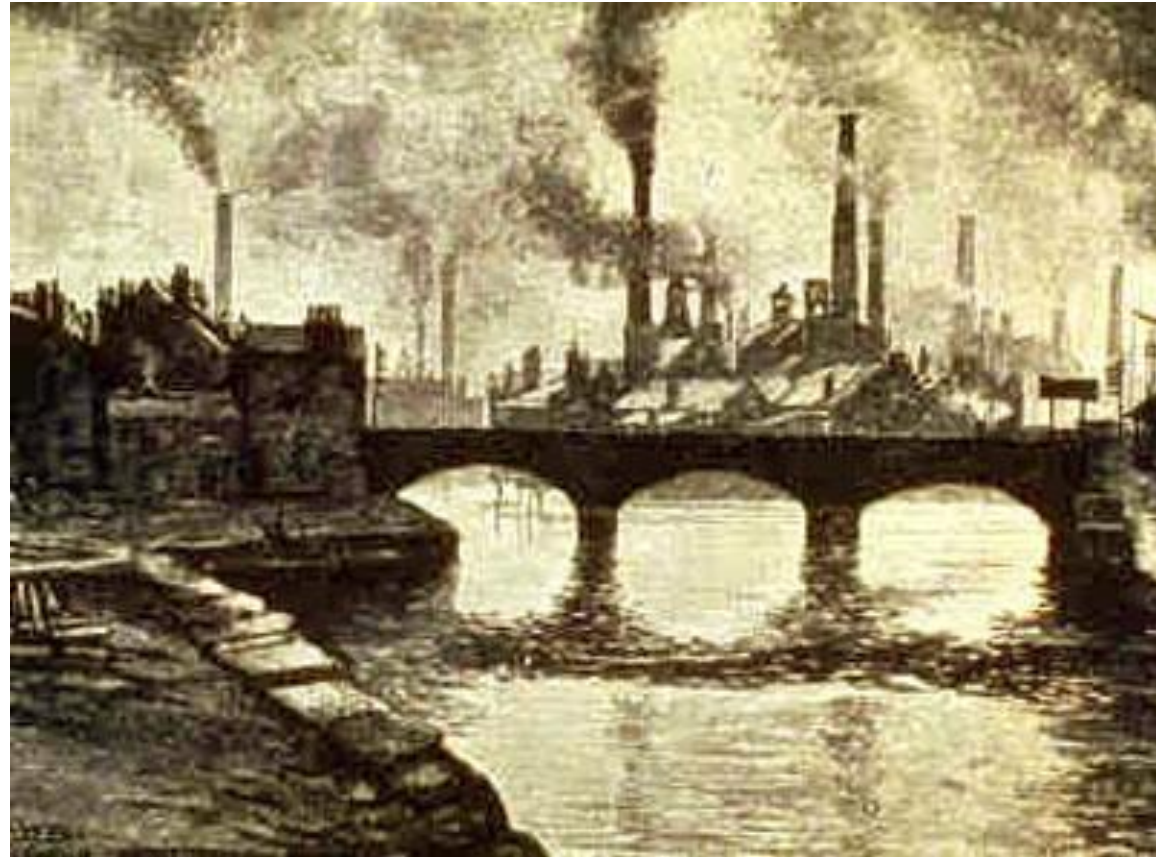


Problem Framing

London, 1815

- Crowded, polluted
- 25% of all deaths
- Due to a lung condition
- That today we call “tuberculosis”

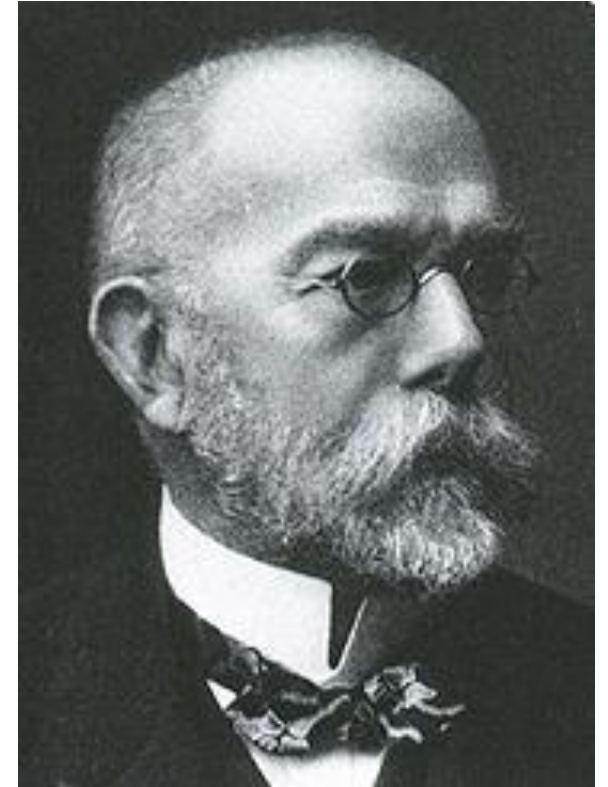


Tuberculosis bacteria

- Not isolated until 1882...
- ...by German scientist Robert Koch



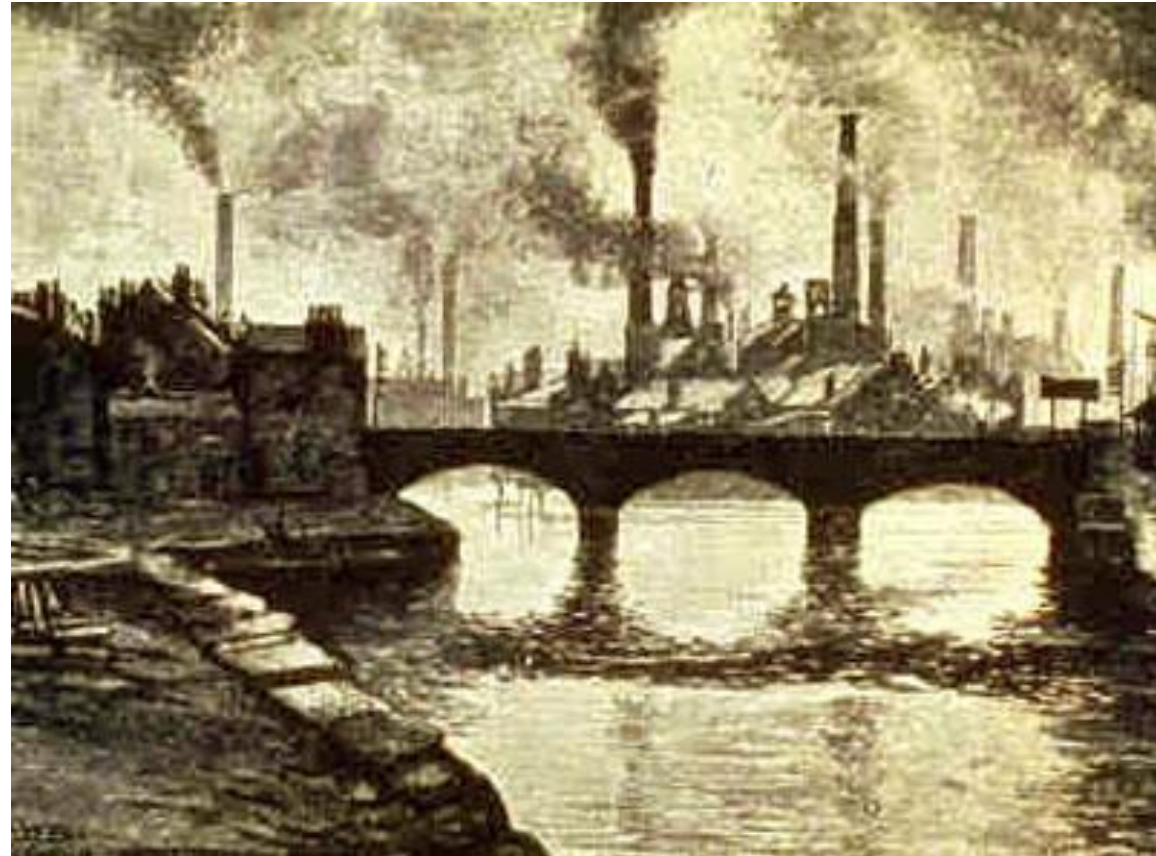
Tuberculosis
Bacteria



Robert Koch
(1843 – 1910)

They framed the problem as: “bad air”

- New regulations
 - Better ventilation
 - Removal of standing water
- By 1850, **90% decline** in death rate
- 32 years **before** the word “tuberculosis” was in our vocabulary



What can we say about their framing of the problem as “bad air”?

- Right??
- Wrong??
- Useful? Yes!

Problem Framing

- Deciding on what the problems are in the first place
- More detailed:
 - Experimenting with, and deciding on, what you will choose to treat as problematic
- Concerned primarily with the usefulness of a particular framing; less concerned with right/wrong, or precision

Problem Framing

- Your ability to solve a problem is directly affected by how well you frame it or design it in the first place
- Problems need not be passively 'found' during analysis...
- Rather they can be proactively designed by you and your team.

Problem Framing

- Problem framing is particularly useful
 - Amidst the non-deterministic environment of ‘organizing’
 - When working with multiple languages or across cultural boundaries

Problem Framing

- Effective managers and leaders create (frame) problems that are actionable and compelling
- Poor managers and leaders create (frame) problems that do not lead to active engagement of workers

ClearCom

Case Debrief

“If you can’t solve the problem, change the problem
you’re solving”

ClearCom—Japan Operations of a Global Telecom Provider

- **“Direct sales”**
 - Sales by ClearCom-owned retailers or the internet—no incentive payments required.
- **“Indirect sales”**
 - Sales by independent retailers—incentive payments required
- Goal: Improve profitability by shifting from indirect to direct sales

ClearCom

- The proposed shift causes channel conflict—retailers threatening to stop ClearCom sales
- More than a year of inconclusive internal deliberations
- Their question to us: *“What is the optimal ratio of direct to indirect sales?”*

The problem—is the problem itself

- Framing the problem as “direct vs. indirect” and the resulting question of “optimal ratio” leads to a dead end
- What is the ‘right’ or ‘optimal’ ratio? 30%-70%? 20%-80%?
- Is there a percentage at which channel conflict goes away? No!
- Even if the team arrived at an answer—say, 30-70—this is still only a target
- Direct/indirect does not align with existing departmental boundaries, but instead cuts across them

If you can't solve the problem, change the problem you're solving

- Problem re-framed as “**How to maximize performance of the retail channel?**”
- “Performance” accommodates both financial (incentive) and non-financial (customer information) aspects
- Aligned with existing departmental lines, instead of cutting across them—workers can bring their full talent and experience to bear. It's actionable.

Mom 'n Pop Stores

- After re-framing, their primary contribution to improved retail channel performance was clarified
 - Not financial savings to Clearcom from reduced commissions
 - But rather, rich customer information
- Because sales volume was small, so too were total incentive payments to these small retailers
 - After re-framing, it became clear that the savings potentially achieved from shifting to direct sales were not worth the threat of boycott and the creation of ill-will toward ClearCom
- Most valuable for customer information/insights
 - Small shop owners had strong relationship with customers, and with a clear understanding of customers preferences—this is the true source of their value (as important as the revenue they generated).

Big Box Retailers

- After re-framing, it became clear their value to ClearCom was opposite that of the Mom 'n Pop
 - Not customer information—sales were simply transactional
 - But rather, financial savings through reduced incentives
- They cooperated on a new multi-tiered commission structure, for two main reasons
 - Their value proposition to their customers: Widest possible selection of devices, carriers and plans. Thus, threat of outright boycott of Clearcom products was considered to be low
 - Cell phones a small % of their overall sales—lower sensitivity to the change, compared to the Mom 'n Pop stores

Bad news: Most aren't very good at framing. Good news: It's a differentiating opportunity for you.

- 85% of surveyed C-Suite execs say their orgs are bad at problem “diagnosis”
- 87% reports this carries significant costs
 - Above: Survey of 100+ execs at 91 companies, 17 countries (Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg, HBR, 2017)
- The “single most underrated skill in all of management”
 - (Repenning, et all, MIT Sloan Review, 2017)

Things that prevent robust framing—a partial checklist

- Pressure to ‘just get started;’ to take ‘real’ action
- ‘Plunging-in bias’
- “It’s just word-smithing”
 - (Ask any good sports coach if a halftime pep talk is ‘just word-smithing’)
- It may get political: framing and reframing may shake up the status quo and power relations
 - So, proactively consider: Who is likely to benefit/suffer from a reframing?
 - Adjust the framing to avoid political confrontation, or not, as you see fit
- Unwillingness/inability to:
 - Adopt an experimental/playful mindset
 - Redefine resources and their purpose—a “pencil” is also a “hole punch”
- Over-estimation of how much control we have over initiative outcomes

Well-framed opportunities and problems...

- Above all, they are actionable, useful, specific and fit-for-purpose
- They're also compelling, motivating—the kinds of problems (or opportunities) people want to solve (or capture)
- They optimize the use of (and do not demean) talent and resources
 - Where a mediocre manager/consultant sees a team with “skill gaps” ...
 - An empowering manager frames a different problem, one where this same team can hit a home run
- They suggest what the next steps should/could be
 - “First let’s figure out what the problem is, then we’ll figure out what to do about it” ←Wrong!
 - Problem and remedy are connected—once you choose the problem, you have also already narrowed the possible solution set
 - “When the only tool you have is a hammer, all the problems look like nails”
 - This works the other way around as well—when you’ve already decided the problem is a nail, you’re also likely to overlook any solution that doesn’t look like a hammer ←Creativity and innovation will suffer!
- Uses abduction—iterative problem solving

“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”

- Albert Einsetein

