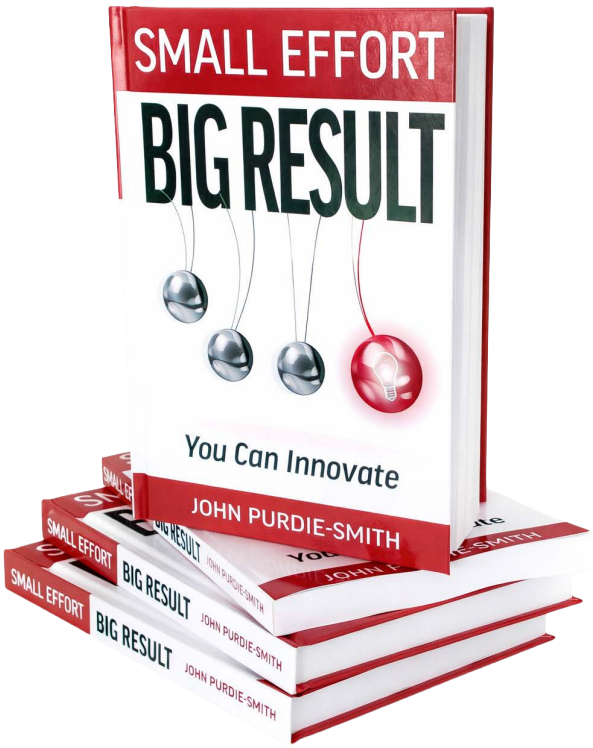
SAMPLE CHAPTER



CHAPTER 5

SEE THE PROBLEM AS THE PATHWAY

An excerpt from the research-based Sebir Model of innovation at the individual level that reframes problems as containing the key to achieving goals instead of only blocking them

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SEE THE PROBLEM AS THE PATHWAY

Problems are just opportunities in their work clothes

HENRY KAISER

Late in 208BC, General Xiang Yu, a brutal Chinese warlord from the Chu state, had a problem.

Xiang Yu had recently rebelled against the first dynasty of Imperial China, the Qin Dynasty, but the pivotal Battle of Julu was not going well. He sent an advance force across the Yellow River but on joining them a little later, he discovered those troops had been nearly starved by a prolonged siege. And even with those weakened fighters added to the men he had brought with him, Xiang Yu's Chu army was still heavily outnumbered.

His combined forces were inferior numerically and physically.

But Xiang Yu's response was remarkable. He deliberately gave himself and his men more life-threatening problems. He ordered the destruction of all their supplies and cooking equipment, except for what would be sufficient to sustain them for just three days.

This created an additional problem (self-inflicted)—a serious shortage of provisions.

And, while his men slept, Xiang Yu oversaw the sinking of all the boats they had used to cross the Yellow River.

Yet another problem (self-inflicted)—no escape route.

He told his men the next day that their choice was to fight and win quickly against overwhelming odds, or die without any hope of a retreat.

Faced with that persuasive incentive, Xiang Yu's army was spurred to fight with extraordinary fierceness and resolve. They found ways to defeat the Qin forces in nine consecutive engagements to ultimately win the Battle of Julu.

When and how Xiang Yu acquired such astonishing perspicacity is impossible to say. Maybe this insight developed over the course of his victories in the many battles that won him power over large tracts of China. Or perhaps his mentor was the Chinese general, military strategist and philosopher, Sun Tzu, who authored the book *The Art of War* about 300 years earlier. Xiang Yu could have been drawing upon

Sun Tzu wisdom such as:

Battles are won before they are fought

But whatever the reason, Xiang Yu certainly exhibited an insightful and radically different approach to problems. Instead of trying to minimize them—or overcome them, or avoid them—he embraced them. And not only that, he magnified them. In doing so, instead of being overwhelmed by problems, he was able to turn them to his advantage. He saw problems as friends and formidable operational allies.

Xiang Yu teaches us two valuable lessons about how to innovate through problems:

1. Cultivate the right problem mindset
2. See the inherent difficulty starkly and succinctly

We learn the first lesson from simply observing what Xiang Yu decided to do. We learn the second one from inferring how he arrived at that decision.

The Problem with Problems

An attitude toward problems such as Xiang Yu's is rare. Although a negative reaction to problems is normal—probably even in ancient times—this sentiment is possibly even stronger in modern times. For most of us, problems are something we prefer not to experience. We don't like them; we don't want them.

Out of sight, out of mind is an ideal category in which to lump them.

A quick dictionary-check experiment can make the point:

COMMON DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF "PROBLEM"
WIKTIONARY
A difficulty that has to be resolved or dealt with
OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY
A thing that is difficult to deal with or understand
MERRIAM-WEBSTER
A question or difficulty calling for a solution or causing concern
COLLINS ENGLISH DICTIONARY
A situation that is unsatisfactory and causes difficulties for people
DICTIONARY.COM
Any question or matter involving doubt, uncertainty or difficulty

If Xiang Yu were to travel forward through time (presumably not by boat) and looked over our shoulders at this dictionary survey, I don't think he would find a description he would agree with. Although one of the dictionary definitions does also encompass the notion of a problem being something that requires a solution, the striking common thread of all of them is their tenor: they are overwhelmingly negative.

And that is the problem with problems—we are conditioned to regard them pessimistically. Our experience is reinforced by how problems are presented to us. They are not something we welcome.

They are usually seen as harbingers of bad news.

As human knowledge has increased—and more tellingly—as the communication and sharing of knowledge has increased—the undesirable role of problems has been amplified. Almost by definition, any explaining or recounting of the ebb and flow of human affairs must acknowledge the part played by problems. Progress is described and celebrated in its achievements *in spite of* the many and varied problems encountered along the way.

Rarely is advancement recorded as having occurred *by virtue of* those problems.

This worldview is not compatible with our model of personal innovating.

If we want to innovate intentionally, we must start with the problem stopping us from doing something we want to do. Therefore, the more intimately we know and understand that problem, the more likely it is we will be able to innovate through it. Instead of harboring a negative view of problems, we embrace them as we would a friend or helpmate. Even indifference to problems can hinder innovative efforts.

Our attitude toward problems must be unmistakably welcoming.

This is the first lesson from Xiang Yu.

The Opportunity with Problems

Problems are the pathway to an innovative solution.

Despite the prevailing prejudice against problems, there are some more enlightened views around. In his stimulating book, *The Obstacle Is The Way,* Ryan Holliday establishes his entire thesis on a few words written by the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, in the year 170AD. After a short prefatory discourse, Marcus Aurelius concludes with:

The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way

It would be a mistake to regard what Marcus Aurelius wrote about problems as merely a shrewd comment based upon the sweeping experiences his lofty position had afforded him. He wasn't just reflecting on the past—he was arguing for the need to see problems as the key to progress. Ryan Holiday elaborates on this from multiple

perspectives in his book. Problems should be searched out rather than shunned. They should literally be embraced because they contain the hidden means to otherwise unobtainable ends.

From research I have completed into thousands of business problems that were solved innovatively, the path to an eventual solution invariably passed through the inherent problem. This is not to say those involved knowingly focused on the problem right from the start. Sometimes the solution was achieved through trial and error. Or, people stumbled upon an answer serendipitously. Occasionally, a known, parallel situation proved to be adaptable to the one at hand and a satisfying answer was put together by copying the essence of that analogous solution.

But even though what transpired may have been clumsy or lucky, a forensic look after the event reveals that—even in diverse circumstances—there is inescapable symmetry between the intrinsic problem and the ultimate solution. The negative and the positive co-exist.

This knowledge invites a contrary perspective on the nature of problems, a constructive, confident one. Oscar Wilde captured it well:

Between the optimist and the pessimist, the difference is droll.
The optimist sees the doughnut; the pessimist the hole!

We must be optimistic about problems to innovate.

And, once an understanding is gained of the essential, facilitating role a problem plays in the generation of a successful innovative solution, it becomes obvious that the problem truly is the pathway.

To build on this insight, a prerequisite to adopting this fresh view of problems is to settle upon a definition of them that recognizes both their negative and positive features. One that Xiang Yu would agree with.

This should suffice:

OUR PROBLEM DEFINITION

A problem is a difficulty that blocks the achievement of a goal and contains the means of achieving it

We are now oriented to evaluate any problem standing between us and a goal.

Undress Problems to Reveal the Opportunity

People from various fields have long discerned the Jekyll and Hyde character of problems and taken advantage of this sensitivity. Henry Kaiser, a 19th century industrialist and shipbuilder in America, opens this chapter with his optimistic take

on problems being opportunities in their work clothes and Marcus Aurelias obviously saw them in a positive light almost 2000 years ago.

And we have Oscar Wilde's cheery, doughnut juxtaposition of the two perspectives.

Another American, John Gardner, a public official and educator, observed in the 20th century:

> *We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems*

Although the interpretation has perhaps been stretched a little, the ancient Chinese symbol for crisis has also been widely used to highlight the alluring contradiction that can be found within problems:

The symbol is made up of two characters, and the argument that the first represents *danger* (or difficulty) and the second *opportunity* is a preferred representation used frequently in business education and, at times, in political communications. It was a favored rhetorical device used by US President John F. Kennedy in campaign speeches. Although some assert the explanation employed is apocryphal and that, strictly speaking, the second character really means *change* rather than *opportunity*, this hasn't detracted from the popularity of the device—nor its expository value.

It engages.

Whatever metaphor we prefer, the common theme running through all these depictions is that the beguiling underside of problems needs to be sought and found. We must undress problems. We must peel off any disguise.

In the end, we want to work with Dr. Jekyll, not cower before Mr. Hyde.

So how do we do that?

To make a problem work for us, we must be able to see it starkly and succinctly. This involves not only an unadulterated description of the obstacle but also visualizing what it can look like once it has been radically overcome.

It is important to avoid being dragged into an arm wrestle over how a problem should be defined or described. Intellectually rigorous explanations of what constitutes a problem are not helpful. This can be a complex area, and many books have been written about problem definition. How is a problem described? What is the root cause of the problem? And how do you know you have found it? Probing of that kind.

This is not for us. We have our definition—a problem is a difficulty that blocks the achievement of a goal and contains the means of achieving it.

And so, to the second lesson handed down from Xiang Yu.

When confronted with a formidable enemy relative to his own forces, Xiang Yu did not analyze his strengths and weaknesses.

Nor did he conduct a brainstorming session to lay bare all his options. He saw through to the actuality of his inferior, weakened army who were facing a seemingly unconquerable foe and focused solely on how he could overcome that brutal deficiency.

Xiang Yu's uncomplicated approach can be translated into a useful template for breaking a problem down into its primary components—simply, clearly, and nakedly. We will build on this later so we are fully primed to innovate, but for now, we'll start with the identification of the three primary components of a problem:

THE THREE PRIMARY PROBLEM COMPONENTS	
Problem Obstacle	This phrase contains one or more nouns that identify the barrier that blocks the reaching of a goal
Problem Cause	This phrase contains the Problem Obstacle qualified by one or more adjectives that identify *how* it blocks the reaching of a goal
Problem Solution	This phrase, which is exactly opposite to the Problem Cause, uses one or more adjectives to reframe the Problem Obstacle once a problem is solved and a goal achieved

To see this routine in action, we return to Xiang Yu and the situation his Chu army faced at the Battle of Julu:

XIANG YU'S STARK PROBLEM STANCE	
Problem Obstacle	**Chu Army**
Problem Cause	**Defeatable Chu Army**
Problem Solution	**Undefeatable Chu Army**

Although we cannot of course know for sure, here is a possible interpretation of what happened. To win the Battle of Julu with the reality of a weakened army—one susceptible to defeat—Xiang Yu seems to have acknowledged his own parlous state—a "Defeatable Chu Army"—and then visualized and focused on its victorious

opposite—an "Undefeatable Chu Army."

How could he bring this about?

How could he ensure his men would not be defeated?

As we now know, he was boldly innovative and created irresistible motivation for his men to fight.

And they did so. In fact, they fought so fiercely that history records "Every Chu soldier taking on ten foes."

A credible conclusion is that it was the unembellished Problem Solution that Xiang Yu visualized which caused him to become so audacious and inventive. After all, conventional battlefield thinking wasn't going to transform the Chu army.

But, regardless of the accuracy of our supposition, we have a lesson we can use. Acknowledging the stark reality of a problem—the Problem Cause—enables us to see through to a dramatically contrasting reality—the Problem Solution.

Such a crystal-clear vision equips us to innovate. We not only see the problem—we see through to a diametrically opposite solution state that inspires us like never before. We consider the Problem Cause and do a mental 180—a radical reversal.

Incidentally, this is where the necessity of describing a Problem Cause succinctly becomes evident—a point that has been emphasized already. Mentally reversing a Problem Cause of two or three words is easy enough to handle. Achieving the same when a Problem Cause is fully articulated as a longer phrase or sentence can pose a much tougher mental challenge.

Let's pause here for a moment and take stock of what we have just done, because this exercise is the essential early step every time we innovate. We must be able to remember and apply the routine, and—as we will see in the next chapter and later—it has other important uses.

So, we will give the problem identification routine an apt name. There are various possibilities, but we will go with this: as we have achieved transparency by inverting a negative image (the Problem Cause) into a positive one (the Problem Solution)—something we have in common with the standard photographic process—we will refer to the problem encapsulation—the way the problem is captured and presented—as the *Problem PhotoBox*.

As will become increasingly clear over the coming chapters, the *Problem PhotoBox* is the indispensable tool when we innovate. For now, we will focus on its progressive formulation.

An early and fundamental challenge that arises during the building of a *Problem PhotoBox* is this: how do we know we have evaluated the problem sufficiently well to innovate?

Very easily. We use a single question. To determine if we have described Xiang Yu's circumstances adequately—or the circumstances of any problem we are confronting—we apply the following litmus test:

PROBLEM SOLUTION TEST

If the Problem Solution—which radically reverses the Problem Cause—is attained, does this mean that the goal has also been achieved?

If the answer is "Yes," our problem framing is adequate for innovating purposes.

It is obviously important that this test question can be answered with ease. If the Problem Solution is accurately described and is genuinely the reciprocal of the Problem Cause, the answer to the question testing the adequacy of a problem description will always be "Yes."

Once again, the virtue of succinctness demanded by the *Problem PhotoBox* justifies itself.

Building a *Problem PhotoBox*—initially by identifying the Problem Obstacle, Problem Cause, and a radically inspiring Problem Solution—can be done for any problematic situation.

Some Guidance with Expressing the Problem

A practical prerequisite to populating the *Problem PhotoBox* is expressing the prevailing problem in clear and simple language so the *Problem PhotoBox* components can be identified, extracted and described. But often, the fog enveloping a problem appears as an amorphous tangle, making it difficult to isolate what the problem really is.

To cut through this confusion, we can borrow a little from metaphysical thinking—viewing the problem in terms of what the Problem Obstacle *is* or what it *does*. This sounds more abstract than it really is. We are simply using a different lens—one that gives us some helpful structure—to see a problem clearly, so that breaking it down into its component parts is easier.

There are four basic forms a problem statement can take. These fall into two opposing pairs.

The first pair relates to *being*—the state of the Problem Obstacle:

- It *is* something undesirable
- It *is not* something desirable

The second pair relates to *doing*—the action of the Problem Obstacle:

- It is doing something undesirable
- It is not doing something desirable

This can be illustrated by re-visiting Xiang Yu's problem stance from earlier. As we

have not yet illustrated how the complete *Problem PhotoBox* is built, we will refer to our summation of the situation facing Xiang Yu as a "Preliminary" *Problem PhotoBox*:

XIANG YU'S PRELIMINARY PROBLEM PHOTOBOX	
Problem Obstacle	**Chu Army**
Problem Cause	**Defeatable Chu Army**
Problem Solution	**Undefeatable Chu Army**

If we were to transport ourselves back in time to just prior to the Battle of Julu—and gain an appreciation of the situation—we could express Xiang Yu's problem in four different forms.

We might begin with *is* or *is not* and state:

- the Chu army is *defeatable* in the Battle of Julu, or
- the Chu army is *not undefeatable* in the Battle of Julu, or

We might choose *is doing* or *is not doing* and state:

- the Chu army is *losing* in the Battle of Julu, or
- the Chu army *is not winning* the Battle of Julu

Each of these four statements approaches the expression of the problem in a different form but, in the end, all converge on the same core Problem Cause—"Defeatable Chu Army"—which leads to the same Problem Solution—"Undefeatable Chu Army."

Even if you don't consciously use one of these four forms and find stating what the problem is a relatively simple matter, the chances are you are emulating one of them intuitively.

However, if the problem feels fuzzy or hard to pin down, start by identifying what the Problem Obstacle is or does. Then use one of the four forms as a guide to express the problem clearly and simply. That clarity will make it easier to populate the Problem PhotoBox—and ultimately, to innovate by means of it.

This thought framework is not mandatory, but if the guidance proves useful, it is there to be drawn upon.

Follow the Problem Pathway—Even When There's No Problem

Having finished reading this chapter, you could be forgiven for thinking I am advocating the practice of inventing problems for the pleasure of solving them.

In homage to Xiang Yu.

Well, in a practical sense, I am.

Our opportunities to innovate are not limited to situations where we are faced with one or more problems. If they were, the entire approach we are advocating would be purely reactive—restricted to innovating only when we are on the back foot, under pressure or playing catchup.

We are about far more than that.

Take, for example, a new project you are about to embark upon. It hasn't had time to accumulate any problems yet because it hasn't commenced. When you are in this position, spend a measured amount of time—either on your own account or with a team of fellow stakeholders—to literally brainstorm anything that could conceivably go wrong once the project is underway. This will produce a sizable list of *invented* problems. With the problem-tackling techniques you will learn in the following six chapters, make plans to either preempt each hypothetical problem (best) or prepare innovative remedies to deal with any problems should they occur.

Befriend problems before they become enemies.

Then you can innovate on the front foot as well.

Back to Xiang Yu.

He was of course engaged in much more than an academic exercise. He invented a problem that enabled him to innovate in the face of a life-or-death situation.

And, at the fundamental level, he also demonstrated that provided a problem is diagnosed without fuss—looked at stripped bare—it compels concentration on what is needed to achieve a desired state that is a perfectly opposed utopia.

Our emerging *Problem PhotoBox* technique works by first clearly articulating the Problem Cause. We then define the Problem Solution as its ideal, mirror opposite. As we will see, this both sharpens focus and channels our thinking toward a narrow set of tightly defined options that align with the sought-after Problem Solution.

Finally—going back to the history books—it would be possible to gain the impression Xiang Yu was a solitary pioneer in employing the option of self-inflicted marine sabotage as an innovative military strategy. That it was a quirky one-off.

But this is not so.

More than 1700 years later, in 1519AD, the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes did the same thing. He led the first expedition that caused the fall of the Aztec empire, but after he and his men landed at Veracruz, on the East Coast of Mexico, he sank his own ships. Although his men longed to return home—with all their options for doing so eliminated—they quickly re-focused on helping Cortes follow the problem pathway to achieve his expeditionary goals.

There are probably other such stories, albeit untold. The legacies of innovating are not newly discovered phenomena, but riches now recognized, comprehended and preserved for our instruction.