



# Are you solving the wrong problem?

Strategies for small business success

Drew Browne

**O**perating a small business, in its simplest form is about being able to manage and solve problems for people, just in time. However many business owners regularly report that they struggle to diagnose business problems accurately. What if the problem they are solving is the wrong one?

And what are the long-term outcomes when you are constantly pouring your limited time, focus and resources into the wrong cup?

## Understanding the context changes everything

An issue is never fully understood if we are not aware of its context and the environment and factors that created it. As business owners, we usually end up finding what we set out to find—only to belatedly discover that we are digging deeper into a problem we have already decided on, rather than undertaking a proper, objective diagnosis.

## Improving day-to-day problem-solving

It starts with improving our pre-problem-solving skills and leveraging the additional insights that are revealed from a better understanding of the context. Being able to accurately describe a problem

in the right way can often produce ninety percent of its solution. And at other times, being able to talk through the origin of a problem first, can be more helpful than jumping in to solve it.

## Pre-problem solving: The skill that rules them all

When working with a problem that is not first accurately framed, you can end up creating a great solution for the wrong problem.

Like first sharpening a saw before using it to cut down a tree, using pre-problem-solving skills first to understand better how a problem is best described or framed—accelerates the solution. A properly framed problem better identifies the issues that need to be addressed. It also identifies the time and resources needed and ensures the new solution is safely pointing in the right direction.

## Why the ‘whack-a-mole’ approach does not work

The adage is true—if all you have is a hammer, you will probably see everything as a nail.

By default, when fixing problems, we all fall prey to simply extending what we already know and expect. It is unusual to routinely push out into the unknown searching for a new result to a problem—es-

pecially where we do not yet have any history, insights or capabilities in that new zone. This means we can end up solving the wrong problem.

Today's commercial advantage is in our ability to recognise and remove blocks and problems before they arise in the customer experience—rather than getting lost in reactively patching holes after they have appeared.

### The problem of 'business plan guilt'

Nothing triggers guilt and self-loathing in a small business owner more than 'business plan guilt'—a trait no doubt leveraged by those proposing a costly solution for this pesky small business malaise.

As I work with business owners, I am astonished at how many feel the need to apologise for—not having a business plan, not updating their business plan or having a plan that does not look professional enough.

I have been to networking meetings and watched business plan salespersons pushing their weight around and leading with the question, "So do you have a professional business plan in place?". In an effort to avoid a heated exchange, I replied in the affirmative and walked away to seek refuge at the dessert table—only to have them follow me and whisper in my ear, "But when did you last update it?".

I have lost count of how many checklist-based solutions business coaches insist on trying to sell me (or my business clients). They endeavour to sell a 150-page business plan template, with optional pivot tables and checklists, as though it is a panacea, able to cure all disease and prolong life. This cookie-cutter approach illustrates the warning that 'prescription without proper diagnosis is often malpractice'.

### The business checklist

Simple business checklists are undoubtedly useful for transactional issues and checking lists. For instance, a pilot may use a pre-flight checklist to focus their thinking and confirm they have not overlooked any key flight requirements. However after take-off, the checklist does not fly the plane, set its course or respond to turbulence.

Business checklists are limited because they lack the ability to properly diagnose and solve the very individual problems that small businesses face. Such methods, which were initially designed as a guide to improve business processes by ensuring no important tasks were omitted, have morphed into a prescriptive, unquestioning force—often marketed as a 'business-by-checklist-in-a-box' solution. The problem with this approach is that it requires little further application of critical business thinking.

However, criticism of the 'business checklist approach' for its lack of business acumen and depth is often met with considerable resistance.

### Checklist analysis-paralysis

Part of the reason business owners tend to over-engineer the diagnostic checklist process is that they lack a clear framework for how to pre-problem solve.

Many people looking for a shortcut tick-box approach fail to realise that utilising this approach to problem diagnosis can in fact prevent them from thinking about and identifying the real issues at hand. An effective framework seeks to inform your thinking, not replace it.

### How do you start pre-problem-solving?

Whether you are framing a problem yourself or with team members, the following framework will assist you in better appreciating the context and complexity of the problem.

#### Individual pre-problem-solving skills

Pre-meeting, have your individual team members anonymously commit to writing:

- what their definition of the problem is
- what the category of problem is—for instance, human resources, user experience design, supplier, quality control or resource allocation, or a combination of these.

This will likely demonstrate that not everyone sees the problem in the same way. Creative solutions nearly always come from alternative definitions of the problem.

#### Team pre-problem solving

When starting a discussion about a problem with your team, it is important to be clear upfront that the expectation is for input from the team members, rather than answers.

##### What hinders this process?

- Berating your team or trying to extract solutions and innovation from the team members on demand is like declaring that floggings will continue until morale improves. This approach does not work—it only triggers the team's stress responses, hindering creativity and access to long-term memory function.
- Using a checklist for problem diagnosis, as this tends to discourage spontaneous thinking about the context.

##### What helps this process?

- Bringing an outsider into the conversation to trigger fresh discussions. The reality is that when managers try to imagine a customer's perspective themselves, they tend to get it wrong.
- Acknowledging that everyone has a bias towards avoiding uncomfortable conversations.
- Recognising that some problems are too complex to be addressed in the course of a normal business day with its frequent interruption. Some issues are deserving of a separate, full and proper airing.
- Identifying a time when the problem did not occur and examining what was different then.

Many people are only creative to the limits required by their job description because they are disengaged from their team or occupation. This means the culture you, as the business owner, design and encourage in your business will dictate whether, and to what degree, you gain



#### The quote

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**Drew Browne,**  
Sapience  
Financial

Drew Browne is owner and senior financial adviser at Sapience Financial. An award-winning writer, speaker, financial adviser, and professional mentor, he works with small-business owners and their families to help them better manage life's risks. Having worked in financial services for over 17 years, Drew's background in law and professional advice have earned him a reputation as a no-nonsense adviser and a formidable advocate for his clients, friends and supporters.

access to the diversity of thinking and insights necessary to out-think your competition.

### **The last word**

Do not waste time and resources attempting to solve the wrong problem. Instead, invest time in pre-problem-solving activities to define the problem you need to address. This approach improves problem-solving efficiency and tends to uncover deeper challenges worthy of your team's attention.

Further, by exploring the underlying context of challenges, businesses can tackle root causes rather than merely addressing symptoms. Implementing pre-problem-solving practices helps businesses to navigate complexity with greater effectiveness, paving the way for sustainable growth. **FS**