Problem Solving 101

Ken Watanabe

CONTENTS

About the Book

Problem Solving 101 started out as a simple guide to teach Japanese schoolchildren critical thinking skills. But it quickly became an international bestseller for readers of *all* ages, thanks to the powerful effectiveness of Ken Watanabe's unique methods.

Full of useful diagrams and quirky drawings, *Problem Solving 101* is packed with practical tools and techniques to train your brain to solve problems, create solutions and make faster, better decisions.

Simple enough for a high school student to understand but sophisticated enough for CEOs to apply to their most challenging problems, *Problem Solving 101* has helped millions of people around the world to find successful solutions to even the toughest of problems.

About the Author

Ken Watanabe grew up in Japan and studied in the United States at Yale and Harvard Business School. He was a management consultant at McKinsey & Company for 6 years. He is now the founder and CEO of his own education, entertainment and media company, Delta Studio. He lives in Tokyo.

PROBLEM SOLVING 101

A SIMPLE BOOK FOR SMART PEOPLE

KEN WATANABE
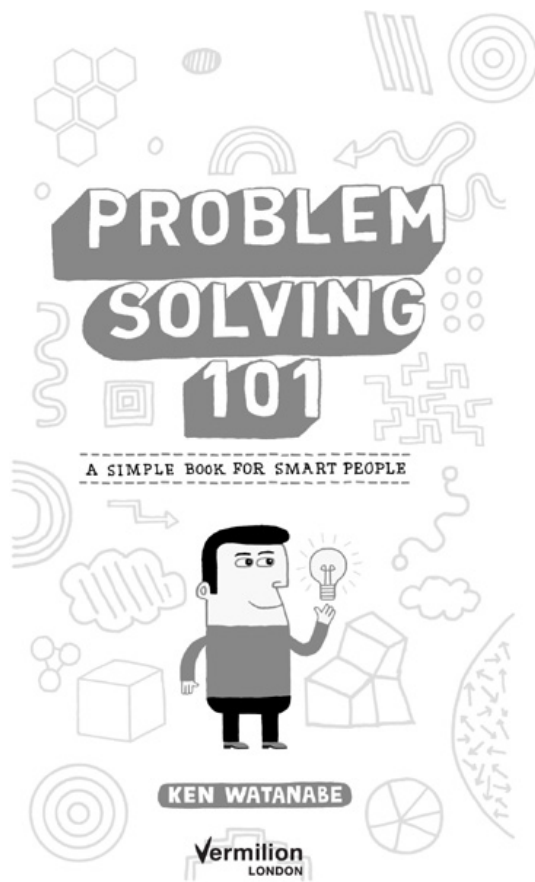
what is your delta?

WHY PROBLEM SOLVING?

We all have to make decisions. Whether you're a student, a parent, a businessperson, or the president of the United States, you face problems every day that need solving. The problems may vary. Maybe you need to pass a maths class, or decide where to live, or figure out how to improve your company's bottom line. Maybe you want to lose some weight or simply get better at golf.

Whether the issue is big or small, we all set goals for ourselves, face challenges, and strive to overcome them. There's a fundamental approach to solving these real-life problems, one that can consistently lead you to effective and satisfying solutions. And chances are, no one has ever bothered to show you how.

One of my missions in writing this book was to show everyone a simple way to deal with the problems they face in their everyday lives. But I wasn't just trying to communicate a skill set. Being a problem solver isn't just an ability; it's a whole mind-set, one that drives people to bring out the best in themselves and to shape the world in a positive way. Rather than accepting the status quo, true problem solvers are constantly trying to proactively shape their environment. Imagine how different our world would be if leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, JFK, and Steve Jobs lacked this attitude.

I hope this book will help inspire both children and adults to develop this proactive mind-set by first tackling the problems in their own lives. Once you learn this simple way to solve the personal challenges you face every day, you just might see that your bigger dreams and accomplishments are also within your reach.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Before I wrote this book, I was a consultant for the global management consulting firm of McKinsey & Company. For six years I worked with major companies all over the world to help solve their business challenges using a straightforward yet powerful set of problem-solving tools.

These are tools that anyone can use. They don't require complicated computer software or a room full of expert analysts. They're simply approaches to broaden and organize one's thinking about a problem, so that more possible solutions become clear.

In 2007 Japan's prime minister made education his nation's top agenda. As the country turned its focus to the educational system, I felt compelled to do my part. Although Japanese business leaders, educators, and politicians have long talked about the need for Japan to shift from "memorization-focused education" to "problem-solving-focused education," no one had figured out a concrete and effective way to make this happen.

So I left McKinsey to write this book and to teach kids. My aim was to teach Japanese children how to think like problem solvers, to take a proactive role in their own education and in shaping their lives. I tried to frame the tools we used at McKinsey in a fun and approachable way, one that would show kids what a practical approach to problem solving could help them accomplish. Although I don't claim to be any kind of expert on education, I hoped that the book would at least provide a starting point, one

that would help shift the debate from whether we should teach problem solving to how we should go about teaching it.

Then a surprising thing happened: The book took off—and not just with kids. It first caught fire in the business segment, becoming Japan's number one business best-seller in 2007. Then it spread through the education community and to a wider general audience. It turned out that adult readers in Japan, from parents and teachers to CEOs of major corporations, had been craving a simple and useful guide to problem-solving techniques.

Now I'm focusing on helping kids put *Problem Solving 101* into practice. I think the experience kids get from having an idea, taking initiative, and learning from both their successes and their failures is what we have to put more emphasis on. So I'm creating more opportunities for them to learn more from real-life situations rather than just in the classroom.

When I work with kids, I don't start by teaching the skills from *Problem Solving 101* in a classroom. Instead, I let them learn the same way Warren Buffett did. Buffett got his first business experience when he was only six years old, buying Coke bottles from his grandfather's store and selling them for a profit. The kids I work with get to run a food and drink business using a 1965 VW van I've renovated for use as a transportable shop. The kids decide what food and drinks to sell, where to sell, and how to compete against other teams by actually selling what they have cooked or prepared. The kids learn the importance of not just problem solving skills, but also leadership, teamwork, creativity, persistence, charm, and *kaizen* (continuous improvement) to make their vision come true. Only after this experience do I help them ask the important questions and provide them with the problem-solving tools that could help them with future projects.

The value of problem-solving-oriented thinking obviously extends far beyond the classroom into every facet of our lives. It enables us to take control of the challenges we encounter and to change the world in a positive way. My hope is that English-reading audiences will benefit from the book in the same way many Japanese readers have.

Best, Ken Watanabe