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FROM STUCK TO SOLVED:
Mastering the Art of
Problem-Solving Resilience

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From Stuck to Solved: Mastering the Art of Problem-Solving Resilience

Getting stuck while trying to solve a problem is as common as the common cold. Expect it. It's going to happen to you no matter how experienced you are. So how do you prepare for its inevitable arrival?

Unfortunately, none of the methodologies we learn deal with the struggle of being stuck trying to solve a difficult problem. We don't talk about our inability to solve it because we feel like we should be able to figure it out on our own. But getting stuck is a natural part of the process for anyone tasked with problem solving. In fact, the more problems you solve and the harder they are, the more likely you'll reach an impasse. Therefore, we should be proud of getting stuck. It means we're doing hard things.

So what do we do when we're stuck? I recently proposed four (4) problem-solving approaches on a LinkedIn survey¹ and the results were a bit surprising, mostly because I think some of the options aren't well understood. I hope to explain these options to give you a range of approaches for getting unstuck. Author's disclosure: I use all four.

In the survey, I asked, "Which of these is your first approach when you're stuck trying to solve a problem?"

Ask for Help

I'm sure there's a joke here about how men don't ask for directions or read instructions. But an aversion to asking for help is not strictly an issue of gender. In the survey, asking for help received only 11% of the votes as the preferred approach when trying to get unstuck... I think that is a shame.

Here's why it doesn't get more credit: when people consider asking for help, they believe their only option is to find someone who knows the answer to the problem. They seek **The Expert**.

When an expert is needed, of course, we should seek one out. In fact, we should probably ask for expert help before we even get stuck. However, it can be difficult, or even expensive, to get that Expert help.

The next place to seek help is from **The Coach**. Whether you have access to an external coach, or your company builds a network of coaches within, the coach doesn't have to be an expert and provide an answer. They are focused on the process of problem *solving*, while you are still focused on the problem itself².

Getting a coach isn't a weakness. In fact, it's a strength. Engaging a coach says that you believe in yourself enough that you're willing to invest in yourself. That's why people at the top of their game, from Leo Messi to Steve Jobs, all had coaches.

¹ Flinchbaugh, J. (2024, August 26). *Problem solvers who solve problems faster don't just apply a better problem-solving method; they apply the right one for the specific type of problem*. [LinkedIn post]. Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jamieflinchbaugh_problemsolvers-problemsolving-problemsolvingmethods-activity-7226335998245249024-jt8T

² Flinchbaugh, J. (2021). Why coaching? *In People Solve Problems: The Power of Every Person, Every Day, Every Problem* (pp. 73-86). Jamie Flinchbaugh.

The last version of asking for help is utilizing **The Listener**. We've all had this experience without seeking it out. We simply talk to someone and share our thoughts out loud, and in the process, the next steps or the answer becomes clear. We just needed to think out loud. This happens a surprising amount of the time with my clients. Most of these solutions are random occurrences, but they don't have to be. Intentionally seek out and find someone willing to listen as you simply think out loud to uncover the solution to your problem.

Regardless of how you seek help, adding cognitive diversity to your problem-solving efforts can help you get unstuck. Different problem-solving techniques can change the dynamic of, and approach to the problem³. By this means, consider talking with people who don't think like you for the maximum chance that their approach, combined with yours, leads to new paths forward.

Walk Away or Take a Break

Walking away from the problem, temporarily of course, is quite powerful and received a wide majority of the survey votes. This is the art of doing nothing in order to achieve a breakthrough.

The academic term for walking away is *incubation*, which is an illustrative word but I don't imagine it catching on in everyday conversation.

However, research shows that when problems are difficult, finding opportunities for your mind to wander by interrupting the difficult work with non-taxing work can help improve your efforts⁴.

The first reason this works is that it breaks the momentum that was pushing you down the wrong path. When you're driving and you hit a dead-end, you don't keep going. You turn around. However, in problem solving, we don't often see that we're stuck, or why. Taking a break naturally stops that momentum, which leads to the realization that we are at a dead-end and we need to make a U-turn.

The larger reason walking away helps is that it allows us to leverage our intuition. I wrote a chapter on Integrating Intuition in my latest book⁵. What I learned is that we can't integrate intuition into problem solving by forcing it with a process, unless that process is to take a break.

We've all heard some version of, "I do my best thinking in the shower." There are many examples of when the best ideas sometimes pop out of nowhere. For me, solutions often come while walking or swimming. But solutions don't come to me because I swim with a whiteboard tied to my waist. They come because my brain can play with ideas without restriction, and then bounce them off other ideas, stories, and models that are already stored in my brain.

³ Kearney, E., Gebert, D., & Voelpel, S. C. (2009). The influence of cognitive diversity on group problem solving: A longitudinal study. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 13(3), 179-191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015143>

⁴ Baird, B., Smallwood, J., Mrazek, M. D., Kam, J. W. Y., Franklin, M. S., & Schooler, J. W. (2012). Inspired by distraction: Mind wandering facilitates creative incubation. *Psychological Science*, 23(10), 1117-1122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612446024>

⁵ Flinchbaugh, J. (2021). Integrating intuition. In *People Solve Problems: The Power of Every Person, Every Day, Every Problem* (pp. 45-58). Jamie Flinchbaugh.

“Sleep on it,” is a common version of walking away from a problem. Research shows that sleep can aid in solving very difficult problems because difficult problems require unlocking new connections between ideas - this “unlocking of connections” often takes place while you are sleeping and your subconscious is at work.

Integrating Intuition can’t be forced but it can be stimulated, but what stimulates intuition is often specific to the individual. Therefore, stimulating intuition comes partly from paying attention to what’s happening when you have “light bulb moments” and then leveraging those experiences. I often stimulate these “light bulb moments” by writing down a question or problem before I go for a walk or take a swim. Often I’ll write down a problem that a client is struggling with and I want to think about it more deeply. I simply reorient my mind to that problem and then my brain can play with it during my activities. Meditation and reading are also excellent intuition stimulators.

Try a Different Method

Everyone has a preferred problem-solving method. Sometimes it goes beyond preference into religious zealotry which limits a person’s problem-solving options. However, almost every method out there has (a) more similarities than differences to your preferred model and (b) has some aspect about it that is unique or powerful. Therefore, it is best to put the zealotry aside and be curious about other methods and tools.

I don’t believe spending a lot of time choosing the best problem-solving method before tackling every problem is productive. If you have a preferred method, your strength in that method combined with its versatility will likely be the best choice. But when you’re stuck, pick up a tool with which you have less familiarity.

There are two reasons this works. First, the unfamiliar method may be a better approach for this particular problem. If you have some familiarity with several different methods, then you have more options to apply to the problem you’re facing⁶. The second reason is, just the act of using a less familiar approach will require you to use your brain differently. It’s like trying to drive on the other side of the road in a foreign country or swinging a golf club with the other hand. It causes you to pay attention to your approach and get off auto-pilot. That break will allow your brain to engage with the problem and help unstuck you.

The most common problem-solving technique, which we don’t even accept as a bona fide “method,” is solving the problem in our head. But, more often than not, when we end up stuck, the problem just rattles around without momentum or structure. This is the perfect time to try a different method. Just try writing it down, or try any other approach. At a minimum, you’ll start making progress.

⁶ Shook, J., & Rother, M. (2019). *Four Types of Problems: From Reactive Troubleshooting to Creative Innovation*. Lean Enterprise Institute.

Knuckle Down and Fight Through

This option received very few votes., However, its effectiveness is underrated. Perhaps a more positive-sounding term, like *persistence*, would have garnered more survey votes.

Research into persistence and creative problem solving indicates two fundamental lessons⁷. First, people underestimate the value of persistence across a wide range of situations which limits their ability to prove its worth. Second, some of the best and most creative solutions come from the latter stages of persistence, suggesting that failing to engage in this practice is a missed opportunity.

Lock out distractions. Work longer than you normally would, perhaps until you're bleary-eyed. Stare at the problem, poke at it, tear it apart, and put it back together.

We've all seen moments in movies where the genius just keeps working until they've found a way through. Off the silver screen, Einstein did this. So did Edison, who experimented with 1,600 different filaments on his way to creating a commercially viable lightbulb.

One prevailing piece of advice for authors is to keep writing every day, even if the writing isn't good. The idea is that one has to push through moments of writer's block or a series of bad ideas to pen the great American novel or make the next great scientific discovery.

When I talk about ideation, as was covered in a chapter of *People Solve Problems*⁸, I outline that when using ideation to generate solutions, the first tranche of ideas will be the obvious ones. Then if we knuckle down and go past those, we will start facing the impossible solutions in the second tranche. Then, and only then, do we end up with the third tranche: the creative solutions.

Persistence works because there are nuggets in both obvious and impossible ideas that can be combined, backed off a little, built up more, or just reexamined. This is one of the reasons that this approach doesn't get a fair shake, because we see it as being stubborn instead of engaging in necessary hard work to generate creativity.

Getting stuck on problems happens to every person, every team, and every organization. This menu of ideas will help you navigate those stuck problems when they inevitably occur. The goal is not to avoid getting stuck. Hard problems are hard, but getting stuck and then finding our way through is how meaningful progress is accomplished.

⁷ Lucas, B. J., & Nordgren, L. F. (2015). People underestimate the value of persistence for creative performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(2), 232-243. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000030>

⁸ Flinchbaugh, J. (2021). Ideation. In *People Solve Problems: The Power of Every Person, Every Day, Every Problem* (pp. 113-128). Jamie Flinchbaugh.