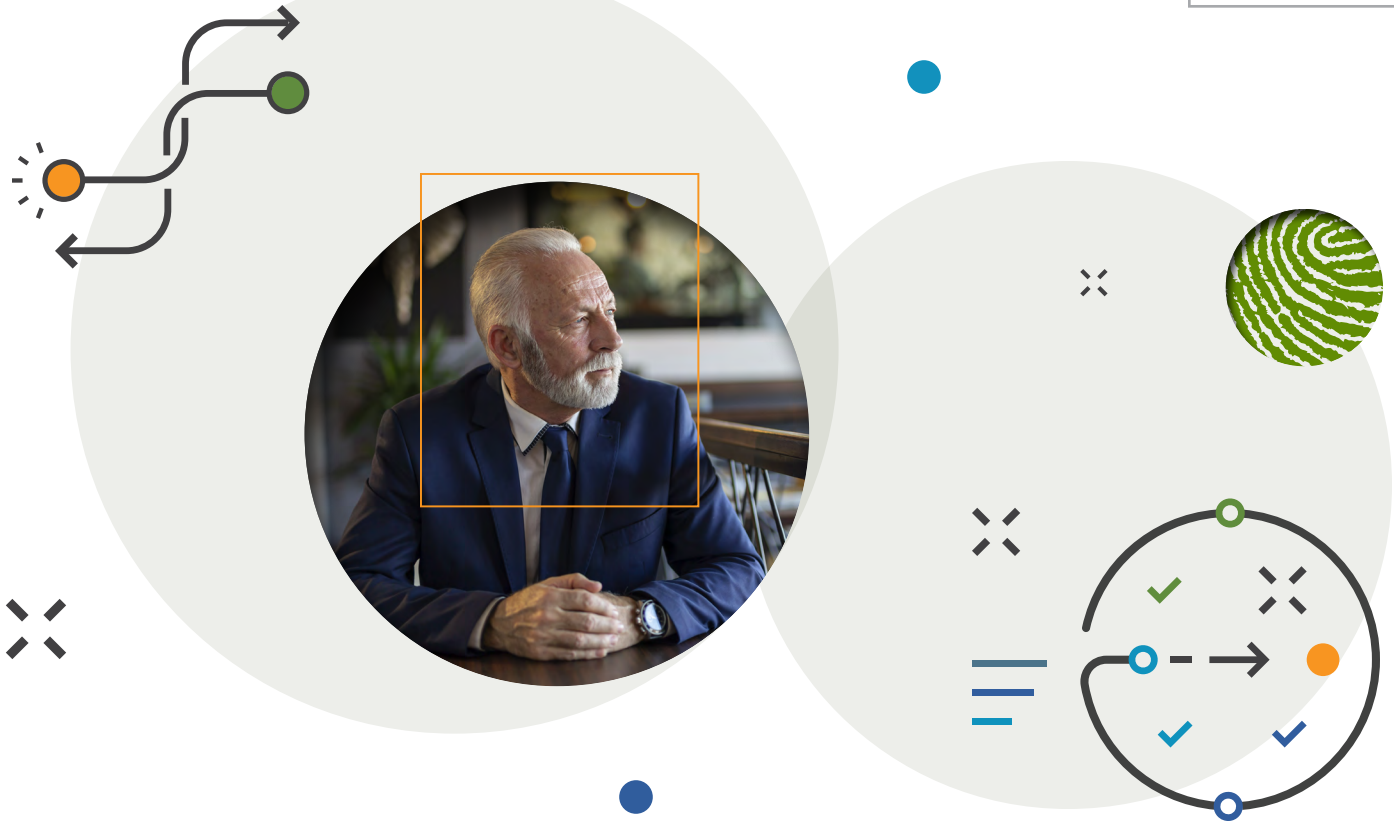




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What problem are you trying to solve?

BEST PRACTICES

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During the course of any complex project, the team spends a good deal of time problem solving. Often that word carries a negative context, but, even more often, it is just a way to talk about the work. When considered an ordinary part of executing a complex plan, there is this opportunity to clearly summarize the best approach to execution. Simply answer the question: What problem are you trying to solve?

Consideration of the best methods in problem definition have been discussed, researched, refined, and taught for many years. Authors like Tom Gilb, Eliyahu Goldratt, Ralph Keeney, Robert Kaplan, and David Norton offer well-considered thoughts and techniques for defining a problem/need/opportunity, then making solid decisions that lead to solid solutions.

While I recommend reading these authors, I'll offer this short summary of common thoughts.

Spend plenty of time up front clearly defining the problem.

A problem definition must always include a description of the current state. You need to know from whence you are coming in order to find a path to where you are going. When describing the desired end state, you must make it clear why that target state is a good thing. What good things will happen or what bad things will stop happening when the solution has been completed? As much as possible, you should include an idea of the expected timeline. Choosing among solution options will include "will this get done soon enough to matter". Define "soon enough".

Measure. If you cannot measure your current state, then how do you know you even have a problem? If you don't measure the final state, how do you know you've solved the problem? Can intermediate milestones provide partial solutions? Answer that by measuring. Gilb and Keeney talk a great deal about this.

Decompose. Solving a big, complex, multi-part problem doesn't work. The definition will be too hard to consume, and

measurement will be impossible. Decompose big problems into collections of smaller problems. You'll know when you've found the sweet spot when you can define and measure reliably. Delivering solutions to smaller problems might also get you those intermediate milestones, letting you realize value more continuously.

Admit defeat and celebrate victory. It is okay to try something only to find it doesn't work. You learn, improve, and move on to a new approach. When you can measure success, it can be easier to admit defeat. Admit it easily and quickly so you can move on to better ideas. When you succeed, take a moment to celebrate before moving on to the next problem. Remember what it took to get there and the lessons you learned on the way.

When you and your team are busy, working hard, getting things done, it can be frustrating to hear someone ask, "What problem are you trying to solve?" Resist the urge to ignore that question. Answering it is the most important part of delivering success.

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