



# How to Solve the Right Problem During Workplace Challenges

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The issue of employees feeling burnout, loss of engagement and retention is not something that was catalyzed in the last two years. In fact, these topics have come up frequently in the last two decades. In this article, [Dave Stevens](#) highlights the bigger problem at hand when it comes to addressing these topics and why there has never been a concrete solution for them in the first place.

A meeting I attended recently highlighted some of the urgent challenges employers are currently facing, namely employee engagement, retention and burnout. It suddenly felt like I was in a time machine, warped back 10 years—these were not only the same issues organizations faced in 2012, but they were also the issues I had experienced working with organizations in 2002. The difference is contextual—our challenges these days are exacerbated by a pandemic, high inflation, uncertainty and war. It shows that the symptoms are not merely situationally driven but are also a by-product of the workplace biases and assumptions we continue to carry and struggle to look beyond.

## AUTHOR



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Many of the conversations I had with leaders back then involved ‘hope’—a hope that next week, month, or year, would be better. No significant time was spent asking questions about ‘why’ these symptoms were occurring and ‘what if’ there was another way to tackle them. Business-as-usual trumped any potential opportunities to examine these problems at a disruptive level.

What the last few years did was shift the dial. Business-as-*unusual* emerged and ongoing disruptions are what many organizations are faced with daily. It is time for us to respond appropriately.

While hope, linked to optimism, is an important attitude to harness during adversity, creating cognitive space to examine recurring problems is valuable and often overlooked. In essence, the main problem we’re trying to solve is *why* we’re not thinking differently about the ongoing problems we’ve been trying to solve in the workplace.

Here are some techniques to tackle these challenges:

## 1. Step away from the problem

Part of the reason many leaders lean on hope is because they don’t address change in their foreseeable working futures. Business-as-usual means just that—nothing changes, including our thinking. When we are immersed in a problem, it’s hard to get a balcony view of the situation. By stepping away from the problem, we develop a [psychological distance](#), which helps widen our perspective and improves our critical thinking and decision-making. One way to do this is to ask reflective questions that support alternate possibilities:

- What questions are you not asking yourself about the situation?
- What would someone who has a different set of beliefs think and say about this situation?
- If you were guaranteed total success in everything—regardless of what it was—what would you do differently?

## 2. Ask ‘thinking’ questions

Questions hold the power to cause us to think. However, our relationship to questions has degenerated into a ‘fixing’ or ‘answering’ process. Rather than help get us to look deeper into a problem, we regard questions as something we must get rid of. In doing so we remove the power of the question. To put it bluntly – if your ‘thinking’ question doesn’t generate much better questions, then it’s not serving its purpose.

**For example,  $3+3=?$**

This not a thinking question. The answer has been drummed into us for so long, there is no need to think about it. Reframing this question into a ‘thinking’ question requires us to create doubt. Doubt lets us go beyond what we know.

**So how about asking,  $?+?=6$**

What is your brain doing now? The power of this question is that, rather than a rote ‘non-thinking’ response, the answer is embedded in further exploration of the problem.

Many of the problems stated upfront – burnout, employee engagement, retention – are rooted in work practice biases and assumptions that stop us thinking differently about them. By asking ‘thinking’ questions we chip away at these biases and assumptions to allow us to further explore the root of the problem.



## 3. Carve out time for critical thinking

Set-up innovation time with team members, individually and as a group, to explore discovery-driven questions on current challenges. Far too often we don't prioritize time for critical thinking in the belief it is unproductive or not a good use of time. This robs us of an important step in the problem-solving process, namely the 'thinking' step. Thinking about the problem is different from solving the problem. When coming up with solutions, we trust our brains to have already done the thinking. We must not confuse the act of 'solutioning' with the act of thinking. 'Solutioning' is about expressing thoughts that already exist. To get to the solution, we need to set up time to think. This creates space for groups to explore problems away from the demands of the workplace.

What problems might employers be faced with if we had to travel forward in time 20 years? Maybe you hadn't thought about it. By asking questions we create a time machine, a mechanism to look ahead. As a core habit, questioning is what allows innovative leaders to have insight into future challenges. In fact, many innovative entrepreneurs said they could remember the specific questions they were asking at the time they had the inspiration for a new venture.

What questions are you not asking yourself, your team or your business about the challenges you're faced with? Maybe a better question might lead to a better answer or some of the actionable tactics mentioned above could help drive a clear vision for you and your team in overcoming the recurring hurdles of not being able to address the recurring problem you're facing.

## Who Moved My Future: Redesigning a Workplace With Creativity

The current state of workplace structures is broken and mending it with some creative thinking could be the key to securing your organization's future. [Read more](#)

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### Our Contributors

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