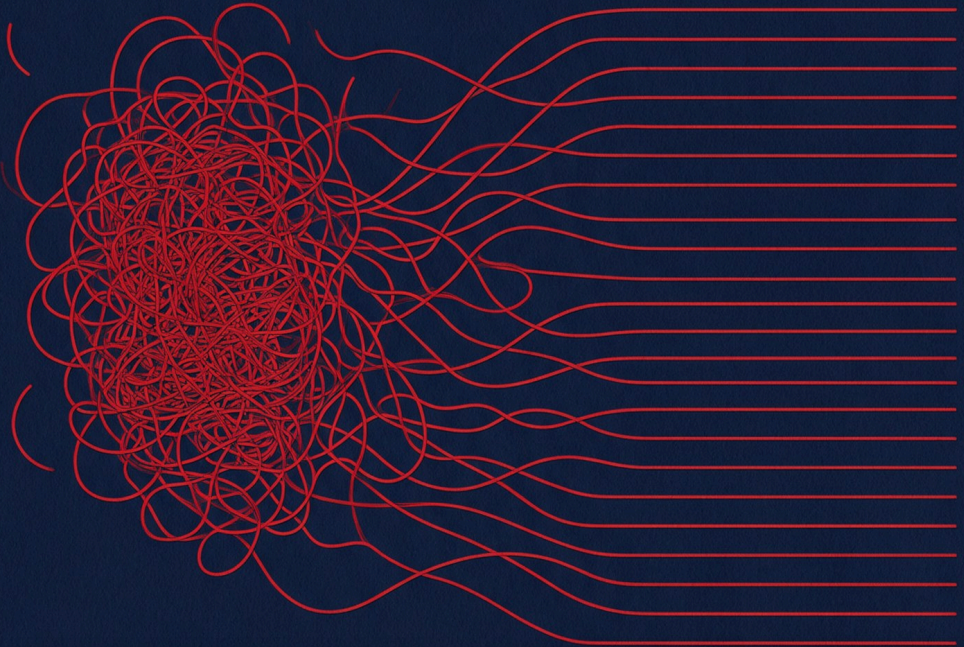


THE STRATEGY SHELF · BOOK 1 OF 11

Crack the Problem

Structured problem-solving for managers and owners



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How every chapter works

The idea → Why it matters → The method → An example
→ Your worksheet → 3-line summary

Included with this book

Printable worksheets: **Problem check**, **Problem statement**, **Problem breakdown tree**, **Cause tracer**, **Hypothesis tracker**, **Data plan**, **One-page answer**, **Problem-solving canvas**, **Fishbone template**, in your download.

1

Why smart people solve the wrong problem

The most expensive mistake in business is solving the wrong problem well.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Symptoms that look like problems
- Five traps that pull teams off course
- Looking below the waterline
- Four questions to ask before you solve anything
- Indian story: Titan Tanishq and the problem underneath
- Your worksheet: is this the real problem?

By the end, you will be able to

- Tell a symptom from a real problem
- Spot the five traps in your own meetings
- Stop money being spent on the wrong fix

THE IDEA

A good answer to the wrong question

Picture a distribution company whose sales fall for two quarters. The owner buys a new sales app, hires two more salespeople and runs a discount scheme. Six months later, sales are still falling. Each fix was sensible. None of them touched the real cause: the company's two best salespeople had left, and their dealers had quietly moved to a competitor.

This happens in every kind of organisation. The team works hard, money is spent, and the problem stays. The fault is rarely effort or intelligence. It is that nobody stopped to ask whether they were solving the right problem.

What people say vs what might be going on

What people say	What might really be going on
“We need more leads.”	Plenty of leads come in, but half are never called back within a day.
“Our staff aren't motivated.”	Targets changed three times in twelve months and nobody knows what counts.
“The software is too slow.”	Two people enter the same order twice because the process is unclear.
“Customers only want discounts.”	Customers can't see why you cost more, so price is all they can compare.
“We need a bigger office.”	Space is fine; meetings take over every room for half the day.

The rule: a problem as people first describe it is usually a symptom, a guess or a solution in disguise. Your first job is to find out which.

THE IDEA

Five traps that pull smart teams off course

- 1 Jumping to a solution.** The moment a problem is mentioned, someone proposes a fix, and the meeting starts debating the fix instead of the problem.
- 2 Solving what you know.** The IT person sees a software problem, the sales head a sales problem, finance a cost problem. Everyone reaches for their own tools.
- 3 The most senior voice wins.** When the boss names the cause early, people stop looking, and data that disagrees never reaches the table.
- 4 Treating the symptom.** Discounts to stop falling sales, overtime to clear a backlog, extra checks to stop errors. The symptom eases; the cause keeps working.
- 5 Solving yesterday's problem.** The team fixes what went wrong last time, while the market has already moved on.

Notice the traps in your next meeting

- Count how many minutes pass before someone proposes a solution.
- Ask: “What would we see if this were not the real problem?”
- Invite the most junior person in the room to speak first.
- Write the problem on the board, and keep fixes off it for the first 15 minutes.

THE METHOD

Look below the waterline

Problems sit in layers. What everyone sees is at the top. The cause that keeps producing it is usually two or three layers down, where few people look.

What you see

Sales fell 15% in two quarters

The pattern

Losses are mostly in 3 of 9 districts

The cause

Dealers there were served by two salespeople who left

The root

No system to hand over key customer relationships

Example: a consumer-goods distributor (invented). Everything below the dashed line is hidden at first.

Each layer down gives you more power. A fix at the top, such as a discount, works for a month. A fix at the root, such as a hand-over process for key accounts, stops the same loss from happening again.

Questions for each layer

- What do we see?
- Where and when is it worse?
- What changed just before?
- What keeps allowing it?

Where to spend money

Spend the least at the top and the most at the root. Most organisations do the opposite.

THE METHOD

Four questions to ask first

- 1 **What exactly is happening?** Describe it with facts and numbers, not opinions. “Customer complaints rose from 40 to 95 a month” beats “customers are unhappy”.
- 2 **Who says it is a problem, and why?** Different people may mean different things. The owner may worry about margin, the sales head about volume.
- 3 **What happens if we do nothing for three months?** If the honest answer is “not much”, it may not deserve your best people yet.
- 4 **Is this the cause, or a sign of something deeper?** Ask “why does this happen?” at least once before you accept it as the problem.

Example (invented): two ways to start the same meeting

Version A: “Sales are down. What should we do?” The team lists ten ideas in ten minutes and picks the cheapest.

Version B: “Sales are down 15%, mostly in three districts, since June. Before we discuss fixes, what changed there?” Within twenty minutes, someone remembers the two salespeople who left.

Tip

Write the four answers on a whiteboard before anyone is allowed to suggest a fix. It takes under ten minutes and changes the whole meeting.

INDIAN STORY

Titan Tanishq: the real problem was trust

In its early years, Tanishq, the jewellery brand of Titan, found it hard to pull buyers away from their family jewellers. It would have been easy to blame designs, prices or advertising, and to spend money fixing those.

The bigger issue sat underneath. Families bought gold on trust, and most had no way to check purity. Tanishq tested 10,000 ornaments picked at random from the market and found that about 65% were below 22 carats.

So the problem to solve was not “how do we sell more jewellery?” but “how do we make purity visible and believable?” In 1999, according to the ICMR case study, Tanishq put Karatmeters in its stores: imported X-ray machines, costing about ₹10 lakh each, that read the gold content of an ornament in about three minutes. Its then chief operating officer, Jacob Kurian, described the aim as moving customers “from blind trust to informed trust”.

10,000

ornaments tested

~65%

below 22 carat

1999

Karatmeters arrive

20–30%reported sales
rise

The lesson: before solving, ask what the problem underneath the problem is. The answer changes what you spend money on.

USE IT IN YOUR BUSINESS

- Ask customers what they worry about but cannot check.
- Make that thing visible and easy to verify.
- Teach customers, then let them judge for themselves.

Source: ICMR, “Tanishq – The Turnaround Story”, case code MKTG013 (covers 1995–2001), icmrindia.org. Figures and quote as reported in that case.

APPLY IT · PROBLEM CHECK

Is this the real problem?

Use the problem you picked at the start of the book.

1 How do people describe the problem today?

2 What do we actually observe? Facts and numbers.

3 Who is affected, and who says it is a problem?

4 What happens if we do nothing for three months?

5 Is this a symptom? What might sit underneath it?

6 The question we should really be answering:

Example (invented): a clinic's waiting times

Described as: "We need more doctors." Observed: waits over 45 minutes only on Monday and Saturday mornings. Underneath: most patients book the same two slots. Real question: how do we spread bookings across the week?

CHAPTER 1 IN 3 LINES

What to remember

- 1 Most failed fixes are good answers to the wrong question.
- 2 What people first describe is usually a symptom, a guess or a solution in disguise.
- 3 Look below the waterline before spending money on a fix.

KEY WORDS**Symptom**

What you can see that tells you something is wrong.

Root cause

The underlying reason that keeps producing the symptom.

Solution in disguise

A fix stated as if it were the problem, such as “we need a new app”.

Common mistakes

- Debating fixes in the first ten minutes
- Letting the most senior voice settle the cause
- Fixing what failed last time, by habit

Try this week

- Run the four questions on one live problem
- Count how fast fixes appear in your next meeting
- Ask “what changed just before?”

Quick self-check: “Our website gets few enquiries.” Is that a problem or a symptom? Write two things that could sit underneath it.

Next: **Chapter 2 · Write a sharp problem statement**

You've just read Chapter 1 of Crack the Problem.

The full book has 8 chapters, 10 worksheets and 78 pages. It is Book 1 of The Strategy Shelf: 11 short, practical books on one subject, sold together.

STILL TO COME IN CRACK THE PROBLEM

- | | |
|--|--|
| 2 Write a sharp problem statement | 5 Start with a smart guess and test it |
| 3 Break a big problem into small parts | 6 Get the right data fast |
| 4 Find the real cause: 5 Whys, fishbone, 80/20 | 7 Turn analysis into a one-page answer |
| | 8 Your problem-solving toolkit |

THE 11 BOOKS IN THE STRATEGY SHELF

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Crack the Problem | 7 Smooth Operations |
| 2 The Strategy Compass | 8 Clear Decisions |
| 3 The Money Engine | 9 Plan to Results |
| 4 Priced to Win | 10 The Deal Table |
| 5 Market Sense | 11 Crisis & Comeback |
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