

From chaos to clarity

Break the fire-fighting cycle

Many organizations find themselves in a constant mode of firefighting. Overloaded schedules, short-term thinking, and ad-hoc decisions dominate the scene. There is always an urgent problem demanding immediate attention, which makes quickly “fixing something” the top priority. On top of that, a relentless stream of unfiltered information – a direct consequence of our digital overload – undermines our ability to think critically. We become entangled in a vicious cycle of symptom management, where structural solutions slip further and further out of sight.

By Gijs Verrest

In 431 BC, Athens stood at the height of its power. The city was renowned for its innovative democratic structures and boasted an impressive military force, with an unmatched navy and strategic control over the Aegean Sea. Thanks to this combination of political influence and military superiority, Athens seemed invincible. It was a city that symbolized power, prosperity, and cultural advancement.

However, a catastrophic disaster awaited Athens. Shortly after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the rural population—under pressure from the Spartan siege—sought refuge en masse within the city walls, causing severe overpopulation. This massive influx not only led to a lack of space but also to dire hygienic conditions, creating the perfect breeding ground for the rapid spread of disease.

A devastating outbreak of plague soon completely disrupted the city. Due to limited medical knowledge, the Athenians were unable to contain the disease; their response was inevitably reactive and improvised. Without an

understanding of the causes and transmission mechanisms of the illness, their efforts were largely ineffective. The population focused on what was visible: caring for the sick and burying the dead. It is estimated that Athens lost between 25% and 35% of its population. Even Pericles, the visionary leader of the city, succumbed to the disease.

Thucydides, historian and eyewitness, described how traditional religious and moral norms disappeared, and chaos took hold of the city. The resulting power vacuum weakened Athens both politically and militarily. Although the exact nature of the epidemic is still debated—possible causes range from typhus to smallpox—it is clear that this was one of the most disruptive disasters of ancient Greece. Athens not only lost a large portion of its population but also its confidence in leadership and social cohesion, and the city never again returned to its former status as an undisputed superpower.



The plague of the 21st century

Fast forward to the present. Thanks to the internet and artificial intelligence, knowledge is more accessible than ever—but they also bring a flood of data. Much like Athens, which became entangled in chaos due to overpopulation and a deadly disease, we are now facing an explosion of information—unfiltered, fragmented, and often of questionable quality. This constant stream of stimuli consumes our attention, and we unconsciously become cognitively overloaded. We lose the ability to maintain an overview and recognize patterns. What truly matters fades from view, and we become increasingly caught up in the urgency of the moment.



It's not just the sheer volume of information, but also its poor quality that plays a disastrous role. Just as poor hygiene in Athens accelerated the spread of disease, today's unstructured—and often misleading—data creates the perfect conditions for ineffective action. Problems are recorded hastily, communicated unclearly, and passed on incompletely. As a result, organizations get stuck in quick, improvised fixes that offer only temporary relief—if they work at all—and often give rise to new problems. We have more information than ever before, but without structure and context, it does not lead to better understanding.

The greatest danger lies not in the abundance of

poor information itself, but in our inability to deal with it. Our attention—a finite and precious resource—is constantly consumed by noise: data without context, problems without depth, stimuli without direction. Our attention span is shrinking, and with it our capacity for critical thinking and connecting the dots. The result is a paradox: the more information we have, the harder it becomes to truly understand what is going on and what deserves our focus.

As a result, urgent problems quickly take precedence, and we fall into a cycle of firefighting—the reactive mode that traps organizations in short-term thinking and knee-jerk responses.

Symptoms of fire-fighting

Even the most renowned organizations can fall into the trap of firefighting—it's a dangerous reflex. The symptoms are all too familiar: overloaded schedules, excessive short-term thinking, rushed decisions, and ad-hoc behavior. There's always some issue to deal with—a missed quality standard or a customer in urgent need. Quickly “fixing something” seems like the best option: find a workaround and keep things moving. We treat the symptoms but never take the time to address the root causes. And so the cycle continues.

When crisis management becomes the norm, superficial fixes take the place of fundamental improvements. This results in a number of persistent patterns:

Urgency overrides importance

Long-term improvements and strategic initiatives are repeatedly interrupted by pressing issues that demand immediate attention. As a result, the organization remains stuck in a reactive mode and drifts further away from structural improvement.

Incomplete solutions

Symptoms are addressed, but the root causes remain untouched. Like a flat tire that keeps getting reinflated instead of being repaired, the same problems resurface—sometimes in an even more persistent form.

Recurring and escalating problems

What isn't tackled at the root continues to grow. A temporary fix may shift the problem rather than solve it, causing it to reappear elsewhere in the organization—often with greater consequences.

Crises right before a deadline

Problems linger until they escalate at a critical moment. Suddenly, everything must be dropped to extinguish the fire right now, leading to panic-driven decisions, inefficiency, and stress.

From one fire to the next

Before one issue is resolved, the next has already appeared. The organization jumps from one urgency to another, with no space to break the underlying cycle.

Declining performance and rising costs

Constant reactive behavior leads to deteriorating quality and reliability. Operational costs rise as additional resources are continually required to fix the same recurring problems.

The vicious cycle of firefighting doesn't just impact an organization's productivity and efficiency—it also affects its workplace culture. Thucydides wrote about how chaos and the loss



Less rushing and firefighting, more understanding and prevention. It starts with a mindset shift: from reacting to understanding.

of cohesion further weakened Athens. Similarly, modern organizations see employee motivation erode when reactive behavior becomes the norm. Teams become demoralized by having to solve the same problems over and over again. And ultimately, customers lose trust when issues that should have been resolved long ago keep coming back.

A new mindset

There is another way: less rushing and firefighting, more understanding and prevention. It begins with a mindset shift—from reacting to understanding. Only when organizations stop blindly putting out fires and start investing in fundamental problem-solving can they escape the vicious cycle of reactive behavior. A shared understanding must emerge of what **truly** solving problems entails. To make real progress, we first need to change how we approach problems.

In practice, however, this shift is far from easy. Many organizations struggle with shifting priorities—what's a top priority today may end up at the bottom of the list tomorrow. It's also difficult to say "no" to things that **seem** important. This is where leadership must step in: by providing direction and making it clear that a thorough approach—even if it takes more time and effort in the short term—is crucial for long-term reliability, safety, and continuity. Structural solutions must be embedded in processes so that solving problems thoroughly becomes part of how we work—not just a one-time effort.

Real problem-solving and continuous improvement are not the responsibility of a single department or a handful of specialists—it requires a mindset that permeates the entire organization. To achieve this, a structured approach is essential, supported by critical thinking skills. Only then can we break the vicious cycle of firefighting and build an organization that truly solves its problems.

The essence of a structured approach

Across many industries, there are established methods and frameworks designed to structure problem-solving. Think of 8D, PDCA, A3, CAPA, and DMAIC—each developed to systematically identify root causes and implement corrective actions. These methods offer a logical sequence of steps, from defining the problem to applying sustainable solutions.

In theory, they're ideal. But in practice, they're often perceived as bureaucratic or reduced to "tick-box" exercises done after the fact. The steps are followed routinely, without truly understanding the situation—robbing the method of its power. Crucial questions like "How do we determine the most likely root cause?" or "On what basis do we choose the right solution?" often go unanswered. A completed form doesn't guarantee that the thinking process behind it was solid.

A structured approach brings the mindset of true problem-solving to life—it provides direction for the thinking process. A simple and clear method makes it accessible and easy to share. This helps keep teams, customers, and suppliers aligned and speaking the same language. A consistent approach enhances repeatability and ensures that problems can be resolved structurally and effectively.

Yet a methodical approach alone is not enough. No matter how well-designed a framework may be, without critical thinking it becomes a mechanical exercise. Truly understanding a problem is not the same as merely following a checklist.

The necessity of critical thinking

We often confuse the thinking process behind problem-solving with the use of specific tools: checking off steps in a plan, asking "why" five times, and filling in fishbone diagrams. As if complex issues can be tamed with a checklist. But there's a blind spot in our toolbox: these tools assume we already know *exactly* what needs to be solved. That's where things often go wrong.

Under time pressure, our brains tend to jump straight into solution mode. We dig for causes,

test hypotheses, and tinker with symptoms—all before we've clearly defined what problem we're actually trying to solve. It's like trying to put out a fire without knowing where the flames are coming from.

Take the popular "5 Whys" method. It promises to reach the root cause by asking repeated why-questions. But in practice, teams often get stuck in circular reasoning or surface-level answers. Most problems are far more complex, and effective solutions require a deeper, more nuanced analysis.

Recent incidents in the news

Firefighting isn't just frustrating and costly—it's also risky. In sectors where quality and safety are critical, small problems can escalate into full-blown crises with far-reaching consequences. Think of product recalls in the food industry, medical errors in healthcare, or security breaches in tech. What starts as a seemingly manageable risk can quickly spiral into significant financial damage, loss of trust, and—in the worst cases—threats to human lives.

Yet, things seem to go wrong more and more often. A selection of recent incidents from the news:

- Coca-Cola had to recall 4 million cans and bottles of soft drinks due to excessive levels of chlorate, a substance that can be harmful with prolonged exposure.
- Microsoft saw 8.5 million devices affected by a faulty CrowdStrike update. Because the software is widely used in healthcare, finance, and government, parts of global infrastructure went offline.
- Chemours, a chemical plant in Dordrecht, suffered a leak that released 45 kilos of tetrafluoroethylene gas, a potentially carcinogenic substance.
- Philips faced scrutiny over a software error in a medical heart monitoring device, which prevented critical heart data from being transmitted to doctors.
- Dr. Oetker recalled frozen products after fragments of copper wire were discovered—traced back to a raw material from a supplier.
- RDW, the Dutch vehicle registration authority, experienced an outage that prevented vehicle transfers and inspections from being processed.
- SpaceX continues to face technical issues with one of its space capsules. Two NASA astronauts, who launched for a one-week mission in June 2024, will not return until 2025.

Incidents like these are often presented as isolated problems, but they reveal a pattern: a system growing increasingly vulnerable due to complex supply chains, time pressure, and cost-cutting measures. Risk management and diligence are being overshadowed by speed and efficiency, leading to a culture where symptom-fighting becomes the norm.

The real question is not *if* another crisis will occur, but *when*—and who will pay the price.

The same goes for the Ishikawa or fishbone diagram. Without a well-understood problem and a sharply defined problem statement, the fishbone becomes a soft brainstorm session: endless lists of possible causes, scattered actions, and a scattershot approach. The result? Busy teams that never reach the heart of the issue.

This is the danger of using methods without disciplined thinking: they create an illusion of control, while real problems continue to grow beneath the surface. What truly matters isn't faster answers—but better questions. Critical thinking is the ability to continually question your own assumptions. To recognize that every “problem” you name is already an interpretation—and *that's* where the key lies. The real question isn't: *What is the cause?* but first: *What exactly is the problem?* Only when that becomes crystal clear can methods and tools do their job effectively.

From chaos to thinking discipline

The “plague” of our time may not be the plague in the traditional sense, but rather an *infodemic*: an endless stream of data in which we lose ourselves. Just as Athens once collapsed under an unprecedented crisis and fell into purely reactive behavior, we too risk drowning in information without real coherence.

Three steps toward escaping the chaos:

1. Slow down.

This goes against our instinct to jump straight into action. We live in a world of constant urgency. The real challenge is having the courage to pause. Socrates—the original source of critical thinking—taught us that *“the only thing I know is that I know nothing.”* In modern organizations, that may sound out of place, but it's exactly the mindset we need. When we acknowledge how much we don't know for certain, we create space for better questions to emerge.



*We need to **externalize** our knowledge: clearly document problems, visualize causes and effects, map out patterns and connections, and openly question priorities. Only then can we create order out of chaos—and make effective collaboration possible.*

2. Bring structure to your thinking—and make it visible.

We tend to overestimate how much we know, and at the same time underestimate how unstructured that knowledge is inside our minds. We need to *externalize* it: clearly define problems, visualize causes and effects, map out patterns and connections, and openly question priorities. Only by doing this can we create order out of chaos and enable truly effective collaboration.

3. Radically filter and prioritize.

Our brains weren't designed to handle the constant flood of documents, emails, and notifications. More data isn't necessarily better—it's about having the right data. Which facts do we really need? What's relevant, and

what's just noise? We need to recognize that true attention is scarce. Too often, we're busy gathering more information instead of filtering better. We keep hoping that one more report, one more dataset, or one more article will provide the answer. But the real skill lies in what we leave out—and in finding focus. Less is more.

This is how you build a culture of critical thinking—one where you no longer get lost in the noise, but instead work purposefully toward understanding. It's a mindset that makes organizations resilient. It prevents us from, like Athens, being dragged under by a crisis that dictates our actions. And ultimately, it moves us forward: because those who no longer spend all their time putting out fires, finally have the space to truly build. **Q**

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The Kepner-Tregoe methodology provides structure in situations ranging from simple to extremely complex, and it facilitates collaboration across the organization. Silos are broken down: from the management team to the shop floor, everyone speaks the same language. The approach makes it clear where to start, what actions to take, and ensures that the right questions are asked at the right time.

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