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Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about presented problems versus open-ended problems. He says that 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. We speak about how we approach some of these tough open-ended problems as we navigate through life.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (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?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (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.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I remember falling in love with a solution once and I am glad that somebody stopped me. When I was leaving EgonZehnder, I had this keeda of content creation. Some-how I felt this would be a pretty cool opportunity to create a TED like video library of content that could be put behind a pay wall. When I tested this with a few people, one of them was an individual who was running a media company, also an ex-McKinsey consultant. He looked at me and said, if you are trying to make money off content, just remember that you will be competing with Bollywood stars, Cricketers and everyone else who has Millions of followers on Twitter. It is an extremely challenging business. But, if you want to keep the costs low and create content that could help your advisory practice, may be that could be worth something.

I still remember, I came back home that day disillusioned that somebody had poured water on my dreams but I realized that I had fallen in love with the solution and had gotten irrational about it. This individual, with his direct in your face style, stopped me from going down the path and I think it was life changing. This podcast in a way is a 2.0 version of my initial vision of creating a video library.

Fascinating how the questions we ask inform the solutions we pick.

End of nugget 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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Podcast Transcript [92.04 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Presented vs Open-ended problems](#)

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