

BE CAREFUL BEFORE STANDARDIZING YOUR PROBLEM SOLVING



by Jamie Flinchbaugh

You might be surprised to hear a lean advocate warning against standardization. To be clear, I'm warning against both over-standardization and overly-rigid application of standardization. Standardization within problem solving is tremendously beneficial. First, it helps us train people on methods. Second, it reduces the friction of collaboration across individuals and teams. Third, it helps us avoid blindspots and skipping past key steps. So standardization is beneficial.

However, when we become overly-rigid in that application, or overly-constrained by its application, we are missing key benefits to

successful and creative problem solving.

The first is that when we are on auto-pilot, our brain is comfortable and only partially engaged. Many of us (although few may admit it) missed a turn on our drive home because our auto-pilot brain was forgetting that we weren't heading home. Since problem solving often requires creativity, either for new insights or new solutions, we need to keep our brain unsettled.

I have watched many, many teams working on a problem solving effort and they get to a step around the current state and just start filling it out...with the stuff that they already know. They

didn't pause and insert curiosity. They didn't get curious about their blind spots. They didn't ask themselves what the best way to learn would be. They got themselves into the mode of filling out a form that they had done many times before and just kept going.

A great method to break this auto-pilot and re-engage creativity is to insert random interruptions. The randomness is essentially because if you build it in, the interruption is part of the standard. You become attuned to it, and it doesn't force you off-balance where you have to think differently. Breaking from the standard and taking a new look at it, looking ahead at a later step and working back from there, trying a new methodology inserted in the middle (try TRIZ for example), can all help unsettle the team and the mind, which is a good thing. When we don't know what to expect next, our brain is more fully engaged and that is often exactly what is required to break through difficult problems.

The other dynamic that we must fight is "first idea lock-in." There are often many techniques to fight this, such as the "parking lot" where we write ideas down that are ahead in the process. However, the brain doesn't necessarily let go of that first idea just because we wrote it down and said we'd come back to it. Our brains are more stubborn than that. There is research that demonstrates that first idea lock-in is a high frequency challenge, and my own empirical observations support that conclusion.

When first idea lock-in takes hold, the standard problem solving process can easily be traced forward to achieve that idea, often subconsciously. Selection criteria become biased towards a preferred solution, breaking down the problem biases a certain direction, and even framing the problem can make that solution a best-fit.

This is another great opportunity to break from the standard, mixing it up either in method or in sequence can help break us from that lock-in.

The final reason not to get overly committed to a single standard is that not all problems are best solved by the same method. An open-ended ill-defined strategic problem is not best solved by getting to the root cause via the 5 Whys. This is why Art Smalley's book *Four Types of Problems*, which I recently discussed in [this podcast episode](#), is a useful framework. Not all problems are the same. Deciding to restart your computer, discovering a chronic systemic problem, and deciding what technology stack to build upon are all very different types of problems.

While your standard problem solving methodology is often fantastic for certain types of problems, for the several reasons stated at the beginning of this article, it is not likely the best for all types of problems. ■