Stanford eCorner

What's the Real Problem?

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Design-thinking expert Bernard Roth describes an approach for opening up the solution space for problems that defy solutions. After identifying the problem, determine what the solution to that problem will do for you, and then make that the question you must answer, advises Roth, academic director of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (d.school).
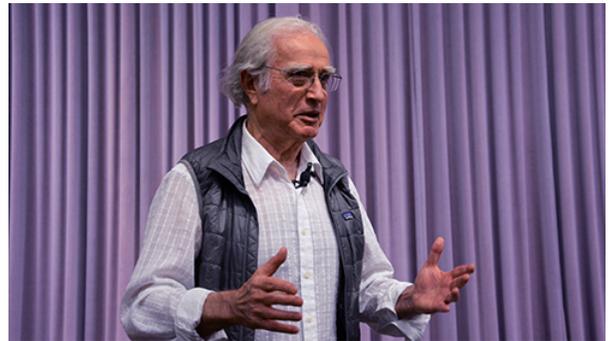
Transcript

- So, what I want you to understand is it's really easy, it's what we call in design thinking, reframing the problem. And the secret is to reframe it. And the question is, "How do I do that?" And the answer is really, really simple. And the way I suggest you do it, is you ask yourself what it would do for you if you solve the problem. Ask yourself what it would do for you if you solve the problem. And that is the question you want to ask yourself. I'll give you an example where I totally failed. So I rented a car, and I drove up to the wine country. And eventually the car ran out of gas, and I pulled into the gas station, and I started to look for the release for the cover to the gas tank. And I must have looked for ten minutes, in the glove compartment, every place normal designers would put it, and I couldn't find it.

I was kind of frustrated, and then I noticed a similar car drove up for gas. So I went up to the lady, and I said, "I know this is a stupid question, "but where is the release?" She said, "there is none", ok. And so at that point, I realized what I was doing, I had framed the question to where the release is. And why would I, if I played my game, which I didn't of course, but if I played my game I would say, "What would it for me if I could find the release?" Well, I'd be able to get the cover open. So now the question is, "How do I get the cover open?" Ok, and if you get the cover open, the easiest way is walk over and open it up, ok. So, it's a silly, trivial question, but it in fact embodies the whole idea.