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Problem Solving

FEATURE ARTICLE

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It's in our nature.

Anyone who has ever owned a birdfeeder can attest to the fact that squirrels are resourceful (and devious) little creatures. No matter what hindrance or obstacle(s) you employ to dissuade them, you are likely to find them neck-deep in your bird seed just moments later.

Last weekend, as our backyard began its annual thaw, my girlfriend decided to refill our feeders in an effort to welcome spring. Shortly following, I could hear our cat cackling at the window. I peered outside to see what all the fuss was about, and wouldn't you know it, a squirrel had somehow scaled our 6-foot shepherd's hook, navigated the wrap-around "squirrel proof" baffle, climbed to the top of the feeder, completely removed its fastened metal lid, and was seated upon a cylinder full of fresh bird seed eating fistful after fistful.

This experience reminded me of a favorite YouTube video of mine. Made by a former NASA Engineer-turned-YouTuber, Mark Rober, "[Backyard Squirrel Maze 1.0 - Ninja Warrior Course](#)" is a 20-minute master class in squirrel problem solving. Not only is this video incredibly amusing, but it also highlights some interesting behavioral characteristics. While these squirrels are driven solely by an insatiable appetite for walnuts, their approach to solving problems on the road to achieving their goal reveals valuable lessons I think we can all gain insights from.

Fail fast.

In other words, speed over perfection. When we are faced with a problem, it is our instinct to act on it immediately. This is actually a good thing, but only if we're willing to recognize failure both early and often. You're not always going to get it

right the first time, so focusing on rapid innovation and iteration will deliver the quickest route to identifying the right solution.

One thing at a time.

Every problem, especially those involving technology, contain more than one component. While your final goal may be clearly defined and obtainable, achieving results quickly requires decomposition. Smaller more consistent wins fuel rapid progression. Every problem must be approached one obstacle at a time.

Focus on the objective.

As cliché as it sounds, “keeping your eye on the prize” is critical for problem solving. Why are we doing this work? What problem are we trying to solve? These questions, along with many others, should be addressed at every stage of the solution. While decomposition is pivotal for swift execution, it is equally as important to keep one eye on the final objective.

Don't let problem solving drive you nuts.

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