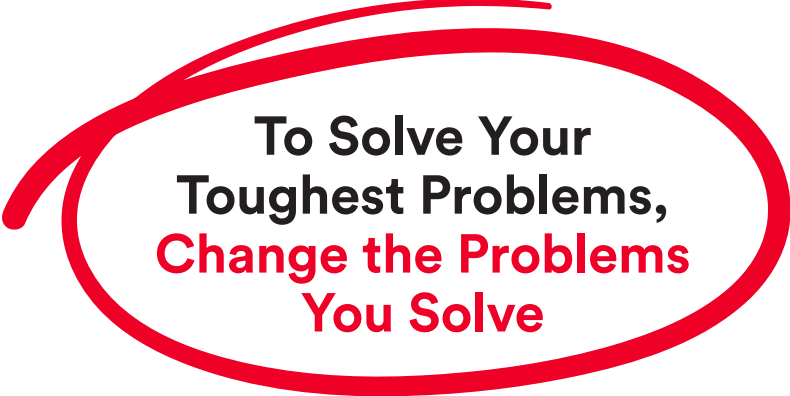


what's your problem?



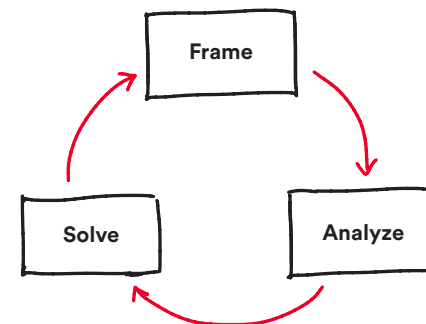
To Solve Your
Toughest Problems,
Change the Problems
You Solve

THOMAS WEDELL-WEDELLSBORG

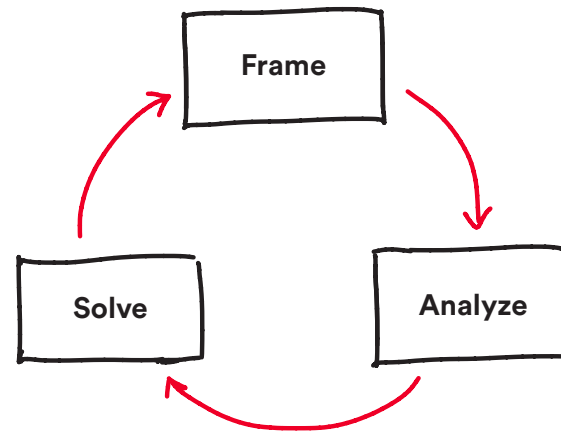
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chapter 1

reframing explained



BEYOND ANALYSIS



The most basic trait of good problem solvers is their optimism. When faced with a difficult situation, they don't just accept their fate. They believe that there is a better way forward—and that they are capable of finding it.

Optimism, though, is not enough. History is full of happy optimists running headfirst into walls. To succeed, their forward momentum must be coupled with the ability to take aim at the right problems. That is what reframing (and its first instance, framing) is about.

It's important to note that reframing is different from analyzing a problem. Analysis, as I use the term here, is when you ask, *Why is the elevator slow?* and try to understand the various factors that influence the speed. Being good at analysis is about being precise, methodical, detail-oriented, and good with numbers.

Reframing, in comparison, is a higher-level activity. It is when you ask, *Is the speed of the elevator the right thing to focus on?* Being good at reframing is not necessarily about the details. It is more about seeing the big

picture and having the ability to consider situations from multiple perspectives.

Reframing is not limited to the start of the process, nor should it be done independent of the work of analyzing and solving the problem. On the contrary, your understanding of the problem will develop alongside your solution. As entrepreneurs and design thinkers alike will tell you, you can't hope to frame a problem correctly unless you get your hands dirty and test your thinking in the real world.

To show how this process works in practice, I'll share one of the most powerful examples I've found. It's a bit longer than the elevator story, but stick with me, there are puppies involved.

AMERICA'S SHELTER DOG PROBLEM

Americans love dogs: more than 40 percent of US households have one. But this fondness for the adorable four-legged fur dispensers has a downside: every year, it's estimated that more than three million dogs enter a shelter and are put up for adoption.

Shelters and other animal-welfare organizations work hard to raise awareness of this issue. A typical ad will show a neglected, sad-looking dog, carefully chosen to evoke compassion, along with a line such as "Save a life—adopt a dog" or perhaps a request for donations.

Through such initiatives, about 1.4 million dogs are adopted each year. But that leaves more than a million unadopted dogs, to say nothing of cats and other pets. Despite the impressive efforts of shelters and rescue groups, the shortage of pet adopters has persisted for decades.

There is some good news, though. Within the last few years, two small organizations have found new ways to address the issue. One of those is BarkBox, a New York-based startup that I have taught reframing to. BarkBox donates a percentage of its income to dogs in need, so one day, its nonprofit team decided to take a fresh look at the shelter dog problem.

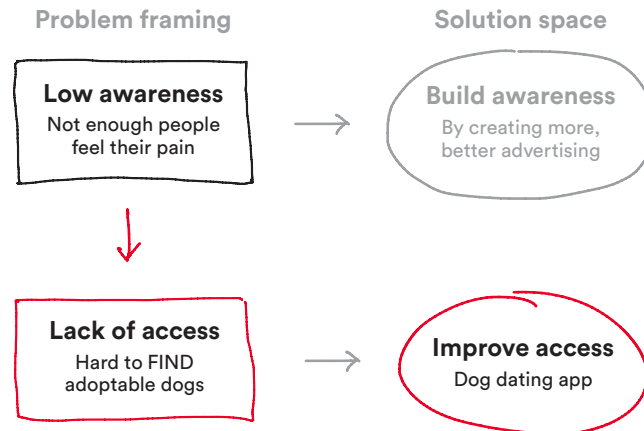
Solve for access, not advertising

Given its small budget, BarkBox knew that investing in advertising wouldn't make much of a difference. Instead, it started looking for other ways to frame the problem. As Henrik Werdelin, cofounder of BarkBox and leader of the project, told me:

We realized that the adoption issue was partially an *access* problem. Shelters rely heavily on the internet to showcase their dogs. However, their websites can be hard to find, and because the industry has so little money, the sites are rarely optimized for viewing on mobile devices. That was a problem I thought we could fix fairly easily.

The result, modeled on dating apps for humans, was a playful app called BarkBuddy, through which people

could see profiles of adoptable dogs and contact the shelter that held them.



Launched with the tagline “Find fluffy singles in your area,” the BarkBuddy app has since been downloaded more than 250,000 times. Soon after launch, it was serving up a million profile views every month. As the first dating app for dogs, BarkBuddy was also featured in several national TV programs and got airtime on a famous talk show. That is a fair amount of bark for your buck, if you will, given that the app cost about eight thousand dollars to build and launch.

This is classic reframing: by rethinking what the problem was, Werdelin and his team identified a new, more effective approach. But at the same time, you’ll notice that in an important sense, the team was still working *within the original framing of the problem*: How do we get more dogs adopted? That’s not the only way to frame the shelter problem.

A different approach: shelter intervention programs

Lori Weise is the executive director of Downtown Dog Rescue in Los Angeles and one of the pioneers behind the shelter intervention program. Lori’s program doesn’t seek to get more dogs adopted. Instead, it works to *keep the dogs with their first family* so they never enter the shelter system in the first place.

On average, about 30 percent of the dogs that enter a shelter are “owner surrenders,” dogs deliberately relinquished by their owners. Within the volunteer-driven shelter community, united by its deep love of animals, such owners are often judged harshly: Exactly how heartless do you have to be to discard your dog like it was just some broken toy? To prevent dogs from ending up with such “bad” owners, many shelters—despite the chronic overpopulation of homeless dogs—require potential adopters to undergo laborious background checks, creating further barriers to adoption.

Lori saw things differently. As she told me, “The whole ‘bad owner’ story didn’t sit well with me. I met many of these people in my work, and most of them care deeply about their dogs. They aren’t bad people. That story was too simple.”

To find out more, Lori set up a simple experiment at a shelter in South Los Angeles. Whenever a family came to hand over their dog, one of Lori’s staff members

would ask them, “If you could, would you prefer to keep your dog?”

If the family said yes, the staff member would then ask why the family was handing over their dog. If it was a problem that Lori and her staff could help fix, then they would, drawing on the group’s funds and their industry connections.

Lori’s experiment revealed a data point that flatly contradicted the industry’s assumptions: 75 percent of owners said that they wanted to keep their dog. Many were in tears when handing over their dogs—and they had often taken good care of them for years before they came to the shelter. As Lori put it:

“Owner surrenders” is not a people problem. By and large, it is a poverty problem. These families love their dogs as much as we do, but they are also exceptionally poor. We’re talking about people who in some cases aren’t entirely sure how they will feed their kids at the end of the month. So when a new landlord suddenly demands a deposit to house the dog, they simply don’t have a way to get the money. In other cases, the dog needs a ten-dollar

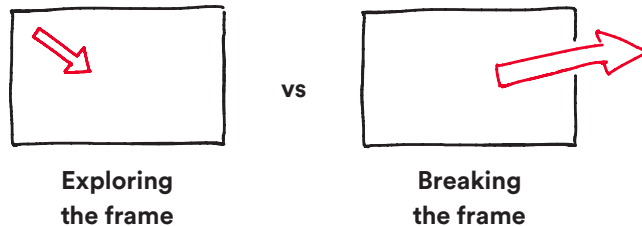
rabies shot, only the family has no access to a vet, or may be wary of approaching any kind of authority. Handing over their pet to a shelter is often the last option they believe they have.

As Lori found, the intervention program wasn’t just economically viable: it was actually more cost-effective than the group’s other activities. Before the program, Lori’s organization spent an average of around \$85 per pet they helped. The new program brought that cost down to around \$60 per pet, dramatically improving the organization’s impact per dollar. The initiative also allowed the families to keep their beloved pets—and by keeping the pets out of the shelter, the program freed up space to help other animals in need.

Due to the work of Lori and several other pioneers, shelter intervention programs are being replicated across the United States, and the approach has gained the support of several industry organizations. As a consequence of this and other initiatives, the number of pets that end up in a shelter and the number that are euthanized are at all-time lows.

EXPLORING VERSUS BREAKING THE FRAME

The two stories illustrate the power of reframing. In both cases, by finding a new problem to solve, a small group of people managed to make a big difference. The stories also show how there are two different ways of reframing a problem—call it *exploring* versus *breaking* the frame.



Exploring the frame is when you delve deeper into the original problem statement.

It is similar to analyzing the problem, but with the added element that you keep an eye out for overlooked aspects of the situation that might make a difference. This is what the BarkBox team did. They started by saying “Not enough people adopt from shelters,” and then they delved deeper until they spotted a “hidden” problem: the access issue. With the problem reframed, they created a wildly outsize impact from their eight thousand dollars’ worth of investment.

Breaking the frame is when you step away completely from the initial framing of the problem.

Lori’s program broke the frame. She rethought the very objective of her work—seeing it not as an adoption problem but as a problem of helping poor families keep their pets—and helped change her industry in the process.

Both of these approaches can lead to breakthroughs. But the idea of breaking the frame is more important, because if you don’t master it, *you will get trapped by the initial framing of the problem*. Even for seasoned problem solvers, it’s easy to get drawn into details, scouring a stated problem for clues while completely forgetting to challenge the overall framing. By keeping the idea of breaking the frame in mind, you will be less limited by how a problem happens to be framed when you first run into it.

TECHNICAL VERSUS MENTAL BREAKTHROUGHS

There is a second, more subtle difference between the two stories. The BarkBuddy story reads like a typical Silicon Valley tale: a hitherto overlooked problem was identified, and due to the amazing powers of technology, we now have a better way to solve it. The BarkBuddy app, in this sense, was deeply tied to its time. It wouldn’t have been possible without smartphones, data-sharing standards, and a large population of people who had

trained their thumbs on dating apps. Dartmouth professor Ron Adner calls this “the wide lens,” meaning that for an innovation to succeed, a supporting ecosystem of technology and collaboration partners must already be in place.

Lori’s invention had absolutely nothing to do with new technology, nor did it depend on having a large population previously trained in a new behavior. It certainly drew on a wide ecosystem of collaboration partners, including veterinarians and shelters—but all of those had been in place for decades, operating pretty much the same way.

This raises an interesting question: What was stopping us from coming up with the two solutions *earlier than we did*? BarkBuddy couldn’t have been built much before it was. The conditions simply weren’t in place. But Lori’s shelter intervention program? Theoretically, we could have come up with that twenty or perhaps even forty years ago. The central barrier to its implementation wasn’t technological. It was a wrongful belief—in this case, that the families who surrendered their dogs were all bad owners. For decades, an entire community had been blinded by its beliefs. Lori broke the frame by taking a piece of data everybody already knew and offering us a new way to understand it.

This is a key theme of the stories in this book. Innovators and problem solvers have an understandable fascination with new technology, whether it’s

engineers pushing the boundaries of physics, doctors developing new drugs, or programmers working wonders with bits and bytes.

But in a surprisingly large number of cases—especially those encountered in our daily lives—the solution to a problem depends not on technological but on mental breakthroughs. As such, solving tough problems is not always about the details, or about being a particularly systematic thinker. It can equally be about interpretation and sense-making; about seeing what is already there but rethinking what it means. Much depends on our ability to question our own beliefs, and to challenge assumptions that we may have held onto for a long time—about our colleagues, our customers, our friends and families, and not least ourselves.

These stories have hopefully given you an idea of the difference reframing can make. To conclude this chapter, here are five specific benefits you’ll gain from reading this book, explained in a bit more depth.

1. YOU WILL AVOID SOLVING THE WRONG PROBLEMS

Most people have a bias toward action. When faced with a problem, they immediately switch into solution mode, rejecting analysis in favor of rapid forward movement: *Why are we still talking about the problem? Let’s find a solution, people!*

Action bias is generally a good thing: you don't want to get stuck in endless deliberation. But it carries the danger that people will charge ahead *without fully understanding the problem they are trying to solve*, or without considering whether they're taking aim at the right problem in the first place. As a consequence, they often waste their energy on the wrong things, fiddling with small variations on the same useless "solution" until they run out of time or money. Sometimes this is described as "rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*."

The process I share in this book is designed to let you reframe problems fast, so you can get both the benefits of speed and the power of deliberation. By introducing reframing early in the process, before people fall in love with a specific solution, you can prevent wasted effort and achieve your goals faster.

2. YOU WILL FIND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Not everyone makes the mistake of jumping too quickly into action. Many have learned to spend time analyzing the problem. But even then they can miss important opportunities. Specifically, many people approach problem diagnosis by asking: *What is the real problem?* Guided by that question, they dig deep into the details, looking to find the "root cause" of the problem.

The elevator story highlights an important flaw in that way of thinking. The slowness of the elevator is presumably a real problem, and buying a new elevator would fix it. But crucially, *that is not the only way to see the problem*. In fact, the very idea that a single "root cause" exists can be misleading. Problems typically have multiple causes and can be addressed in many ways. The elevator problem could also be framed as a peak demand problem—too many people need the elevator at the same time—which could be solved by spreading out the demand, such as by staggering people's lunch breaks.

Reframing is not about finding the *real* problem; it's about finding a *better problem to solve*. By insisting that there is one correct interpretation of a problem, we blind ourselves to the possibility of smarter, more creative solutions. Reframing makes you better at finding those.

3. YOU WILL MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

Research has shown that one of the most powerful things you can do when solving problems is to **generate multiple options to choose from**. The Ohio State University professor Paul C. Nutt, a leading scholar in the field, found that people make bad decisions more than half the time when they consider only one real option:

- *Should I do an MBA or not?*
- *Should we invest in this project or not?*

In contrast, people who create and consider multiple options make the wrong call only a third of the time—and this holds true even if they end up sticking with their original plan in the end.

- *Shall I pursue an MBA, do a startup, seek a new job, or stay in my current role?*
- *Shall we invest in project A, B, or C, or is it better to hold off for now?*

Just increasing the options helps you make better judgment calls.

But there is a catch: the options you consider have to be *genuinely different*. A team that doesn't understand reframing may think their analysis was really thorough because they identified fifteen providers of new, faster elevators. Of course, they've just found fifteen different versions of the same solution. Reframing leads to better decisions because it lets you find genuinely different options to choose from.

And there's more. At the risk of doing what every author does with their favorite subject—*“and that, dear reader, is why furniture reupholstery will save humanity”*—I will nonetheless argue that the widespread mastery of reframing can have an even bigger positive impact. Take just two examples—one personal, one societal.

4. YOU WILL BROADEN YOUR CAREER OPTIONS

On a personal level, solving hard problems is one of the most fulfilling things there is, and it's a great way to make a difference for the people and causes you care about. On top of that, teaching yourself to reframe will also have some tangible effects on your career.

Most evidently, by becoming a better problem solver, you will immediately make yourself more valuable to your company. And because reframing doesn't require you to be a subject-matter expert for a given problem—as you'll see later, experts can sometimes get trapped by their own expertise—it also means that you can contribute to areas outside your own role, much like management consultants can add value to industries they haven't worked in themselves. That can be helpful in case you someday want to change into a different kind of role.

Not coincidentally, the ability to solve problems is also highly prized on the job market. In a recent report, the World Economic Forum shared a list of the most important skills for the future. The top three skills, listed here, should seem familiar:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity

Lastly, reframing will also future-proof your career in a very specific way: by making you less vulnerable to being replaced by a computer.

Depending on your current occupation, this threat may feel remote to you. However, most experts will give you a sobering message: AI and other forms of automation have already started taking over many of the jobs that people used to have, including white-collar jobs.

Problem diagnosis, though, is different. By its very nature, defining and reframing a problem is a uniquely human task, requiring a multifaceted understanding of the situation; an aptitude for absorbing vague, hard-to-quantify information; and the ability to interpret and rethink what the data means. These are all things that computers will not be capable of doing in the near-term future*—and as such, becoming better at them will serve to create both job security and new job opportunities for you.

5. YOU WILL HELP CREATE A HEALTHIER SOCIETY

Finally, reframing also matters to the continued functioning of our society. Solving conflicts in a sustainable way requires people to find common ground with their adversaries—and that often starts by figuring out

what problems people are trying to solve, rather than fighting over solutions. As I'll show, reframing has been used to find new solutions to deeply entrenched political conflicts.

At the same time, learning to reframe is also a useful mental defense system—because research has shown that framing can be weaponized. Take a careful look at how people from warring political parties talk about a hot topic, and you will see how they use reframing to try to influence your thinking.

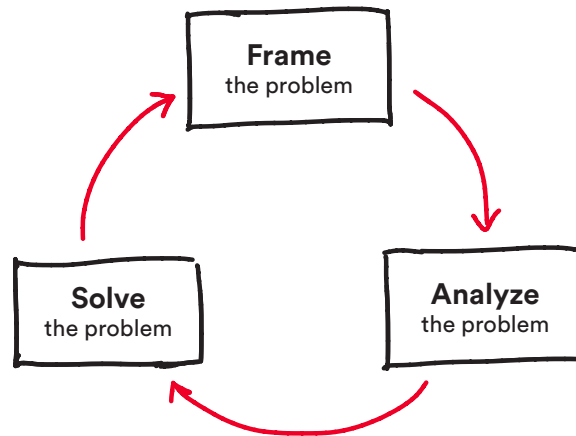
In this sense, reframing can be seen as a central civic skill. By boosting your problem-framing literacy, you will become better at detecting when someone is trying to manipulate you. A population more fluent in framing is a population better protected against demagogues and other people with ill intentions.

And that, dear reader, is why you should recommend this book to your allies, while softly slandering it to your political opponents.

*Well, no earlier than next Wednesday, anyway.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

reframing explained



Tackling problems involves three activities that you cycle through repeatedly:

1. **Framing (and subsequently reframing) the problem:** when you determine what to focus on
2. **Analyzing the problem:** when you study the chosen framing of the problem in depth, trying to quantify it and understand the finer details

3. **Solving the problem:** the actual steps you take to fix it; things like experimentation, prototyping, and eventually implementing the full solution

There are two different ways to look for new angles on a problem:

1. **Exploring the frame:** when you try to reframe a problem by delving deeper into the details of the first framing
2. **Breaking the frame:** when you step away from the first framing, putting an entirely different spin on it

Most problems have multiple causes—and thus, they may have multiple viable solutions. People who look for the “real” problem risk missing out on creative solutions, because they stop at the first viable answer they find.

Not all solutions to problems are technical. Sometimes, new approaches can be found by questioning our beliefs rather than applying new technology.

Creating multiple options improves the quality of your decisions—provided those options are genuinely different.

Your career can benefit from reframing, as can our society as a whole.