than just reframing, its around curiosity and questioning skills. Having said that, I want to share an anecdote because I teach this normally to leaders in companies, but I was invited to teach my reframing workshop to a bunch of kids aged 5, 6 and 7. A friend of mine runs a, what is called an elementary prep school here in the U.S., and he knew of my work, so he said, come up and let us do it, and I was like, okay, we will try it but I am not sure how well this is going to work. To be honest, I do not work with kids normally, so I did not know their abstraction level. It was really interesting to see. So two observations there, one is that kids can actually understand this better than you think, like, when I taught the session later, they sent me some footage of some of the kids explaining it to their parents, oh, here is this thing with problems, blah blah blah, and I was like, wait, they actually understood that. So first observation is you can probably start guiding them fairly early whenever they have a problem to try to understand why it is a problem. And then, a second observation that struck me here. We tend to think that if you are asking me here like, hey, what kind of problems do kids have, most people say, well, it is about the bedtime or it is about homework or it is about the iPad that they cannot spend enough time with and so on. What I saw in that session was almost none of the problems that the kids chose to work on had anything to do with parents. Parents think that oh, it is the iPad because that is my biggest problem. But in actuality, the problems that the kids raised had to do with their friends, their brothers and their sisters. Those were the problems that really took up their thinking type. Kids have basically accepted that we are evil dictators and they are okay with it. So that is great news but fundamentally, it struck me because even with people we live with, we tend to think too quickly that we understand what their biggest problems are. And in fact, you have to ask, you cannot just assume what somebody's problem is, even if you have known them literally their entire lives.

DJ: It is a great insight. It is about really putting yourself in their shoes and understanding the world from their perspective and not from your perspective.

TW: Exactly.

DJ: Hmm. And moving forward Thomas, you ask us to look at our contribution to the problem while framing a problem. Can you talk a little bit about this notion of contributing to the problem and how that distorts the framing?

TW: It is a term that I have from Doug Stone, Sheila Heen and Bruce Patton who wrote the book Difficult Conversations, and what they point out is really when something goes wrong or when there is a problem, we tend to talk about blame, like, who is to blame for this, meaning who should be punished. And what they point out with this concept of contribution is, well, you can see this problem as having arisen because multiple people did or did not do something that helped it happen. So the real question is here, not who is to blame which is like finding one person you can point out but saying looking at us as almost a system, how did each of us contribute to this problem happening. And it can really be powerful because it both opens up a mentality where you are more collaborative around fixing it and it can recognize that even if it was in fact mostly your colleague over here who created the problem, there is also something you can do to prevent it from happening again. So it takes a more nuanced view on why problems happen compared to this like, oh, it is just because this person was an idiot. That is contribution.

DJ: Got it and that is a great insight. I guess what you are saying is, it is not so much about external, external attribution is easy to say, I am okay, you are not okay, that is the easy part, but really to take ownership and to have agency and to focus on your end of the bargain as well, you know, you

are part of the system, so it is a little more of I guess systems thinking kind of a thing saying, you have a role to play as well.

TW: The example that I talk about in the book is a leader I met, he worked in a factory and whenever there is like something going wrong on the manufacturing floor, it was his job to have a conversation with the people who were involved and fix the problems so it did not happen again. And of-course as you can imagine, when you are called into your boss's office and something bad happened, you are kind of worried, you are defensive and so on. And so he had this very powerful technique of starting the conversation saying, well, we have had this issue, tell me how the company failed you, like putting out there very clearly, we know kind of you probably did some things that we need to think about, but we also did something since this could happen. So it was a way to kind of open the conversation in a way that both took in contribution in that notion but also signaled, hey, we are not looking to pin this on just one person and saying you are bad, we are actually trying to think together as a team about how to prevent this and we recognize that we have played a part in that too.

DJ: Hmm. And in the book in a different section Thomas, you talk about the difference between empathy and perspective taking. I use them interchangeably. So can you bring about the distinction between the two and how it links to this problem solving?

TW: The common way of thinking about empathy is people just like will understand how they feel. So if you are in a conflict with a family member or a colleague, how do they feel about this. That though we know from the research is only one part of the picture and it is not always the most helpful one. Cognitive empathy, if you will, or perspective taking, is really about understanding not just what they feel but also more external things like what do they know, do they have the same information about this that I do in my head or are there things they are not aware of, what was their situation when this happened, so almost taking in an external perspective instead of trying to focus only on what is happening with their emotions at the moment. I like this simple way of explaining it which is to say imagine that your neighbor is building a fence and they are hit there, we spoke about hammers before, they hit their thumb with a hammer, empathy is to feel their pain. Perspective taking is to understand why they are building the fence. It is a broader perspective, a broader way than just getting anchored or caught up only in the emotional part of things.

DJ: Hmm, got it. And another point you make at a different point in the book is about how we frame questions so that we elicit authentic responses. I think you talk about this in the context of having exit interviews with people who leave a company and very often, these end up being very bland conversations. And you actually mention that sometimes, the juice come out when you ask a contract question which is tell me how the company failed you rather than the other way round. So can you talk a little bit about eliciting the next level of insight and the wisdom of framing the right questions?

TW: So exit interview is such a good example of that because when you ask people so you decided to leave our company why do you do it, people tend to say, well, I got a better offer. Why do they say that, well, it may be true, but also, they highlight that because it is a non-contentious reason for leaving. If you just say, well, I got a better offer, I understand that, you are not burning any bridges, the reality might be that they left it, their offer was only a little bit better but what really mattered to them was to get away from a specific leader that they really could not work very well with. And so that does not come up if you just accept the first answer that is put on the table. It is not that it is wrong, it might be true, but there is typically more to the story. So even just asking, oh, yeah, I totally understand that, what else would you add to that, other factors, like just ask more questions than necessarily having accepting the surface value of the first thing that they put on the table.

DJ: Hmm. That is interesting. For me to provide a contra view, I used to be a search consultant in my previous life at Egon Zehnder and very often, candidates would often call you, the candidates that do not make the final list saying do you have any feedback for me, and very often, the lazy answer or the non-committal answer would be, no, that was a better candidate or, you know, this was not a good fit for you. But really, even if I go back to some of my conversations, it would require courage to give that hard feedback saying, you know, you came across as too greedy or you came across as too operational and not strategic or whatever the reason might be. And very often, that is often the bitter truths in the moment but 5 years later or 10 years later, some of these people call you and say, you know, thank you for that feedback, it is valuable, if you had not told me, then I would not have had the opportunity to correct it. So it is quite a profound point indeed.

TW: I have noticed in my own life that I have sometimes been held back from sharing honest feedback because of the fear of the reaction. And whenever I really think about it when I have tried giving direct feedback, it is very rare to get negative reactions, or even if you do, I think as you point out, they may have an initial bad reaction and then later, it kind of actually hits home for them. And it does require courage and it does require you, it is almost an investment in them, it is a belief in them that they can become better. I am sharing this feedback with you because I think that the next time we work together or you work with somebody else, I think you can actually become something more powerful, this almost comes to your topic of potential, I believe in what you can become.

DJ: And the reason I am giving this feedback is because I care for you in the sense at some level, the very fact that I am, you know, maybe just another anecdote on this came from the man Egon Zehnder himself. When I was leaving the firm, he used to meet all the consultants and he was quite active in the recruitment process, so I met him in his home office in Zurich. When I was leaving the firm, I wrote a note to him saying, you know, it has been a great journey, learnt a lot, thank you for building this firm, etc., etc. And he used a phrase which stayed with me, he said, great feedback, thoughts in your head that you do not share are a bit like gift wrapping a present and not giving it to the person. So it is almost like you are, you know, he almost framed it as an obligation that you have to the people around you to share feedback. So in a way, that sort of, that back to your point about framing, once he framed it that way, each time when I think about feedback, I think about gift wrap, a present that is lying gift-wrapped and it would be a crime not to give it to the intended recipient.

TW: Yeah. And I think to me, the one thing I tend to add to that is to give the recipient permission to wait. So you can say, hey, I have some feedback for you, is this a good time to share it or would you rather take it up at a different time. Because I do notice that people are more likely to act on feedback, once they have kind of accepted, saying, okay, now I am ready for it.

DJ: It is a great point. It triggers another insight that came up in my conversation with a gentleman called Bruce Feiler who has written a book, Life Is In The Transitions and he says, when you go through especially life quakes, disruptive events in your life, try and make sense of scars but not the wounds. He says that do not try to process these things too soon, wait for sometime to elapse, let the wound become a scar and then maybe you might be in a better position to make sense. So, to your point, I think there is an element of timing as well, is the person and the position to process what you want to tell him or her.

TW: Yeah. So what you are sharing there is, as far as I know, is supported by some of the research into post-traumatic events, so if you have been through a very rough event of some kind. There used to be a tendency to try to debrief you as quickly as possible, like, okay, we need to get you right away in the talk through the entire thing and so on. And it turns out, that tends actually to have better results if you give it a bit of time where you let the mind do its own kind of, as it is like creating the scar tissue versus delving straight in. If I remember this correctly, what would happen

sometimes is, if you debrief too early, you almost actually fixed the bad event in people's minds to a greater degree than if you had allowed them to get a little bit of a distance from it. So I think there is something very powerful about that understanding of when is the right moment to start to go in and kind of either give feedback or process something that happened or what not.

DJ: Great insight. Moving forward Thomas, you say that sometimes while handling a tricky situation like a hostage crisis rather than asking an explicit question about what they want, we are actually better off labeling a fear, you know, saying it seems like, dot dot dot, something that they might harbor to get to a better solution, I found again the link between a hostage situation and framing quite interesting, so can you say more about this piece?

TW: This is an insight from Chris Voss who wrote the book, Never Split The Difference, it is a book about negotiation and he has been a hostage negotiator for the FBI. And he talks about this method of labeling which is, the function of labeling is to put emotions into play, like, normally we are discussing something and the emotions of what is going on are unaddressed or are lurking in the background. What he would do, and there is a quite interesting anecdote or approach, you know, he is called in, somebody has locked themselves in an apartment with a gun and there is hostages and they do not want to go back to jail which is what will happen if the police comes in, and he just found, instead of starting to say, hey, you need to come out or all of the demands and all that, you just start saying, hey, it seems like you are really worried about us coming in shooting, it seems like you are really worried about the idea of going back to jail. And according to him, it does something magical in the conversation, it just allows you to put the, not just the facts but also the emotions on the table, so you can start working on that too. So a very simple technique here, not for when you are in hostage negotiations I hope, but when you are dealing with a conflict and you are perceiving something that is going on emotionally, then you might say, hey, it seems like you are a bit upset about what just happened here and then just see how they respond. They might say no, they might say, no no, you got that wrong, I am not upset, I am just going to, of the stuff going on, but by saying that, it seems that or it is it looks like, you create an opening for them to confirm or disconfirm what is going on in their heads.

DJ: Hmm, it is a beautiful insight. It opens a window to a deeper and a more authentic conversation in terms of what really matters to the other person, what is not being said, and sometimes, back to your earlier point about outside in, sometimes the person himself or herself may not be aware that they are coming across in a certain way and showing the mirror sometimes can get them to bring it to that awareness and elicit a better response or a better situation.

TW: Yeah. I love that actually that people, to different degrees, can be aware of their own reactions. You can suddenly notice, hey, wait, I notice I am feeling very tense, why is that. Even just self-observing, for that matter, can be helpful.

DJ: I have a condition called hangar, when I am hungry, I get irritated and restless. And sometimes, you know, once my wife started pointing out saying it seems like you are hungry, then I know, okay, that is sort of setting off a chain reaction and sometimes, you know, then you get into the auto correct mode.

TW: That is one of the examples I share in the book. So the book mixes business problems and personal problems because I found that, of course problem solving applies equally to both, and this story of my friend Tanya and her husband Brian who used to, a great marriage, they are still married and they had a lot of fights, fights that got worse than they needed to be over small things. And they initially started saying, well, we are from two different countries, so maybe it is a cultural thing or it could be a values blah blah blah, and none of that helped until they started just noticing from the

bright spots, hey, was there ever a time when we did not have this problem, even though it normally would have arisen, like what are the positive exceptions to this. And they just noticed, well, the budget is normally very sensitive to discuss, we normally fight over, only this day we did not and why, because unusually we did not have the discussion in the evening, we had it in the morning. And why was that important, well, hanger or tiredness, you know, when you are past 10 o'clock in the evening, if you are discussing something sensitive, nobody has the mental energy to take a positive approach to that. You do not want to discuss problems when you are hangry or when you are angry and tired.

DJ: Hangered.

TW: Yeah, exactly. Very basic idea of starting to notice these patterns and saying, oh, there is actually a smart approach here, instead of trying to change who we are, just change what time we discuss sensitive matters.

DJ: Hmm, very true. At a personal level, one of the guests on the podcast was Matthew Walker who has written the book, *Why We Sleep* and he talks about circadian rhythms which is sort of people's body clocks. So in my home, I have got the body clock of a morning person and my wife has a body clock of an evening person, a late-night person rather, and when we look back, some of the best conversations we have had was a period of a few months when I was in India and she was in the U.S.

TW: Oh, I love that.

DJ: So I would call it in my morning and she would be in a really good frame and I said, you know, this went by and after about a few weeks, we said, this seems to be a lot more energizing than when we are in person. And then we sort of said, actually, it is possibly because our body clocks are perfectly adjusted when we are in these time zones.

TW: I love that. I mean that solution sounds like it comes with other drawbacks though, the long-distance relationship.

DJ: Not to indicate it is a solution but at least, once it came into our awareness, we said, let us not discuss anything of significance either first thing in the morning or last thing at night.

TW: Yeah, I love that.

DJ: Anything between lunch and tea time is generally a good time.

TW: It almost goes like, when you have meetings in different time zones as those time zone planners when you can see, oh, here we are both greens and here it was like, oh no, here you are red, I know that.

DJ: Exactly. In the book, you also talk about iterating across ideation and trial. You say that sometimes when we come up with new ideas and new frames, it is important for us to pause and test it out there before we move forward. So can you talk a little bit about how we get that balance right and the criticality of trial in the framing process?

TW: I think the main point I make in the book and my work around framing is that we are often too quick to jump into action and the book is really a manifesto and a how-to guide about how not to do that. But there is, it has to be said also, a pitfall on the other end of that which is that you get trapped in analysis that you, this happens especially to smart people with multiple PhD degrees, you overthink stuff and you keep just circling around in your head around this problem and you analyze

and want more data and so on. The recognition here is that you need to mix those two things. So you do want the ability to take a step back to frame the problem differently to analyze it and so on and you also want to step in and start using almost like lean startup methods, you know, experiment, do stuff, talk to people. Action and analysis when you, marry those two, that is when it becomes really powerful. And the insight here is, you do not have to do those two things one of the time. You can start with trying to frame it and think deeply about the problem. Then you go spend a week trying to do stuff and then you get your team together next Monday and say, well, given what we just did, have we learnt something new about the problem, do we still understand what it is, have we surfaced important aspects of the customers in need that we did not realize before we actually had to address to. So really developing that back-and-forth skill, switching between framing analysis and then making sure you move forward, so you do not endlessly ruminate about a problem. You tend to know what type of person you are or which of those two pitfalls your team falls into, so just making sure you get that right as well.

DJ: Got it. And as we wrap up Thomas, I spend a lot of time talking to leaders as a coach and as a sounding board, as you think about the application of your work in the realm of coaching and sort of, let us say if we frame it as broader leadership advisory, any specific themes that jump out at you as obvious opportunities to use this tool of reframing to get to a better place?

TW: The most powerful collaboration you can have with a coach or with any other type of person who is helping you, this be consultants or even friends or what not, is when you become joint explorers of a problem. So it is not that it is your job as a coach to say no no, this is your problem, it is rather that you, with your client, together go through this process of asking questions about the problem and trying to see it differently, not just going into solution. So there is a magic kind of collaboration you can get to which also very much changes the dynamic of, now if you go to a coach, you are expecting them to ask questions. But often, if this is in the context of say consulting, very often, you will see a client just treat the consultant as a vendor saying, no no no, you are the person who is going to build this for us or whatever it is, verses that more collaborative approach where you together identify the nature of the problem and then of course help them come up with solutions. Having said that, I was very curious to hear your thoughts on that. You work with this directly, where do you see reframing and problem framing in general fit into the coaching work?

DJ: Hmm. It is a great question Thomas, not sure if I have a clean answer to it but one of the applications I have empirically observed is just that people sometimes come in with a certain framing and helping them to re-evaluate that is helpful. Sometimes they may frame it as a career problem. Let me share a specific example, I was working with a very senior investment banker from Hong Kong and the bank had just shut shop in Asia and he was trying to figure out what next. And he framed it as I want to work intensely for the next 5-10 hours and then do something else in my life. And he said, okay, therefore, what are the options, what could I do, A versus B versus C. And then as we spent time, I challenged the assumption why does it have to be a sprint for the next five years, and then, you move into whatever you call it, retirement mode or chilling out mode, why cannot you pick something that you are passionate about and maybe do this for the next 30 years or 40 years. And somehow, that framing changed the perspective completely and said, okay, if that is the case, then maybe I should really focus on what energizes me and therefore, what is it that I can do for the long term that I can pivot towards which gives me meaning, which gives me fulfillment, which takes care of the commercial needs, etc., etc. So it is just, to your point, what I found helpful is people come in with a default question because they have framed it in their head in a certain way but when you ask them to consider other framings, it often ends up in a much more powerful place.

TW: Yeah. I would recommend here for those of your listeners who are not themselves professional coaches but want to play that role to an extent for others, I really like the work of Michael Bungay

Stanier who wrote the book, *The Coaching Habit*, it is a very accessible guide for people to ask a little bit better questions when they are trying to help somebody else. So there are ways you can do this. The key thing is really just to remember this core idea, you do not necessarily want to try to help people achieve what they come in with, you actually want to step back and say, wait, why is this important to you or exactly as you did with the example you just shared, question their assumptions about how things, what does success look like. I want to share an anecdote here in the same realm and I thought of this because you have been in the executive search space as you can afterwards tell me whether this is still accepted practice but the story is, this is from Robert Sternberg, one of the big names in creativity research. There is this leader who is in an industry he loves, in a firm he loves and he has a boss that he really cannot work with. He is like, oh my God, this is like I hate my boss, it is horrible. And so he goes to a search firm and says, can you find a new position for me as similar as possible to my old job and the executive search person says, yeah, there is a lot of demand at the moment for senior executives such as yourselves, this should not be hard, we can easily find you something. That same night though, he goes back and he talks to his wife and she is good at reframing and they have a good relationship where they can help each other with problems, and together, they find a different approach which is next morning, the leader goes back to the executive search person and says, here is the CV of my boss, can you find a new job for him. Apparently, the story goes that that is what ended up happening, like they actually managed to find a position for the boss that the boss happily accepted without really knowing what was going on and that leader got promoted into his job. Now it is a beautiful story, I suspect that the ethics around search may have changed a little bit and you could not do that today or is that a realistic story?

DJ: My first response if I wear a search consultant's hat with a commercial objective is that the boss is possibly paid higher than the guy, therefore, the boss's position is probably more lucrative for me, so I would grab it if somebody offered that saying, take this search and this is the fee and take the junior search and that fee. My commercial hat tells me, that is not a bad trade-off. But back to the point around ethics, see the point is, it is a free world unless he is sharing confidential information, at the end of the day, it is free markets at play.

TW: Yeah, I mean all he did really was to point...exactly.

DJ: He sold his boss as a candidate which is often value, as long as he did not mislead the search consultant, I do not see any ethical issues here.

TW: Yeah, I am glad to hear that, then I will continue to use the story.

DJ: Absolutely. If he has got an idea about two levels higher, then even better for the search firm. As we wrap up Thomas, this podcast, as you know, it is titled *Play To Potential*, what does that term mean to you?

TW: Potential resonates with me a lot and I use it a lot, so I do not tend to look back a lot in my career and say, hey, I have achieved these things, I have published books with Harvard blah blah blah, I am very forward focused and I am very focused on what I can potentially become. So a friend of mine who acts as a mutual coach, we tend to have discussions around, this sounds maybe a little ambitious but kind of what could you do where you would end up in a history book, and I mean something good to be clear. There are bad ways of ending up in history books, but what is the story of your life and your future where you ultimately become somebody that are written history books about or you are featured in some of them. I like that perspective because it lifts me up from kind of the day-to-day grumbling about, here is a difficult client or whatnot, it helps me, like seeing the potential, gives you some sort of energy, and my way of doing it is often to read biographies. And when I read a biography of interesting people, it reminds me that we can lead interesting lives. I

think I can quote this from my head, we will try. This is a famous poem from, I think it is Longfellow or Wordsworth and it is a segment of the poem, let me see if I can get it right here. I should say this is slightly a gendered thing, he wrote it at a time where it was not so much men and women that were both quoted in poetry, so take a note of that. But here is the lines, *lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time.* Whenever I hear that, I just get, like that does something for me, the idea of like footprints on the sands of time, what could a life look like if you were to do that.

DJ: Wow, really powerful Thomas. In the spirit of sharing, I was talking to a lady called Jennifer Garvey Berger on this podcast, she is based in the UK and she is a coach and she has written a book about, leadership in a world of complexity and one of the things she says is the human mind is wired in a certain way that it overestimates the journey we have had so far and who we have become but significantly underestimates what we could become in the future. It is just a wiring. So, to your point, sometimes, we need to get out of our comfort zone and really think deliberately about what we could become, otherwise our minds by themselves are probably not a good judge or a good indicator of what we could become, so really inspiring. On that note Thomas, really really enjoyed this conversation. Thank you for bringing spontaneity, for keeping it conversational and for all your insights.

TW: Thanks so much for inviting me. This was a really really rich conversation I feel.

DJ: Lovely, thank you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you found the conversation purposeful. If you want to listen more on this topic, you might like my conversation with Ravi Venkatesan who has recently written the book – “What the heck do I do with my life”. A lot of what we discuss there might be relevant in the context of this conversation. You might also like my conversation with Sir Andrew Likierman of London Business School who has studied Judgment for several years. We touch upon some of the similar themes that we discuss here.

Thanks for your time and attention and look forward to having you at a subsequent conversation at the Play to Potential podcast. To know more about the Advisory work I do, you can just visit playtopotential.com and look at the section About Deepak. Bye now.

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Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Nuggets

- 92.01 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Elevator problem and reframing
- 92.02 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Myth of the false binary
- 92.03 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Framing existential questions
- 92.04 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Presented vs Open-ended problems
- 92.05 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Focusing on the underlying
- 92.06 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Teaching Reframing to kids
- 92.07 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Eliciting authentic responses
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- 92.09 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Problem framing and Coaching

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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