

Solving Problems The Right Way

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 5 min read · May 2026

We're all guilty of it. Something goes wrong, we jump to fix it, and two weeks later the same problem is back. The real issue was never the symptom we were treating — it was the cause we never took the time to find.

Here's a small story that made that very clear to me.

The Curious Case of the Mysterious Water Pool

We'd just moved into a new house. Excitement all around. But almost immediately, a small annoyance appeared in the kitchen — water kept pooling on the worktop in one particular corner. Not a flood, but enough to be a persistent nuisance.

Naturally, we got to work fixing it.

- **First attempt:** Move the drainage rack closer to the sink
- **Second attempt:** Change the orientation of the mat underneath it
- **Third attempt:** Buy a new holder for the cleaning sponges

None of it worked. The water kept coming back.

It wasn't until the rest of the household went away and I finally had time to sit with a drink and actually *observe* — rather than *react* — that the answer appeared. The water wasn't coming from any of the things we'd been adjusting. It was coming from wet hands reaching across to grab the washing-up liquid and handwash dispenser.

The fix? I moved the sponge holder to a different spot and repurposed it to hold the washing-up liquid and handwash bottles instead — keeping them within reach but away from the wet zone. Problem solved. No more water. No more frustration.

How Often Do We Firefight Problems?

That kitchen corner is a near-perfect metaphor for what happens in teams and organisations every day. We hear it constantly: *"We're always firefighting."*

The phrase captures something real — a reactive cycle where time and energy go into managing symptoms rather than addressing causes. Ever experienced any of these?

- Dealing with the same recurring complaint from a client, month after month
- A team that keeps missing deadlines despite process changes
- Staff turnover that continues despite improved benefits packages

In each case, the visible problem gets treated. But if the root cause — the wet hands reaching for the bottles — is never identified, nothing actually changes. Worse, the cost accumulates: time, energy, and resource poured repeatedly into the same symptom, when a single well-aimed fix would have closed the loop for good.

Why Root-Cause Analysis Matters

Identifying the *why* behind what's going wrong is almost always more effective, and more efficient, than throwing short-term solutions at its symptoms. Yet it requires something that feels counterintuitive in moments of pressure: slowing down.

Three steps that work in practice:

- 1. Pause and Assess**
Rather than rushing to a fix, spend time observing and understanding what's actually happening. What are the patterns? What's changing the dynamic? The answers are often hiding in plain sight — but only visible if you stop long enough to look.
- 2. Test and Validate Observations**
Once you've identified a likely cause, test it. Be curious. Make small adjustments and see whether they affect the root, not just the surface.
- 3. Implement a Targeted Solution**
Once the cause is clear, the solution is usually much simpler than expected. It doesn't need to be complicated or expensive — it needs to directly address what's actually driving the problem.

Lessons for Teams and Organisations

Just as the kitchen water issue came from a misplacement of items, organisational challenges often arise from misalignments in process, habit, or culture — things that are invisible until you look for them.

- Instead of blaming low performance on motivation, ask whether people have the clarity and tools they actually need
- Rather than constantly replacing staff, examine whether workload, communication, or culture might be driving them out
- Before investing in new systems, check whether existing ones are unclear, outdated, or simply not being used as intended

The instinct is always to act. The discipline is to observe first.

A Final Thought

Problems come with urgency. That urgency pushes us to move fast. But moving fast on the wrong fix wastes far more time than taking a moment to understand what's really going on.

Whether it's a puddle on a kitchen counter or a team stuck in a reactive cycle — chasing symptoms will only get you so far. Find the root cause, and you change the pattern for good.

What's the water pooling in the corner of your organisation that no one's stopped to look at properly?

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