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## *The First Problem Is Usually the Wrong Problem*

Spark Talk transcript
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*Edited for readability. Filler words and false starts removed.*

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TRANSCRIPT

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*The First Problem Is Usually the Wrong Problem*

Spark Talk · IGNITE: Global Gathering

Before I begin, I want you to think of a client. Think of someone who came to the session already pretty certain about what their problem was. Maybe they were equally certain about what they thought needed to change. You listened. You asked questions. And maybe sometime in that conversation, or a later one, you started to wonder: is that actually the problem? Raise your hand when you have someone in mind. Okay. All right. Keep that person in mind. We'll come back to them.

For now, I want to take you back to a day early in my product career. I was two weeks into research with a new product team, sitting in a dark conference room, taking detailed notes on every answer a research participant was giving. We were trying to figure out how to make the product results page on our website more effective.

This particular participant was very opinionated. They walked us through everything they would need to know to decide which laptop to buy: processor, video card, warranty, financing. And they were clear they wanted it all up front, so they didn't have to hunt for it. I clung to every word. It was my first time participating in a customer interview, after all. Who would know better what the customer needed than the customer themselves?

Afterward, I made a list of all the information they'd recommended we include. Then I realized just how long each result on our page would become. I brought my concern to a senior product manager. He said, "Including all of that information on a product result page is like including the nutrition facts from a can of soup on the navigation sign above the grocery store aisle. Wrong place, wrong time."

So we went back to the drawing board. The customer had shown us where they needed to end up, but not necessarily the best route to get them there. We created and tested several recipes with different amounts of information. The winning recipe showed improved engagement and forward movement while showing drastically less information than that customer had recommended.

But we didn't throw away their feedback. We repurposed those ideas for experiments on the product detail page, where customers are more ready for that kind of information.

Across nearly ten years building products, and later leading people, I spent a lot of time around assumptions. As product managers, we think of ourselves as professional problem solvers. What product discovery has taught me is that the problem someone first brings isn't

necessarily the problem to solve. It's a hypothesis.

A few years later, I was promoted to lead my team. Many of the people I was now leading had been my peers. I wanted to be approachable. I wanted them to trust me. I wanted to help them shine. And approach me they did. In nearly every one-on-one, people were bringing problems to me and asking for my help fixing them.

At the same time, I joined the Coaching for Leaders Academy, and I made it a goal to become a more coach-like leader. In doing so, I noticed just how quickly I would jump from someone's description of a problem to my own ideas on how to solve it.

About six weeks into my new role, one of my top-performing product managers came to me and said, "I've been working to position myself as the next candidate for the lead product manager role, but I'm just not able to effectively influence our portfolio with this product. I want to move to one that's a higher priority."

I respected her. I wanted to help her shine. So I started solving. I assessed all the products in our portfolio. I looked at staffing and resourcing, and I pitched rotations to my leaders. I was doing a lot of work to answer one question: where should I move her?

But the more I learned, the more that question didn't sit well with me. If I moved her to a product with an already packed roadmap, it could take her three to six months to ramp up just enough to effectively influence it. I was falling into the assumption trap again. Her hypothesis was growth. Changing products was just one theory for how to get there.

Two weeks later, I sat her down and told her she wouldn't be moving products immediately. Instead, I encouraged her to think about growth like a product problem. How might she tap into new growth from exactly where she was?

She wasn't thrilled, but she started brainstorming. One idea stood out above the others: a product manager knowledge and training series, where she could demonstrate her expertise, pull together ideas from across the team, and answer questions from her peers. She pitched it to our leaders and got the green light to test it.

That experiment gave her something moving products alone wouldn't have given her quickly: visibility as a leader among her peers. She got to practice leadership instead of waiting for a future role to bestow it upon her, strengthening her candidacy for the role.

Somewhere during that period, the connection clicked for me. Product problems and people problems aren't all that different. I thought coaching was teaching me something brand new, and then I realized I'd been practicing a version of that same discipline for years: identify the assumption, turn it into a hypothesis, test it, learn, and change your mind. I wasn't just seeing a product pattern anymore. I was seeing a human pattern.

Now, this is a room full of coaches. You know how to be curious. You know how to evoke awareness. You know your job is not to solve the client's problem for them. What product discovery has brought to my coaching is testing and iteration. In product, we expect hypotheses to be wrong. That's why we test them. We gather evidence and revise our understanding. Instead of asking only, "What do you think is happening?", we can help a client ask, "How can I learn whether that's actually true?"

Recently, I was working with a client who had led his organization for eight years. During that time, his org had nearly tripled in size and scope, but he'd never been promoted. He thought the problem was visibility. It was a reasonable hypothesis, but instead of treating it as fact, he decided to test it. If lack of visibility was the problem, increasing visibility should change something.

He compiled a list of his team's accomplishments, celebrated their achievements, and met with his leaders and the leaders of peer teams. Then he paid attention to what happened next.

He did gather evidence. It just wasn't the evidence he wanted. His leaders were polite. They acknowledged his team's achievements. But he noticed that, continually, the conversation would turn to revenue-generating priorities outside his scope.

Now, he had drastically streamlined employee onboarding for the company. His team had rolled out a highly successful self-service tool that drastically reduced the time it took to close IT tickets. He had been the company's first IT hire. For years, he'd felt central to the company's vision. Now he didn't. At one point, he summed up what he was seeing: "I spend the money. They make the money."

His original hypothesis had been that greater visibility could change his promotion prospects. What he was beginning to see was that the company might value revenue-generating functions differently than the IT and security organization he was leading. That realization was disappointing, but it was clarifying.

Eventually, he reframed the problem statement altogether, away from "How do I obtain a promotion suitable to the size of the organization I'm leading?" There was empowerment in that pivot. He had a new problem statement and could redirect his energy toward tests to figure out what kind of company would be a better fit. His hypothesis had failed. His experiment had succeeded, opening the door to his next iteration.

That's the part of product discovery I think offers us something useful as coaches. When we care about people, it's tempting to take their word at face value. We want to trust them. We want to see the world from their point of view. But trusting someone doesn't require treating their interpretation of a situation as fact. Sometimes the most empowering thing we can do is help a client hold an explanation lightly enough to treat it as a hypothesis and test it in the

real world.

This is the discovery loop I now keep in my own mind: Know, Assume, Test, Learn.

**K** Know: what do we actually know?

**A** Assume: what are we assuming?

**T** Test: what could we test?

**L** Learn: what did we learn?

The goal is not to prove the client wrong. It's to help them replace speculation with continuous learning. A failed hypothesis isn't necessarily a failed outcome. Sometimes it's the information that opens up an entirely new path.

Now go back to the client I had you picture at the beginning. What do you actually know about their situation? What might they be assuming? What could they test in the real world? And what might they learn that you could never uncover through conversation alone? Maybe the problem statement they brought you is exactly the right one. Or maybe it's simply a first hypothesis.

My instinct now is not what it was three years ago. When a client tells me, "Here's my problem," before I accept that problem statement, I ask: what are we accepting as true, and what might the client learn by testing it?

> *The first problem isn't a conclusion. It's the beginning of discovery.*

Thank you.