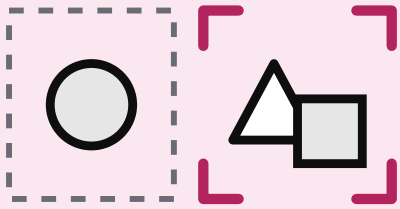
Concept

Problem framing

Deciding which problem to solve before looking for solutions. How it is framed, and reframed, determines which solutions are possible.



In Spanish
Encuadre del problema

Origin
Schön (1983), as "problem setting"; Dorst (2011, 2015)

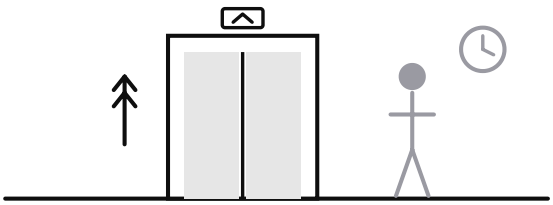
What problem it addresses

It explains why a capable team can solve the wrong problem very well. It gives design a reason to question the brief before generating ideas, not only afterwards.

An example

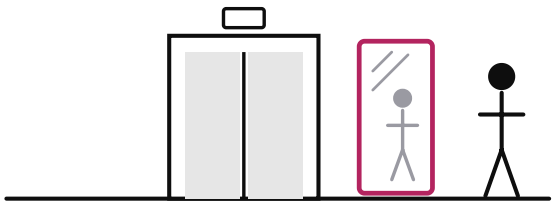
A case told by Wedell-Wedellsborg: the tenants of an office building complain that the elevator is old and slow.

The problem as given: the elevator is slow



Replace the elevator, the motor or the software that controls it. **A big, expensive job.**

Reframing: the wait feels long



Put mirrors next to the elevator. People look at themselves and lose track of time. **Complaints drop sharply.**

The elevator is just as slow. What changed was the problem, and with it the possible solutions.

Why it happens

1

The problem arrives already framed and often carries a hidden solution inside.

2

Look at it from another side: what really bothers people, and whom?

3

The new frame opens up solutions no one could see before.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Before generating ideas, write the problem two or three different ways and ask what really bothers people, and whom.

Avoid

Accepting the brief as it comes when it already carries the solution inside, like "we need an app."

Don't fall for it

Reframing isn't dodging the problem. The new framing has to address what really matters to people, and you must be able to explain it to whoever commissioned the work.

85%

Executives **85%**

What the research says

Of 106 senior executives from 91 companies in 17 countries, 85% said their organization is bad at diagnosing problems (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2017).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It is an opinion survey, not a measurement. In a study of art students, those who explored more before deciding what to draw made work judged more original and, years later, were more successful (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Sawyer, 2026).

Connections

Used in

- How might we...?
- Double Diamond

Related to

- Problem–solution co-evolution
- Reflective practice
- Wicked problems

Authors and works

1976	**Jacob W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**	Studied how art students find their problem and followed their careers for years.
1983	**Donald A. Schön**	Distinguished setting a problem from solving it. In practice, problems are not given; they have to be built out of confusing situations.
2011	**Kees Dorst**	Explained that when only the value sought is known, the designer proposes a frame, a way of looking at the situation that suggests how to achieve it.
2015	**Kees Dorst**	Turned frame creation into a method for open, complex problems; for example, treating the late-night disorder of a club district as if it were a music festival.
2017	**Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg**	Brought reframing to management with the slow-elevator case.

Sources

Original sources

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- Dorst, K. (2011). The core of 'design thinking' and its application. Design Studies, 32(6), 521–532. View source (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2011.07.006)
- Dorst, K. (2015). Frame innovation: Create new thinking by design. MIT Press.
- Wedell-Wedellsborg, T. (2017). Are you solving the right problems? Harvard Business Review, 95(1), 76–83.
- Getzels, J. W., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1976). The creative vision: A longitudinal study of problem finding in art. Wiley.

Secondary sources

- Sawyer, K. (2026, April 20). The 1960s art school experiment that redefined creativity. The MIT Press Reader. View source (https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-1960s-art-school-experiment-that-redefined-creativity/)

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