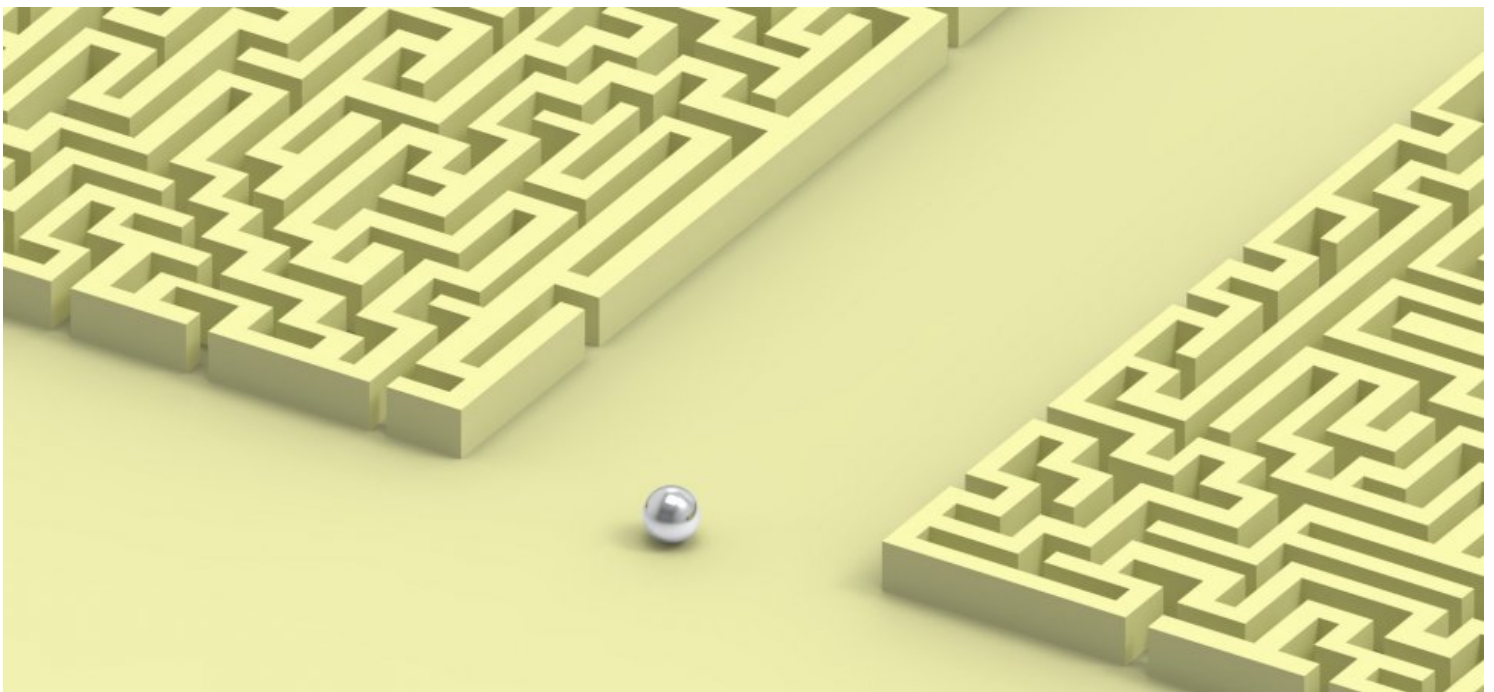# Problem Solving is a Critical Skill in Business. Avoid These 7 Common Mistakes When Trying to Work Through Something

Every business today has to deal with complex problems. Do you have the discipline and process to avoid the pitfalls?

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CREDIT: Getty Images

In every business, especially new ones, quick and effective problem solving is a critical skill.

The problems you face are more complex and moving faster than ever before, and the consequences of a poor or incomplete solution can be costly to your business, and well as to your community, human health, and the environment. What we learn in school hasn't kept up with the demands.

For example, there is no question that Theranos and Elizabeth Holmes faced a host of complex problems in their drive to offer a comprehensive blood test from just a finger stick and a single drop of blood.

I found some real insights into today's problem solving challenge in a new book, "Bulletproof Problem Solving," by Charles Conn and Robert McLean. These authors have more than thirty years of experience in complex problem solving, including solution approaches, in McKinsey & Company, start-up companies, and many social and environmental organizations.

Based on my own thirty years of experience in large and small business, and advisory roles with new businesses, I support their summary of the common pitfalls that many business leaders experience in facing the problem solving challenges in the marketplace today:

1. Settling for weak problem statements, without knowing the root cause.

Rushing into analysis with a vague problem statement is a clear formula for long hours and frustrated customers.

You need clarity around the decision-making criteria and constraints, the time frame required, and an indication of action that will occur when the problem is solved, or not solved.

2. Asserting the answer based on bias, ego, or passion.

Asserting any solution without proper validation in this complex world is a recipe for disaster. No matter what your conviction or experience ("I've seen this before"), the stakes are too high to try to force an answer.

In this age of instant and total communication, you can't fool customers.

3. Failing to break the problem into component parts.

Only by first finding all the cleaving points that allow you to dissect the problem, will you likely find the most serious crux of the issue.

Elizabeth Holmes never focused on how many false positive blood tests were sending people to the hospital, or she might not have minimized the problem.

4. Neglecting divergent views and team culture norms.

Groupthink amongst a team of managers with similar backgrounds and traditional hierarchy makes it hard for anyone to see the real alternatives clearly.

5. Relying on an incomplete or outdated analytic tool set.

Some issues can be resolved with "back of the envelope" calculations, while complex modern issues may demand more time and sophisticated new tools.

For example, sometimes no amount of regression analysis is a substitute for a well-designed real world experiment with "big data" analysis.

6. Failing to link conclusions to a compelling action plan.

Analytically oriented teams often say, "We're done" when a solution is found, but don't follow-through with a plan to communicate complex concepts to diverse audiences, and sell their action plan to stakeholders. Effective solutions capture the total audience with compelling actions.

7. Assuming each problem can be solved once and for all.

Rarely is a problem solved totally the first time. Complex problems have a messiness about them that takes you back and forth between hypotheses, analysis, and conclusions, each time deepening your understanding.

Expect your problem solving to be iterative and a learning process.

Every leader needs to adopt a systematic approach to problem solving and continually hone their skills. The authors present a seven-step approach that works for them, and has been proven across multiple business arenas.

I recommend that you do your homework to find a system that works for you and avoids the pitfalls outlined here. The longevity of your business today totally depends on it.

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PUBLISHED ON: APR 21, 2019

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