



Stanford eCorner

Reframing Problems

Tina Seelig, *Stanford Technology Ventures Program*

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STVP Executive Director Tina Seelig discusses how reframing problems can open new approaches to finding solutions. Narrow definition of problems is a danger, says Seelig, and reframing can be a valuable tool in the process of creative thinking. In this clip, Seelig encourages the audience to come up with a new type of nametag, but by reframing the problem to address the real underlying need.



Transcript

To reframe problems. Now, what am I talking about? Well, let me tell you a story. I hate name tags. I hate name tags. How many of you wear name tags? You wear name tag, right? These lovely Stanford name tags - how many people are wearing your Stanford? Oh, yeah, you got these love name tags. Here is why I hate your name tag. I'm sorry, I do like you, it's just your name tag. A, they're way too small for small for me to read; B, they're usually hanging around your belt, kind of awkward. They're often flipped over so I can't read it. And they certainly don't have the information I really want to know about you.

Now we could, together, decide that we're going to design a brand new name tag, right? We could do that. But instead of designing a brand new name tag, we could broaden the discussion and say what our name tags for in the first place. What do we use name tags for? Ice breaker. For what? An icebreaker. An icebreaker, to kind of get conversations going. Anything else? What's that? Oh, sort of like a ticket to get in - like an entrance ticket. Did they make you do that? Wow. Really? That's interesting. To identify as part of a group. To identify you in a group? Great.

So instead of asking you to design new name tag, what if we decided that we are going to design a brand new introduction devise? Oh, all of a sudden, the frame of possibilities opens up. What kind of ideas would you come up with if you were going to design an introduction devise? Hats. A hat, the great idea. Well, in fact you solve the problem, it's not hanging around your neck. Maybe even a hat that has some sort of marquee on it with information - kind of about you and it sort of like go up and I can get kind of this ever changing display of information. What else? iPhone app. An iPhone app. I can have an iPhone app that when I get near you, it tells you... Do you have something? Does something do that? Not yet. But...

Now do. OK, who's going to do that? We got how many Stanford students? OK, will you go up and it actually maybe tells you who you know, who's in the same social network, who went to school with you. That'll be pretty cool. Any other ideas? I kind of like the idea, I kind of want a T-shirt or shirt that is the name tag and it's got printed with all sort of information about someone. So you know, you got instead of why having a name tag in one little place. Your whole outfit could be your name tag, with all different information. So the fact is, this is a big problem. People frame problems way too narrowly. For example, if I ask you to design a bridge - any engineers here? Architects? Engineers? Fabulous. If I ask you to design a bridge, you'd design a bridge for me.

But you could turn around and say, "Why do you need a bridge in the first place?" Right? And I'll say, "Well, I got to get to the other side." You go, "Oh, you want to get to the other side?" What other ways are there to get to the other side of a body of water besides a bridge? Through a cannon. A cannon, that's a good idea. Right. You can take a boat, you can have a tunnel, you can have a hot air balloon. You can even have a cannon. The fact is, that's a perfect example, where if you don't ask a broader question, you'll end up with a very limited set of options. So let me tell you an example of this. The United States

spends zillions of dollars designing a pen to write in space. Right? They figured these astronauts are going to be in space; there's no gravity. How are we going to write if we don't design a pen that can write when it's upside down in zero gravity? They spent millions of dollars designing this pen.

You can buy this. I bought one online and got this picture. I did not make it up. You can go buy the Fisher Space Pen. The Russian ask the question differently. They said, "Instead of how do I design a pen to write in space?", they asked, "How do I write in space?" And what did they come up with? A pencil. The fact is, the solutions do not have to be complicated. It's not about making it complicated, it's opening up the frame to come up with appropriate and interesting and creative solutions to the problems.