CHAPTER FOUR

THE ANSWER IS IN THE QUESTION

Why getting the best answer means asking the right questions in the first place.

'The only stupid question is the one not asked.' Anonymous[1]

When Jorma Ollila joined Nokia in the mid 1980s, the giant Finnish corporation made toilet paper and wellies. Nokia Corporation was the result of a merger between a paper company, a rubber goods company and a cable company.[2] Ollila became the CEO in 1992 and when he took over he asked, 'What business should Nokia be in?' His answer was mobile communications and, against the wishes of many Nokia shareholders, executives and employees, over the next few years he sold off all the assets not aligned to this new focus and helped transform the company's fortunes (profits increasing five-fold between 1993, before the changes kicked in, and 1999), and with it the Finnish economy. Nokia is now the biggest mobile-phone manufacturer in the world and has a 40 per cent share of all handsets sold. Not a rubber boot in sight. And *now* Nokia has asked itself that question again, what business should they be in, and the answer is different once more. Nokia is currently transforming itself into a media company by offering music, games and applications through its phones, and plans to be the world's biggest entertainment network.

The questions we ask shape the answers we get, and posing the right question is an art in itself. Before we unleash our creative energy (and our time, money and resources) on finding creative solutions to a problem, we need to question the assumptions we're making about the problem we're trying to solve. Is it in fact the *right* problem in the first place, or are we basing it on a bunch of flimsy assumptions? When Albert Einstein got home from school his mother asked him not what grades he got, but whether he had asked any good questions. Jorma Ollila of Nokia didn't focus on how to increase sales of toilet paper, even though Nokia had started life in 1865 as a lumber mill; he questioned the assumption that Nokia needed to have all those diverse and unrelated businesses to survive. Someone that one of us used to work with was apt to say, '"Assume" makes an "ass" out of "u" and "me".' A little irritating when you've heard it a few times, but you get the point: **it's important to examine each assumption we're making to see if it actually holds up to scrutiny.**

What if, for instance, we turn an assumption on its head by looking at its exact opposite? Does it make a real difference? If so, keep it in, if not, you might want to dump it. To illustrate how different assumptions can change a problem we'll use one dear to our hearts: the traffic congestion in Los Angeles.[3] The average annual delay per road user in Los Angeles stands (mostly stationary) at 93 hours.[4] If a problem we are trying to solve is how to reduce traffic congestion in LA, what sort of assumptions are we making, and do they pass the sniff test? The assumptions include:

- **There's too much traffic in LA.**
- **People don't like being stuck in traffic.**
- **Congestion slows things down.**
- **It's a bad thing to have congestion.**
- **People need cars to get around.**
- **People need to travel around LA.**

[1]Why did no-one ask for their name?

[2]This sounds like the beginning of a joke …

[3]The point of this example is not actually to solve the problem of traffic congestion – there are a million worthy efforts dedicated to that – it's just to illustrate how to think through a problem that you should be able to relate to.

[4]Data from 'Commuting in America', Alan Pisarski, *Transportation Research Board*, 2006.

Duh, we might think – those all look blindingly obviously true. Maybe so, but let's just hold our horses for a minute and take a closer look at these assumptions. For instance, the first one, *There's too much traffic in LA*, begs the questions what is *too much* and, *compared to what* exactly? And how about the second one, *People don't like being stuck in traffic*? Some people might love being stuck in traffic and maybe they've got used to that time alone in their cars drinking coffee, making calls and shaving/applying lipstick/both at the same time.[5] The third one, *Congestion slows things down*, seems solid, as does the fourth, *It's a bad thing to have congestion*. But the fifth assumption, *People need cars to get around*? Nah, that's baloney.

People clearly don't need cars to get around – they have legs (even the people in LA), bicycles, buses (sort of) and if you look really, really hard, the occasional train. Of course, if you've spent any time in Los Angeles you'll know these alternatives don't make much sense unless you're travelling just a couple of miles, and even then you take your life in your own hands (or someone else's hands if they're applying lipstick and shaving while driving). But there definitely are alternatives; they just might need a little working on.

And the last assumption, *People need to travel around LA*, is sort of true in that they need to get to work and go to the shops to buy food and stuff, but many of the journeys are for non-essential things like going out to eat, or going to a movie, or going to the beach. We don't want to party-poopers here … we're just saying.

Is it perhaps better to find ways to reduce the need to travel around LA in the first place, rather than make travel easier? As anyone who has spent time in LA knows, it is very spread out, it's actually not one city but 88 of them, and maybe transportation as a whole is the problem – whether that's by bus, train or car – and by trying to switch people to public transport we'd just be dealing with the effect of the problem rather than its cause. Being transported around is dangerous, for instance, and it uses up valuable fuels, produces dirty emissions, takes up precious time and costs money. So, rather than assume people need to travel around Los Angeles, we could choose to tackle a different problem altogether, namely how to get people to travel around LA less. This version of the problem suggests a need for ideas that are not solutions for better public transportation and other ways for making getting around easier, but instead for solutions for ways to **encourage people to work from home and improve local services so they don't have to travel around much at all.** Of course, that wouldn't satisfy the people who like being stuck in traffic drinking coffee, shaving and putting on lipstick – but maybe that's OK.

If we decide the best problem to solve is how to get people to use their cars less, the ideas might include encouraging people to work from home more or penalising their unnecessary use of cars through taxes and fees, as Mayor Ken Livingstone did in London,[6] or even by bribing commuters to leave their cars at home. In 2006 the city of Seoul, South Korea, launched their 'No-Driving Day' scheme in which drivers are given incentives to leave their cars at home for one day every week. Provided by public organisations and private companies, the incentives include discounts on auto tax, cheaper petrol, free parking and free car washes. Drivers stick e-tags (using Radio Frequency Identification Technology, or RDIF) on their windscreens so the city can monitor car usage and see if they are eligible for the discounts and freebies. It's estimated the scheme keeps two million cars off the road each year, reducing traffic volume by 3.7 per cent, reducing carbon emissions by two million tons and saving $50 million a year in fuel costs.[7]

[5]In 2003 a woman from Ohio was fined for breastfeeding her 1-year-old baby while driving (the mother, not the baby). In 2009, a Chinese lorry driver was fined for taking a shower while driving his lorry along the Jinyi expressway. He had a sprinkler system rigged above his head while his wife in the passenger seat held a plastic sheet up to protect the cab's instruments.

[6]The congestion charge was introduced in London by then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, in February 2003.

[7]**www.c40cities.org/bestpractices/transport/seoul_driving.jsp**

SPLITTING THE CHERRY

Another way to look at a problem is to split it up into smaller chunks and explore some of those as separate problems. We start by writing the problem in its simplest form, such as 'traffic sucks', and then split that problem into two pieces.

Now we split each of those cherries up into two more chunks. For example, two big problems with drivers is that they don't pay attention (we, of course, are great drivers, it's just those *other* drivers that are so bad), and there are just too many of them blocking our way. And two big issues for roads is that there aren't enough of the bloody things and, anyway, they're closed half the time.

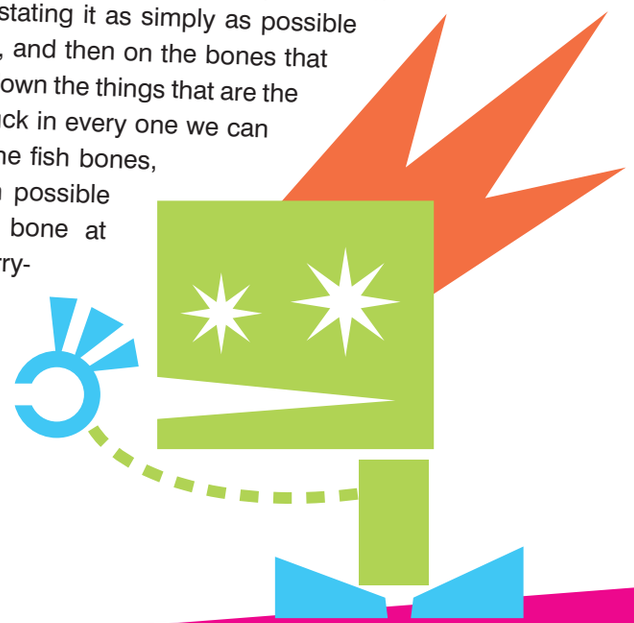
We carry on splitting up the cherry until we can't do it any more and end up with a tree diagram (a cherry tree!) of all the individual problems that make up the bigger problem. From these we can decide which ones to focus on.

(Just a thought, but how about redirecting all the really crap drivers into the holes made for the road works?)

SOMETHING FISHY

Try not to be put off by the size of the problem, however stinky it might seem at first, because it can almost always be broken up into smaller, more manageable chunks. Think of it as a fish bone.

Using a technique developed by a Japanese dude named Kaoru Ishikawa – who in the 1960s developed the fishbone as a process to manage work in the Kawasaki shipyards – can help us break up the big problem. First, by stating it as simply as possible and writing it on our fish head, and then on the bones that make up the skeleton putting down the things that are the key factors. When we have stuck in every one we can think of and written them on the fish bones, we then start to think through possible ways to address them, one bone at a time. It's a bit like the cherry-splitting technique, but where the cherries taste like cod.



The Mazda MX-5 car, also known as the Miata, was developed using Ishikawa's fishbone method. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the MX-5 is the most popular sports car ever built. Designers in California and Japan started with a design credo called 人馬一体 , or *jinba ittai*, which translates roughly as 'rider and horse as one'. It was all about driving fun – that wind-in-the-hair driving experience you get when riding a horse (or maybe from blow-drying your hair). They then broke the design credo into five separate elements that together would deliver the car they were looking for: it needed to be compact and lightweight while still safe; have a cockpit big enough for two normal-sized adults; an engine placement that gave 50:50 weight redistribution across the front and rear of the car; all four wheels evenly used on the road to enhance stability and performance; and lastly, a good connection between the engine and rear differential so it was very responsive to pressure on the throttle.

The first MX-5 galloped off the production line in February 1989 and, two decades and 900,000 sales later, the MX-5 had gone through three generations of design, each one staying true to the five core design principles outlined in their original fishbone diagram. Ah so.

I had been working on the musical *Ghost* with the Tony-Award-winning stage director Matthew Warchus.[8] As you can imagine, putting on a stage musical is a massive undertaking for all concerned and is a nightmare of logistics. The director has to consult the set designer, the special effects expert, the lighting engineer, the actors and the actresses, etc., on every decision because of timing and practicality issues. And, of course, let's not forget the music and lyrics, which have to not only help tell the story but often do so in 'timed by the stopwatch' organised sections, so that the music and stagecraft work seamlessly hand-in-hand with sets that are moving and have actors and actresses leaping around them.

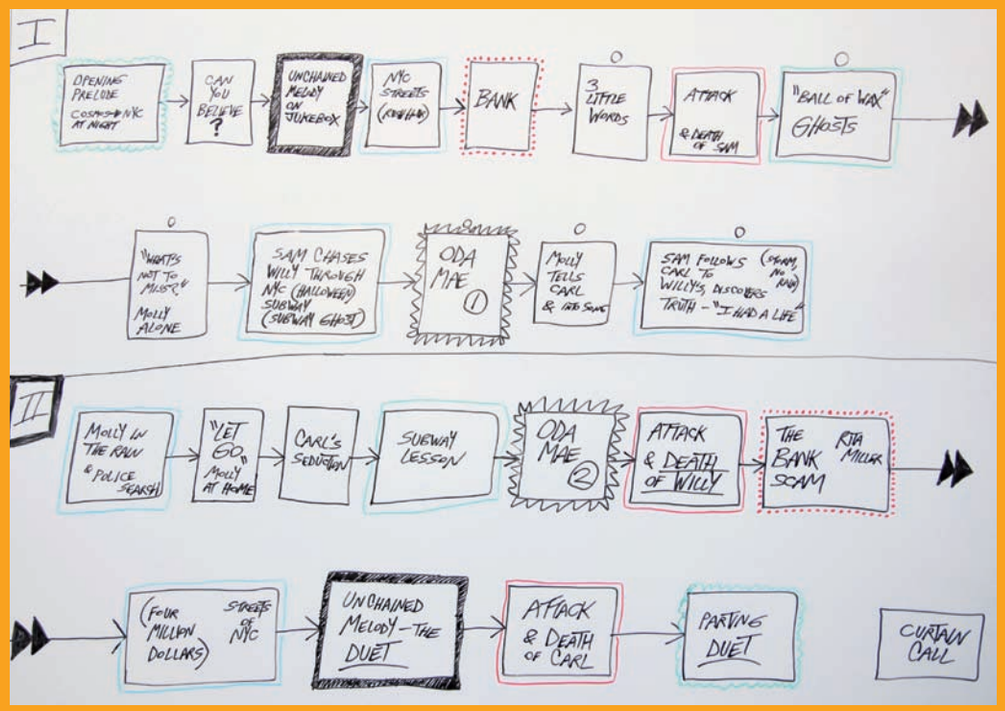
When a problem appears it can be overwhelming for us mere mortals to fathom out how to fix it, as one thing affects everything else. Fortunately, we have Matthew, who is not normal! Matthew is a classic example of someone who uses 'The Answer Is The Question' method of decision-making. He also uses the method of breaking everything down into small pieces like Kaoru Ishikawa did. In fact, one very drunken night in 'The Hospital' (not a medical hospital but the creative members club I founded with Paul Allen) Matthew broke down the whole musical into what looked like a block diagram (see picture) on The Hospital Club's 'Today's Specials' menu board from the bar. Each block represented a scene and had a colour border, and each colour that was repeated in another block meant those scenes were connected and had a musical thread running through them.

This simple way of standing back and looking at the whole musical helped us solve many issues and brought about interesting Big Questions, such as: What is the musical really about? We all had our own ideas but even Bruce Joel Rubin, the writer of the original film screenplay who was working with us, was amazed at how Matthew simplified the whole show in five minutes in

[8]Among many other accolades, Matthew has won the Globe's Most Promising Newcomer Award for Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and has won the *Evening Standard* Best Director Award; was nominated for the Olivier Award for Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*; won the Drama Desk Award for Best Director of a Play for his production of Alan Ayckbourn's trilogy of plays, *The Norman Conquests* at London's Old Vic Theatre; and competed against himself – and won – in the Best Director of a Play category in the 2009 Tony Awards.

front of us after several vodka martinis and a full-bodied red wine!

Matthew told Business Playground in an interview: 'My job is storytelling, and scripts are written in linear form or they are presented in a linear form – you read them from the first page to the last – and when an audience then watches a story, they receive it in a linear sequence. But, the effect the story has on an audience is not achieved through a linear sequence. The emotional effect of the story is achieved by patterns, and so only by creating a chart can you start to look at what the patterns are in the story, or what patterns you want to emphasise, or what patterns you want to add to the story. Those little "mirrors" and "reflections" and "echoes" that recur in the story – a park bench and the things that take place there, a piece of music that keeps coming back in a musical, or a phrase like "ditto" in the film *Ghost* – all these little things make the pattern that creates the emotion in a story.'



DIFFERENT STROKES

In crafting a problem, looking at it from different points of view can help. **We in our own little worlds might see it in one way, but others will almost certainly see it in other ways; and stepping into their shoes for a while can help us reframe the problem so we can decide what is the best question to ask.** With the traffic congestion conundrum, for instance, if you are the mayor of the city you might have a different way of looking at it than if you are the police chief, an environmentalist or a regular commuter. All might agree that the problem is a bad one that needs to be solved, but exactly *why* it needs to be solved will vary depending on viewpoint.

The mayor might be most concerned that too much time is lost through bad traffic, which is affecting businesses throughout the city, and would like to see office workers in LA having to spend less of their day stuck in cars. The police chief probably cares less about productivity (and getting votes from business leaders) and more that the sheer volume of traffic is a major cause of accidents and fatalities, and so a drain on police resources. The environmentalist hates the traffic because exhaust fumes are poisoning the atmosphere. And commuters don't like the congestion because it takes up too much time and is stressful. From which perspective we look at the problem will help us prioritise the ingredients required to achieve the best solution. If the time commuters spend travelling to work is

a really important consideration, for instance, and public transport is being considered as a solution, then encouraging people to travel by clean, natural, gas-powered buses – a great solution from an environmental point of view – might *not* be the best answer, as buses make so many stops and therefore tend to be slower than cars.

Different Strokes is a good group exercise to help define the problem. If there's a small team of people working on an innovation project, you can assign roles for each one of them. Make it fun by giving them names and even finding some props to help get them into character. (It's also a good technique to use when you have what you think is a good solution to a problem, or a great idea for an innovation and need to get buy-in from stakeholders.) **Again, putting yourself in the shoes of other people – people with different agendas – can help you see what the challenges in getting them to endorse it might be.** Just make sure they have clean socks on. You can take account of their concerns before they've even told you, and if you can deal with them you have a way better chance of seeing your idea happen.

MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ... OR ROLL THE DICE

If we get the problem right in the first place we have a better chance of finding the best solution. To start with we need to do a bit of navel-gazing as we examine all the assumptions we're making about a situation, and then get rid of all of the ones that don't hold true. Nokia questioned some very fundamental assumptions about its disparate businesses before deciding to change direction to mobiles, eventually becoming the biggest mobile manufacturer in the world, and more recently deciding to shift again by focusing its efforts on becoming a media distribution company. Again, the answer is often in the question and if we ask the right question we will more likely get the right answers. **How we frame a problem will lead to very different creative solutions and so it's worth working through the various versions of the problem we want to solve.** We used the example of traffic congestion to see how reframing it would send us in a different direction creatively. Sometimes breaking up bigger problems into smaller pieces is the way to go when the problem just seems too big to tackle, a technique that has been used successfully in shipyards, car design, and for stage productions. In the next chapter we show how, for our creative abilities to do their work properly, they need a little breathing room. OK, now open wide, say, 'Ah ...'

BOARD GAME: WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

How it works: Working out the right business problem to solve is a bit like putting a band together. It takes patience and practice, but when you get it right you can make some sweet, sweet music. If you ask a question like 'How do we sell more of our music?', for instance, you'll likely end up with a very different answer compared to one like 'How do we make money from our music?' The first one assumes that selling music is the best way to make money from selling music, but the second one doesn't.

How to play: Players start by writing down a business problem as a question starting with: How can we ...? They then ask themselves a series of questions about the problem to get it to a more insightful version. The end result should be simple and clear. (As German abstract expressionist painter, Hans Hoffman, said, 'The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.' He could have just said 'Keep it simple, stupid' instead, but, oh well, never mind.) Players move down each step by throwing a die and, depending on the number that comes up, ask themselves a different question about the problem they're trying to solve:

1 = HOW?
2 = WHY?
3 = WHICH?
4 = WHEN?
5 = WHO?
6 = WHAT?

Example: Say you have a band and your problem is 'How can we sell more music?', you throw a 6, a WHAT question, and so ask yourself, 'WHAT are the barriers to selling more music?' You come up with a few answers such as, fewer people are buying music nowadays; the economy stinks; not enough people know about us; or, our music sucks. Next you throw a 2 and so you ask yourself, 'WHY are people spending less on buying music?' Your answer is that people can get it for free online. Now you throw a 4 and ask yourself 'WHEN do people spend money on music?' The answers might be when they buy special editions with all sorts of extra content or when they're seeing live gigs. Next you throw a 1 and choose to rephrase the problem as: 'HOW do we make the stuff we sell better than the versions people can get for free?' Now you throw a 5 and ask yourself 'WHO is it that pays to get extra content when they can get the music for free elsewhere?' Your answer might be die-hard fans.

And so on. When we hit the last space we can write up the problem in a new way, using the insights gathered throughout the game. It might be something like, 'How can we make our music releases special enough that die-hard fans will pay good money to buy them?' Now that's a more tangible problem to crack. But, depending on our previous answers, we might instead have chosen a different reframing of the problem. For instance, one around not

trying to sell music but concentrating our efforts on live gigs to earn money and using the recorded music as a promotional tool for them, and that will lead to a whole different set of solutions around finding third-party sponsors (see Chapter 3).

How to win: Find the best way to frame a problem and everyone's a winner, baby!