

# Proble

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## **About the Author**

Ken Watanabe grew up in Japan and studied in the United States at Yale and Harvard Business School. He was a management consultant at McKinsey & Company for 6 years. He is now the founder and CEO of his own education, entertainment and media company, Delta Studio. He lives in Tokyo.



**KEN WATANABE**



*what is your delta?*



# PREFACE

## WHY PROBLEM SOLVING?

We all have to make decisions. Whether you're a student, a parent, a businessperson, or the president of the United States, you face problems every day that need solving. The problems may vary. Maybe you need to pass a maths class, or decide where to live, or figure out how to improve your company's bottom line. Maybe you want to lose some weight or simply get better at golf.

Whether the issue is big or small, we all set goals for ourselves, face challenges, and strive to overcome them. There's a fundamental approach to solving these real-life problems, one that can consistently lead you to effective and satisfying solutions. And chances are, no one has ever bothered to show you how.

One of my missions in writing this book was to show everyone a simple way to deal with the problems they face in their everyday lives. But I wasn't just trying to communicate a skill set. Being a problem solver isn't just an ability; it's a whole mind-set, one that drives people to bring out the best in themselves and to shape the world in a positive way. Rather than accepting the status quo, true problem solvers are constantly trying to proactively shape their environment. Imagine how different our world would be if leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, JFK, and Steve Jobs lacked this attitude.

I hope this book will help inspire both children and adults to develop this proactive mind-set by first tackling the problems in their own lives. Once you learn this simple way to solve the personal challenges you face every day, you just might see that your bigger dreams and accomplishments are also within your reach.

## **WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK**

Before I wrote this book, I was a consultant for the global management consulting firm of McKinsey & Company. For six years I worked with major companies all over the world to help solve their business challenges using a straightforward yet powerful set of problem-solving tools.

These are tools that anyone can use. They don't require complicated computer software or a room full of expert analysts. They're simply approaches to broaden and organize one's thinking about a problem, so that more possible solutions become clear.

In 2007 Japan's prime minister made education his nation's top agenda. As the country turned its focus to the educational system, I felt compelled to do my part. Although Japanese business leaders, educators, and politicians have long talked about the need for Japan to shift from "memorization-focused education" to "problem-solving-focused education," no one had figured out a concrete and effective way to make this happen.

So I left McKinsey to write this book and to teach kids. My aim was to teach Japanese children how to think like problem solvers, to take a proactive role in their own education and in shaping their lives. I tried to frame the tools we used at McKinsey in a fun and approachable way, one that would show kids what a practical approach to problem solving could help them accomplish. Although I don't claim to be any kind of expert on education, I hoped that the book would at least provide a starting point, one that would help shift the debate from whether we should teach problem solving to how we should go about teaching it.

Then a surprising thing happened: The book took off—and not just



with kids. It first caught fire in the business segment, becoming Japan's number one business best-seller in 2007. Then it spread through the education community and to a wider general audience. It turned out that adult readers in Japan, from parents and teachers to CEOs of major corporations, had been craving a simple and useful guide to problem-solving techniques.

Now I'm focusing on helping kids put *Problem Solving 101* into practice. I think the experience kids get from having an idea, taking initiative, and learning from both their successes and their failures is what we have to put more emphasis on. So I'm creating more opportunities for them to learn more from real-life situations rather than just in the classroom.

When I work with kids, I don't start by teaching the skills from *Problem Solving 101* in a classroom. Instead, I let them learn the same way Warren Buffett did. Buffett got his first business experience when he was only six years old, buying Coke bottles from his grandfather's store and selling them for a profit. The kids I work with get to run a food and drink business using a 1965 VW van I've renovated for use as a transportable shop. The kids decide what food and drinks to sell, where to sell, and how to compete against other teams by actually selling what they have cooked or prepared. The kids learn the importance of not just problem solving skills, but also leadership, teamwork, creativity, persistence, charm, and *kaizen* (continuous improvement) to make their vision come true. Only after this experience do I help them ask the important questions and provide them with the problem-solving tools that could help them with future projects.

The value of problem-solving-oriented thinking obviously extends far beyond the classroom into every facet of our lives. It enables us to take control of the challenges we encounter and to change the world in a positive way. My hope is that English-reading audiences will benefit from the book in the same way many Japanese readers have.

**Best, Ken Watanabe**

## **YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO BECOME A PROBLEM-SOLVING KID**

This is a book about kids solving problems. They face some pretty tricky challenges—the kinds of problems that might cause most people to throw up their hands and give up. But problem-solving kids aren't like most people—even though most people should be more like them.

As you'll see, problem-solving kids come in all ages, shapes, and sizes. They may seem to have special talents, or at least more than their fair share of luck. But the truth is, they're people just like you, who have learned how to think, make decisions and act on their own, and to live proactive lives. They've also picked up some helpful problem-solving tools along the way.

If you follow the simple lessons in these pages, you too can become a problem-solving kid (even if you consider yourself a grown-up). Rather than feeling as though your life is out of your control, you can take charge and shape the world around you. Instead of being overwhelmed by the challenges you face every day, you can learn to enjoy them and overcome them.

In fact, you may even feel like a better person at the end of this course. Your dreams and goals will seem less out of reach. And you'll be better able to accomplish whatever you're passionate enough and imaginative enough to conceive and pursue.

It could be something as simple as becoming a better dancer or learning how to cook French cuisine. Or maybe it's a bigger goal, like running for government or solving the global warming crisis. Whatever it is, you'll learn how to tackle it.

Problem solving isn't a talent limited to the lucky few. It's actually a skill and a habit that you can learn. This book will introduce you to a basic problem-solving approach through three case studies:

- The Mushroom Lovers, a new band trying to improve their

concert attendance numbers

- John Octopus, a bright young man with aspirations of becoming a computer graphics animator who needs to buy his first computer
- Kiwi, an aspiring football player looking for the best training school in Brazil

It will also give you a full toolbox of proven problem-solving techniques, the same techniques used by successful problem-solving people and companies all over the world. But before we start learning the problem-solving approach, let me introduce you to the problem-solving kids and their friends.

## **PROBLEM-SOLVING KIDS AND COMPANY**

So by now you're probably wondering what is it exactly that makes someone a problem-solving kid. First, let's talk about what they're not. There are several common attitudes that can get in the way of effective problem solving. While the following characters may sound like caricatures of real people, I bet these non-problem-solving kids also sound pretty familiar. Chances are you know people just like them at school or at work. Maybe they're your friends or members of your family. Some of them may even remind you of yourself!

For instance, take Miss Sigh.



Miss Sigh is the kind of person who gives up immediately whenever she faces even the smallest challenge. She just sighs and says, “I’ll never be able to do that.” Which isn’t to say she *couldn’t* achieve things if she tried. Sometimes she has a great idea or notices a problem that can be fixed. But she’s terrified of failing and having people laugh at her. Instead of speaking up or taking action, she sits around feeling sorry for herself.

Miss Sigh can’t take control of her own life. She feels as though no one understands her, and she blames anything bad that happens on everybody else. Over and over, she says the same kinds of things:

- “I’ll never be able to do that. I’m just not that talented.”
- “I’m not going to try. What if I fail? Everyone will make fun of me!”
- “I blame my parents. I blame society. I blame you!”
- “Nobody understands me. Nobody cares about me. Everybody is out to get me.”

Mr. Critic, on the other hand, is never afraid to speak up. He is a professional criticizer. Whatever the plan, he is ready to point out the shortcomings and shoot down everyone else's ideas. If someone tries something and fails, he'll be the first to say, "I told you so." He's always eager to blame someone else whenever things go wrong.



He may have a lot to say about other people's mistakes, but he never does much of anything himself. As you probably know, being a critic is easy; getting stuff done is the real challenge. Even if you know how things should be done, it's useless if you aren't willing to roll up your sleeves and get to work. It's possible that Mr. Critic may not realize how little his criticisms are appreciated by people who are actually trying to get things accomplished. Or maybe he's too afraid to take responsibility and face the fact that he himself makes mistakes.

You may hear Mr. Critic saying things like:

- “Well, that definitely won’t work. What a stupid idea!”
- “I told you that would get screwed up. It’s all your fault.”
- “Come on, I told you what you needed to do. Why can’t you get it done?”

Mr. Critic may be a big downer, but Miss Dreamer has her head stuck in the clouds. She loves coming up with new ideas. But it rarely goes beyond that. She never bothers to figure out how to turn her ideas into real plans, and she definitely doesn’t try to get anything done. She is satisfied just thinking about her great dreams. They’re always better in her head than they would be in reality, anyway.



Miss Dreamer has many audacious dreams—dreams that never seem to become realities:

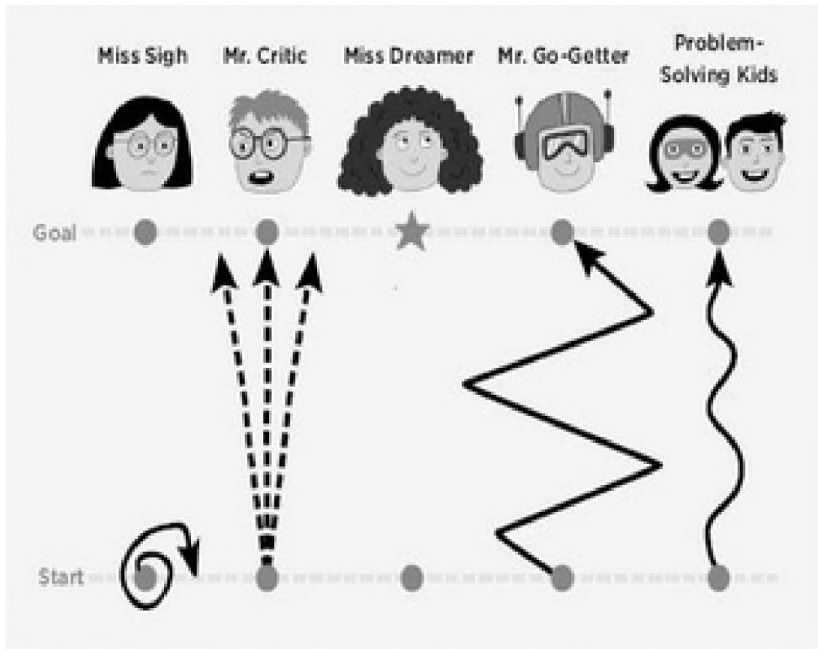
- “I want to write a novel!”
- “Wouldn’t it be great if I started my own business?”
- “I want to be a doctor when I grow up.”



Here's what you may hear from a problem-solving kid:

- "Okay! I'm going to accomplish this within three months."
- "This is a problem, but rather than worrying about it, I'm going to figure out what I can do about it."
- "So what really caused this?"
- "To fix this, we're going to need to do X, Y, and Z. Let's try them out."
- "So how did this work out? What went wrong? Is there a way we could do this better next time?"

Take a look at the following chart. It compares the five characters we've just met and highlights their differences.



In the chart, all five characters have a problem they need to solve.

Miss Sigh circles around the starting point, sighing away. Of course, she gets nowhere.

Mr. Critic is certain he knows how the problem should be solved, and he quickly points out to others what they are doing wrong. But he doesn't do anything, and his criticisms don't help anyone else get the problem solved, either. The dotted lines from his starting point are all the other people's plans that he shot down.

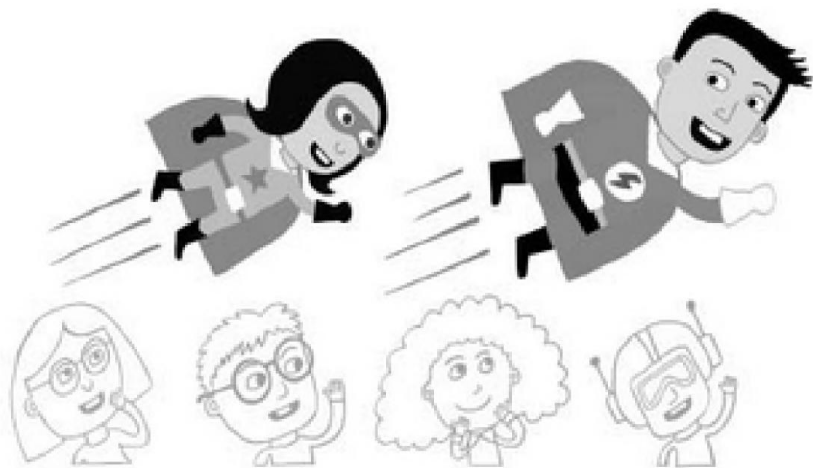
Miss Dreamer does not get to the goal, either. She just stares at the goal like it's a bright, beautiful star. Sitting at the starting point, she dreams of grand and wonderful solutions to the problem, but never tries to make them happen.

Unlike the first three, Mr. Go-Getter at least tries to reach the goal.



He never gives up and just keeps on running as fast and as hard as he can. However, he is not necessarily running in the right direction. When he figures out that he's going the wrong way, he turns and starts running in another wrong direction as fast as he can. He never stops to identify the root cause of his problem or figure out an effective plan. It's a shame, because he certainly has more than enough motivation to reach his goal.

The problem-solving kids achieve their goal more quickly and directly than the others. While they have plenty of Mr. Go-Getter's guts and speedy execution, they also figure out the actual root cause of the problem they need to solve before coming up with an actionable plan and going to work. As they travel toward their goal, they never stop monitoring their own progress to make sure they're headed in the right direction. While others get nowhere or head in the wrong direction, the problem-solving kids have already reached that first goal and are heading for the next one.



Problem solving isn't a talent that some people have and others

don't. It's a habit. By developing the right skills and adopting the right attitude, anyone can become a problem-solving kid.

## **Problem-Solving Kids Evolve at an Amazing Rate**

Problem-solving kids don't just reach their goals faster; they evolve faster, too. They check out the impact of their actions and try to learn from their successes as well as their failures.

If you never take action, you'll never get any feedback on your attempts, and without feedback, you'll never grow as a problem-solving kid. That great idea in your head will remain just that—only an idea. When you do take action, every result is an opportunity to reflect and learn valuable lessons. Even if what you take away from your assessment seems to be of small consequence, all of these small improvements taken together make a huge difference in the long term.

Let's look at an example: Alex, Bianca, and Cliff all own fruit stands that each sells 100 watermelons per month. Alex's business increases at a rate of 1 percent each month, while Bianca's increases by 5 percent, and Cliff's increases by 10 percent. How different would their watermelon sales be in three years?

After three years, Alex will be selling 143 watermelons a month. However, Bianca will be selling 579 watermelons, while Cliff will be selling a whopping 3,091 watermelons every month. While Bianca is selling more than five times as many watermelons as Alex, Cliff is selling twenty-two times more than Alex. He is going to need a bigger fruit stand for all those watermelons. Imagine what the difference would be over a longer time period, like ten years, or thirty!

In the following chart, Cliff's business growth soars above his more slowly improving competitors. That seemingly small 10 percent rate of improvement means a lot in the long run.