

CHAPTER ONE

The World Needs Problem
Solvers



DESIGN *for* PEOPLE

In the spring of 2020, two college students named James Kanoff and Aidan Reilly were sitting at home like the rest of us, watching the world collapse through a screen. COVID-19 had shut down their campus. News footage showed mile-long lines of cars at food banks, families waiting hours for a bag of groceries, many turned away empty-handed. And then, in a different news cycle on the same day, they'd see footage of farmers destroying millions of pounds of perfectly good produce because the restaurants, hotels, and schools that normally bought it had all closed overnight.

Surplus food. Starving families. Separated by a logistics problem nobody was solving.

Kanoff and Reilly weren't supply chain experts, and they weren't nonprofit veterans. They were college kids who looked at the same news everyone else was watching and asked a different question: what if we just connected the farms to the food banks?

Their first move was almost comically small. They called an onion farm in Idaho (Owyhee Farms) that had millions of pounds sitting in surplus, and asked if they could redirect a single truckload to a food bank in Los Angeles. The farm said yes. The food bank said yes. They drove a U-Haul from point A to point B, and The Farmlink Project was born.

What happened next is what makes this story matter. That single truckload became a system. Student volunteers researched which farms had surplus, which food banks had need, and which trucks could bridge the gap. They built a logistics operation from scratch, and within months, they were moving food at scale. Five years later, Farmlink has rescued and distributed nearly 500 million pounds of fresh produce that would have rotted in fields or ended up in landfills. They operate in all fifty states, and their team

of former college students now runs one of the most efficient food rescue operations in the country.

Here's what I want you to notice about this story. It's not a story about logistics, and it's not even really a story about food. It's a story about what happens when someone refuses to accept the gap between what is and what could be. Kanoff said it best: *"Dream big, start small, move fast."* They had a massive vision — make the world's abundance of nutritious food accessible to everyone — but they started with one farm, one truck, and one delivery.

That's what problem-solving looks like. Not waiting for permission, but seeing a problem, starting where you are, and figuring it out as you go.

THE COMPLEXITY PROBLEM

The challenges we face today aren't simple. I know that's obvious, but it's worth sitting with for a minute, because the nature of today's problems is part of what makes people feel so stuck.

Fifty years ago, addressing hunger meant producing more food and distributing it more efficiently. Today, solving hunger means understanding food deserts, analyzing agricultural supply chains, considering environmental impact, navigating economic inequality, and working through regulatory systems that weren't designed for the scale of need we're facing. The problem hasn't just gotten bigger, it's gotten more intricate, more interconnected, and harder to see clearly.

This is true across virtually every domain. Education isn't just about curriculum anymore — it's tangled up with digital access, family dynamics, mental health, and economic inequality. Health-care isn't just about treatment, it's about prevention, wellness,

access, cost, and cultural competency. Even running a small business now requires navigating technology platforms, supply chain complexities, labor market shifts, and an AI revolution happening faster than any of us can keep up with.

The systems thinkers call these “wicked problems” — challenges that are complex, interconnected, and resistant to simple solutions. Human trafficking, homelessness, addiction, food insecurity, education gaps, mental health crises. None of these will yield to a single intervention, a single discipline, or a single clever idea.

And yet.

The traditional approach to problem-solving was built for a simpler world. It assumes problems are isolated, favors specialization over integration, and treats symptoms because root causes are harder to see. And it moves slowly, often by design, through layers of bureaucracy and approval. That approach isn’t just outdated, in a world moving at the speed of AI it’s dangerous. Because when you apply old approaches to new complexities, you don’t get partial solutions. You get accelerated failure.

THE REAL GAP

At this point, you may already be thinking: if problems are this complex, how in the world can little-old-me have any real impact?

I get it. I’ve felt that way too. But this is exactly the mindset we need to rage against. The “*dying of the light*” in our personal lives might not be some sweeping global crisis. It might be our lack of response toward a family in need. A volunteer opportunity we scroll past. The difference between stopping to talk with the person holding a sign on the corner and pretending we don’t see them.

The decision to foster a child. The choice to show up at the school board meeting instead of just complaining about it online.

We need problem solvers, yes. But more than that, we need men and women who choose to do something instead of nothing. How many problems persist not because they're too complex, but because too many of us are paralyzed by fear, overwhelmed by scale, or numbed by apathy?

This book is a comprehensive breakdown of the skills needed to become an effective problem solver. But the cornerstone is actually quite simple: it's action. If there's only one thing to take away from everything that follows — beyond all the frameworks and models and case studies — it's this: do the next right thing.

Not the biggest thing. Not the perfect thing. The next right thing.

In most cases, we control what we choose to do or not do. Are you discontent with the problems you see around you? Do those problems spark something in you — passion, maybe even a bit of rage? Do you feel compelled to make a difference, even if you don't know exactly how?

Most importantly: are you willing to take the next step?

Everyone has the potential, and I would say the responsibility, to be a problem solver, regardless of role or background. A parent finding innovative ways to help their child learn. An empty-nester devoting hours each week at the local food shelter. A college student cultivating conversations with classmates about mental health support. A product manager at a nonprofit building tools that help organizations raise more money for their mission. These are all problem-solving. And none of them required a special degree or a corner office to start.

The gap we face isn't a talent gap. The world is full of smart, capable, passionate people, and the gap is between the problems that need solving and the number of people willing to step up and solve them. Not just willing, but equipped. Having the mindset, the frameworks, and the courage to look at a complex challenge and say, "*I'll figure this out.*"

DESIGN THINKING: A FRAMEWORK FOR EVERYONE

One of the most powerful things I've learned across twenty-plus years of building products, leading teams, and working with organizations of all sizes is this: there is a reliable, repeatable process for solving hard problems. It's called design thinking, and it's not just for designers.

Design thinking was pioneered by firms like IDEO and refined at institutions like Stanford's d.School and Harvard's Graduate School of Design. But its roots go much deeper. In 1955, Henry Dreyfuss — one of the founding fathers of American industrial design, the man who designed everything from the Western Electric telephone to the interior of Air Force One — published *Designing for People*. His central argument was revolutionary for its time and remains essential today: the purpose of design is not to make things look good, it's to deeply understand people and build things that serve their actual needs.

"*We begin with men and women,*" Dreyfuss wrote, "*and we end with them.*"

That principle — what I call "*designing for the other side of the screen*" — is the beating heart of effective problem-solving. And it translates far beyond product design.

Here's the framework, distilled to its essentials:

Start with empathy. Before you solve anything, understand the people you're solving for. Not your assumptions about them or what you think they need, but what they actually experience, struggle with, and hope for. This means listening (really listening), spending time in their world, and setting aside your own biases.

Define the real problem. Most failed solutions aren't bad solutions, they're good solutions to the wrong problem. Dig past the symptoms to find root causes. Ask "why?" five times. Reframe the challenge until you're sure you're aiming at the right target.

Generate multiple ideas. Resist the temptation to fall in love with your first solution. The best problem solvers generate many possible approaches before committing to one. They think beyond the obvious. They borrow from adjacent disciplines. They ask "what if?" relentlessly.

Prototype quickly. Don't build the finished product, build the smallest possible version that lets you test your core assumption, whether that's a sketch, a mockup, or a one-page proposal. Speed matters because learning matters, and you can't learn from something that only exists in your head.

Test, learn, iterate. Put your prototype in front of real people and watch what happens. Gather feedback, measure what works and what doesn't, then improve and test again. The goal isn't to get it right the first time but to get it less wrong each time until you arrive at something that genuinely works.

This process works because it's fundamentally about humility and curiosity. You start by admitting you don't fully understand the problem. You end by letting reality (not your ego) guide the

solution, and it can be applied to virtually anything. Redesigning a nonprofit's donor experience. Figuring out how to better support your team at work. Addressing a need in your neighborhood. Launching a new initiative at your church.

The Google Ventures design sprint — a compressed version of this framework — has been used to solve challenges across industries from healthcare to education to financial services. Stanford's d.School teaches it to students who go on to work in policy, medicine, business, and social enterprise. The methodology is discipline-agnostic. What matters is the mindset: empathy first, action second, iteration always.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CAPABILITY

There's a line in the Gospel of Luke that has always stayed with me: *"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."* You don't have to share my faith tradition for that principle to land. If you have the ability to see problems clearly, the skills to build solutions, and the resources to act (even modestly), you carry a responsibility to use those things for others.

Scott Harrison's journey is one of the clearest examples of this I've encountered. Harrison spent a decade as a nightclub promoter in New York City before a crisis of conscience led him to volunteer on a hospital ship off the coast of West Africa. What he saw there — people suffering from diseases caused by contaminated water, conditions that could be prevented for a few dollars per person — broke something open in him. He came home and founded charity: water, which has since funded nearly 200,000 water projects serving more than 20 million people in 29 countries. Harrison didn't have a background in hydrology or international develop-

ment. He had event planning skills, a network, and the conviction that doing nothing was no longer an option.

The parallel to Paige Chenault, whose story we'll explore in the next chapter, is striking. She was an event planner too. She didn't set out to solve homelessness. She asked one question: do homeless kids get birthday parties? And built something beautiful from the answer.

Here's what I've noticed again and again: the most impactful problem solvers don't start with the most resources or the most expertise. They start with the most willingness. They see something broken and they refuse to look away. They use what they already have: their skills, their networks, their particular way of seeing the world, and they take a step.

The enemy of making a difference can often be thinking you have to make too big of one. Start small. Start now. Use what you have. The compound effect of consistent, thoughtful problem-solving is staggering.

THE PATH FORWARD

The world doesn't have a shortage of problems. Look around your own life for five minutes and you'll find friction points, unmet needs, broken systems, and people hurting. What we have a shortage of is people willing to engage. People who will move from observation to action, from complaint to contribution, from *"someone should do something"* to *"I'll figure this out."*

Kanoff and Reilly were college students with no logistics experience. They've now moved half a billion pounds of food. Veronika Scott, whose story opens Chapter 3, was a college student with a design assignment. She's now employed over a hundred

people and distributed more than 100,000 sleeping bag coats across seven continents. These aren't superheroes. They're people who saw a problem, refused to accept it, and started with the smallest possible action.

You don't need to launch a nonprofit, and you don't need a huge platform or a large following. You need to notice something that's broken, care enough to engage, and take one step toward making it better.

The question isn't whether you're capable of solving problems. You are. The question is: what problems will you choose to solve? And are you willing to take the next right step?