Problem Solving 101 Summary

1-Sentence-Summary: *Problem Solving 101 is a universal, four-step template for overcoming challenges in life, based on a traditional method Japanese school children learn early on.*

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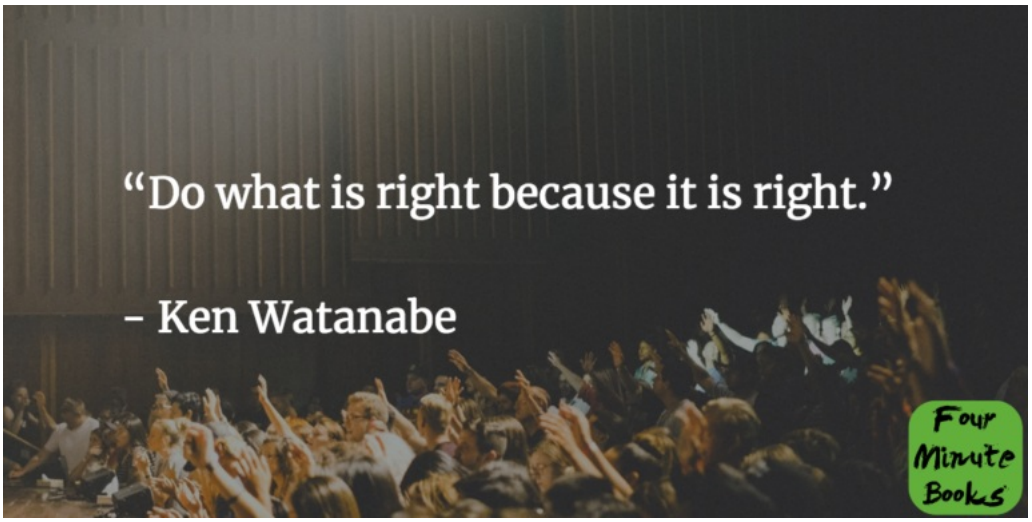

I recently co-authored a piece gathering 303 life lessons we all eventually learn, but often forget. The list reminded me of all the important subjects we never study in school: human behavior, work habits, creativity, relationships, communication, love, and personal finance, for example. The skill Ken Watanabe explains in this book ranks highly on that list: problem solving.

Having a methodical approach to how you deal with problems, as opposed to just going by gut and feelings, can make a big difference in how successful you are in overcoming your obstacles. What's interesting is where Watanabe found this approach: in school. While the Japanese education system has long had a leg up on its Western counterpart, this surprised me. Apparently, most Japanese children learn a very basic, universal problem-solving template in their first years of school.

After growing up in Japan, then studying in the US, it is exactly this template that Ken Watanabe decided to share in *Problem Solving 101*. Here are the 3 underlying activities you need to use it:

1. Instead jumping straight from finding a problem to attempting to solve it, break it down first.
2. Gather data to analyze all potential root causes and solutions.
3. Formulate hypotheses and methodically test them to find what works.

If you often find yourself jumping head first into solutions that don't really fix your problems, this one's for you! Welcome to Problem Solving 101!

Lesson 1: The first step of properly tackling any problem is to break it down.

Let's say you and your partner want to move in together and start a family. You've both entered the working world a couple years ago and are now looking to buy a home. However, once you look at your salaries and expenses, you realize you can't afford the kind of home you want your future kids to grow up in. What could you do?

In this situation, most people would either resign to waiting for their next promotion or force themselves to randomly cut back on a big spending point. However, the trick to solving such a seemingly complex problem elegantly is to not jump at the above question in the first place. Instead, **break down the problem into various aspects**. In this example, "not enough money to pay mortgage for desired house" can be divided into "too little income," "too high expenses," and "expectations of future house."

Once you have categories, it's very easy to continue digging. Watanabe recommends decision trees. For example, you could now list causes for the "too little income" category, like "my company pays less than the industry average," or "I was passed over for a promotion." When going along these sub branches, you can mark each one with yes or no, to determine whether it's actually part of the problem.

With a proper breakdown in hand, it's much easier to analyze the causes and potential solutions of your problem.

Lesson 2: Make sure you analyze all potential root problems and solutions by gathering data and reflecting.

Of course it's impossible to be 100% objective when judging what lead to your problem, but that's where analysis comes in. For each root cause that you marked with a yes in your decision tree, ask what data you need to verify your answer. For example, to see if your salary is below industry average, you can use to compare it to several statistics. And to figure out if you really were passed during the last promotion round, ask coworkers when they were last promoted and come up with your own, company-internal data.

The point of analysis is to never accept statements at face value, including your own. It gets you to pause and reflect before moving on, which is what makes it so valuable.

That's why it also applies to all potential solutions you subsequently brainstorm. If you want to confront your boss with the below average salary claim, you better bring lots of data from good sources to back it up. At the same time, if you find it's easier to collect data for other solutions, like cutting your expenses on monthly subscriptions, because you still have all your receipts, analysis also helps you determine which solutions have the best cost-to-benefit ratio.

Lesson 3: When trying to find a solution, formulate multiple hypotheses, then test them one by one.

Analysis helps you separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to the sources of your problem, as well as your options to get rid of it. However, the pool of choices you're left with is still just a set of ideas. There are no guarantees that you've identified the correct causes or that executing a chosen solution will actually bring relief.

That's why you should think of your selection as hypotheses. **A hypothesis is defined as a currently accepted statement that could be proven wrong later**. What's great about approaching your plans this way is that you'll stay flexible. Maybe confronting your boss won't work. If it doesn't, what matters is that you can quickly switch to a different path of action, rather than circling back to your initial hopelessness.

Whenever you feel lost or don't know what to do, take an intermediary step of analysis. Get more data, reflect on new information, then change course. With an approach like this, you'll never really get stuck. Even if problems won't disappear over night, you'll always have some sense of what to do next.

Problem Solving 101 Review

Breakdown, analysis, hypothesis, execution. What Watanabe has described here is the scientific method, except he did it in a way everyone can understand. Teaching children this from a young age helps them think on their feet decades later, when they enter the working world, where problems are often complex and confusing. If I ever do come up with a school of life, there'll definitely be a class called *Problem Solving 101*.

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- How to find the right categories for a problem like bad grades
- What a school band can do to get to the root of their small audiences problem
- Which approach works best in sorting and prioritizing solutions
- How you can use Problem Solving 101 to achieve even your biggest dreams

Who would I recommend the Problem Solving 101 summary to?

The 9 year old third grader, who has a chance to learn proper problem solving right from the start, the 30 year old young professional, who could use a reset on how she tackles problems after college, and anyone who tends to jump to conclusions.