

# Your Idea is a Solution. Start With a Problem.

**Bill Murray, CoachingUP**

Most of your ideas are solutions—mine too. That may sound good, but it isn't. But it's not our fault. We were taught to think on our feet, come up with quick solutions, and act. It's what gets us recognized.

But it's wrong. Our solution ideas, mine and yours, aren't the solution.

Think about the odds against us:

- We're not the customer to begin with!
- Our solution idea is a logical answer to an emotionally-charged problem
- The problem isn't as big as we think it is
- The customer can solve it themselves without hardship
- It's actually a business problem, so our external customer doesn't even care about it
- The customer isn't willing to pay to solve it
- Our solution doesn't solve the root cause problem
- Our solution would arrive too late to matter

I could go on, but you get it.

In learning about the work people do, I often ask, "So who is your customer, what problem are you solving, and how do you know that this problem is worth solving?" Too often, those questions are met with frustration. We're tasked with coming up with solutions, when we really need to understand problems and outcomes. But we're not equipped to do it if we are working in the traditional way.

"So," you ask, "what am I supposed to do? I'm paid to solve problems!"

I hear you. First, get all the solutions out of your team's heads. Put them up on the wall in a parking lot for later. Now with a clear head, start with the problem. Your job is to understand it better than your customer. When you do, you'll have the insight required to provoke action. There just isn't any way around this. But it doesn't have to take forever. What can you learn about your customer and how the problem you're trying to solve impacts them? What can you learn about the outcome they want? Remember, outcomes aren't solutions. Outcomes are what happens as a result of the solution; in sales parlance, *the benefit of the feature*. What is your customer doing now to solve? How is that working? Does your customer care enough to even try a different solution?

Recently, I spent time with a team that has a perfectly logical solution that they want to create. But the cost of the solution is possibly greater than the benefit that the customer and the Enterprise would ever get from the solution. Like an order of magnitude, or two, greater. The cool thing is that the team accepts this, and is spending their time sizing the opportunity and putting some real financials to it. They've even identified existing opportunities that may indirectly drive results without additional investment. Smart!

Once you understand the scale of the problem and what your customer is trying to achieve, you can identify the behaviors your customer would have to be willing to engage in to get that outcome. Now you can try some of your solutions in the parking lot, but in a simple way to test the behavior, not the solution itself. The goal is to see if your customer will behave in a way through which we can deliver value. If they won't, that's OK. You just got the evidence you need to do something else. It's not failure, by the way. Failure is spending a lot of money to build something no one wants. Anything else is success.

Solutions clumsily look for problems. Insights reveal outcomes; the real thing that activates a customer. Solutions are cheap and plentiful like water. When you fall in love with a solution you become detached from the problem and your customer. Insights are rare like diamonds, and there is requisite work to find them. But when you fall in love with a problem, you become agnostic to solutions—just like your customer.

