

Lessons from Sergei

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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Sergei Pavlovich Nepobedimyi came up with an invention that had a devastating impact in the Middle East during the conflict of 1973, where 180 tanks were lost on day one, mostly courtesy of the Sagger. (1)

Sergei was the inventor of the Sagger missile. Basically it was an RPG (those rocket propelled grenades that are fired off-the-shoulder in the movies), but it came with a twist - you could fire at a target 3km away (10 times further than an RPG) - with an even more destructive effect. It had a devastating impact in the Middle East during the conflict of 1973, where 180 Israeli tanks were lost on day one, mostly courtesy of the Sagger. [1]

No solution in sight

At first, the Israeli tank commanders were mystified - there were no enemy tanks or RPG's in sight, yet they were getting knocked out with alarming frequency. As the battle went on, some clues emerged - those who were on either side of the knocked-out tank noticed a red light moving towards the tank just before it was hit. They then found a trail of wires leading to the stricken tank. The problem had been discovered: The Sagger missile.

The Sagger was a wire-guided missile that could be fired from a considerable distance by a soldier lying down in a shallow depression in the sand. He/she only had to fire in the general direction of the tank and could then use a joystick (bit of an oxymoron here) to guide it to its target. It had a red light to enable the shooter to keep track of it all the way to contact.

What was the problem? On the face of it, it appeared that the Russians should never have sold the Sagger in the first place (but it was too late to address that issue). The Israeli tanks could have all lined up in single file facing enemy territory, only sacrificing the front tank with each missile. But that's not how you win a battle, it's how you queue for the cinema. There appeared to be no solution.

A solution emerges

However, on further analysis it was revealed that the missile travelled relatively slowly and that the shooter had to have eye contact with the missile all the way to the target. So we could reframe the problem as: preventing the shooter seeing the target. In the desert that's simple - if you have a tank. You just create a lot of dust. And that's what they did - obscuring the tank from view every time they spotted the red dot. They also fired in the general direction of the red dot as good measure, to distract the shooter even further. It worked. [1]

Reframing gives more options

The lesson is applicable in advertising and marketing: Reframing a problem can make an enormous difference to the efficacy of a successful strategy. Rather than asking ourselves what would get the consumer to buy our product, it can be very illuminating to ask ourselves why our customers would not buy our product. Small tweak, big change in perception.

When you ask the question framed differently, you get a different answer. For example: (2)

"What is the sum of $5 + 5$?"

"Which two numbers add up to 10?"

The latter option two gives us many more choices. As Albert Einstein said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, because once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes".

Another valuable way to open the frame when you are solving a problem is to ask questions that start with "why?".

In this example by Teena Seelig quoting Michael Barry:[2]

If I asked you to build a bridge for me, you could go off and build a bridge. Or you could come back to me with another question: "Why do you need a bridge?" I would likely tell you that I need a bridge to get to the other side of a river. Aha! This response opens up the frame of possible solutions. There are clearly many ways to get across a river besides using a bridge. You could dig a tunnel, take a ferry, paddle a canoe, use a zip line, or fly a hot-air balloon, to name a few.

You can open the frame even farther by asking why I want to get to the other side of the river. Imagine I told you that I work on the other side. This, again, provides valuable information and broadens the range of possible solutions even more. There are probably viable ways for me to earn a living without ever going across the river.

The five whys

The five whys is a technique used in the Six Sigma methodology, which Toyota used with devastating affect against Detroit's carmakers (Toyota's profits in March 2003 were larger than GM, Ford, and Chrysler combined).[3]

For example:[4]

Problem statement: You are on your way home from work and your car stops in the middle of the road.

1. Why did your car stop?

- Because it ran out of petrol.

2. Why did it run out of petrol?

- Because I didn't buy any petrol on my way to work.

3. Why didn't you buy any petrol this morning?

- Because I didn't have any money.

4. Why didn't you have any money?

- Because I lost it all last night in a poker game.

5. Why did you lose your money in last night's poker game?

- Because I'm not very good at "bluffing" when I don't have a good hand.

The final 'Why' leads to a root cause that allows you to take appropriate action. You could take a gamble on the 4th 'Why' by calling the gambling hotline, or go one level deeper and take lessons from an expert on bluffing. Whatever floats your boat.

Once again, kids can show us

Perhaps children with their insistent whys and are-we-there-yets have a lesson to teach us. If you asked a class of kindergarten children if they could draw, everyone would put up the hand. They just framed the problem a little differently. Such a pity we lose that natural skill as we grow up. But, like a bicycle, it's easy to get the skill back - just ask why.

References:

1. D Senor, S Singer: Start-Up Nation. Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, Hatchet Book Group, New York. 2011.
2. Tina Seelig: [How reframing a problem unlocks innovation](#)
3. KnowWare International, Inc: www.qimacros.com
4. iSix Sigma Dictionary: www.isixsigma.com.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.

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