

This is an edited transcript of the December 10, 2014 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled [Mike Lehr on Strategic Problem Solving for Small Business Owners and Solos](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

Today I'm pleased to welcome [Mike Lehr](#) back to the podcast. For over 20 years now Mike has been a trainer, writer, HR advisor, and consultant helping people to become better influencers and problem solvers.

Mike is the president and founder of [Omega Z Advisors, LLC](#). His firm specializes in the practical application of intuition in the areas of influence and problem solving.

Unlike many consultants, Mike's ideas and methods have been thoroughly tested in the chaos of the real business world – and that's why his approach to problem solving is so straightforward, practical, and highly effective.

So, are you ready to learn how to solve the problems that stand in the way of making your business better in 2015? If you are, then you're going to find Mike's advice extremely valuable.

Welcome to the podcast, Mike.

Mike Lehr: Hey, thanks, Steve. I enjoy being here again.

Stephen Lahey: It's great to have you back. Before we talk about effective problem solving today, not just for our business but also for our clients, can you give us a little bit of an intro to your background and what triggered you to make the leap to self-employment?

Mike Lehr: Well, first of all, Steve, I came from a sales and sales management background. In 1990 I was hired as a salesperson for a large Midwestern bank. A few years later the sales wave hit the bank

and every frontline employee now had sales as part of their job description. This also meant that managers had to manage the sales process and they weren't used to that. So I became the sales manager and helped the employees become better at sales and the managers to get better at managing the sales process. They didn't have these skills so that was sort of a training/coaching role for me.

I also became involved in implementing customer relationship management software, or CRM. CRMs were a newer idea at that time.

I was successful and they ended up promoting me to the corporate office to do more for the entire region in that particular department. It was during that time that more and more people said Mike, you could do this on your own. I said yeah, maybe. But this at least put the seed in my head. I thought, well, I had been through three executive management changes in ten years and the fourth was coming down the pipe, and every time new management comes in, they tend to set the talent a little bit differently, so I decided to push the envelope to see where I stood. I ended up writing a document for an executive based on some leadership principles that we had talked about. In short, it didn't go over well, but I knew where I stood, what the culture of the firm was going to be, and I left.

I left in 2003. In some ways, my experience mirrors the movie Jerry Maguire. Of course, I wish I could say the movie was about me, but the movie actually came before my experience. That was almost 13 years ago, so here I am.

I work in the change management space, which, depending upon your perspective, falls in either management consulting or HR consulting space. So for instance, my focus tends to be the cultures and the relationships. My deliverables tend to be documentation training, advice, and program management of external and internal teams. For instance, an accounting firm will say, Mike, we do reorg and process improvement, how is what you do different? And I answer them that I focus more on the culture and the relationships involved in those situations, and those are usually the reasons why those things don't work and why reorgs—I think Harvard Business Review had done research and said about 85% of them don't work as planned or even make the situation worse. So that's kind of where I am right now, Steve.

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Stephen Lahey: I've seen so many different organizations go through reorgs, and take different flavor of the month approaches to how they can become more productive, and the reality is that the real solutions are not what sounds good, not what looks good on paper. They are what can actually work for real people. Change is tough on people, and that is the thorniest, most difficult, most challenging thing you can deal with. So as a management consultant dealing with that sort of thing, wow, that is challenging work. You're dealing with a variety of different clients, but it almost doesn't matter because the challenges are human challenges.

Mike Lehr: Exactly.

Stephen Lahey: Of course, certain size organizations have certain things in common when they try to drive change like this. But basically the human issues are similar no matter how big or small a company is. Very interesting.

Now, speaking of solving problems, I know we're going to talk about problem solving on the podcast, and you recently blogged about problem solving in a really interesting way that caught my attention. First, you wrote about the importance of defining and solving "the right problems". And before people say, well, I know what the right problems are. Well, in actuality you may not. So to kick things off, Mike, can you share your thoughts about what you really mean by defining and solving the right problems?

Mike Lehr: Well, Steve, it's deceptively simple, and you hinted at it, and everybody says, oh, yeah, I'm defining the right problem. When I talk about defining the problem at hand, I recommend writing it down. Now this may seem kind of rudimentary, but it really helps. I became a fan of this method over 15 years ago when it helped me. This helps with communication if several are working on the same problem because a lot of times you have these meetings, everybody thinks they understand the problem, but it helps to have it written down for clarity – to have everyone in agreement on exactly what problem needs to be solved.

But it also helps with inspiration. Seeing the problem before us in words stimulates more in us by working with more of our senses. It's amazing what happens when you can actually focus in on some of the words that you've used to define the problem. As I mentioned, it's helped me solve a pretty good training problem.

Now, we can expand the definition of problem to scope out the problem in very much the same way we scope out the projects. So, it's not simply defining the problem, but also some of its various aspects, what's influencing it, and then going from there. So, in many ways, it can be the same process that we use to scope out projects.

Even though this sounds simple, it's very tough to ensure we're defining the right problem correctly. The main reason is that we tend to frame problems in ways that make them easy to solve rather than in ways that they actually exist in the real world. In other words, we're predisposed to solving a problem in certain ways before we even define it. We'll try to solve a problem in a way that fits the solution that we believe will work. So that's the main problem is just overcoming some of those biases.

Stephen Lahey:

Tell me a little bit about the problem that you were focused on relating to the sales training project that got handed to you. My audience and I, we're solos, and we may encounter the same thing if we're dealing with a client or even our own business. So, what situation did you encounter, and then how did this work for you when you were figuring out how to approach this big sales training project at the bank that you mentioned at the start of the interview?

Mike Lehr:

There was a national sales manager. He had met with some of the top sales people and they were getting to merge a couple divisions and there was a whole slew of new products coming in that the sales people would then be responsible for selling. And the sales people had issues, and their common complaint was that they needed to understand the product and how to close more sales with these products.

So I wrote down the problem based upon his question, and I noticed that they were more interested in the products and the closing techniques. I had the sales manager sign off on the task that he wanted me to solve. It was to come up with training that would solve these questions of theirs, but it suddenly dawned on me what was missing. What was missing was that it's not the products that are going to determine how successful we are, it's not the closing techniques that are going to be determining how successful we are, it's going to be the questions that we ask. And our questions are going to help us sell more effectively. And so the whole course of the week for this training that came up was, okay,

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what *questions* do we ask that will not only help us gain information, but will also better position us as expert providers of these products and services? So that was the basis of it.

And it turned out extremely well and it all boiled down to not looking at what the problem was as defined by the sale manager and myself – but asking what's missing? What's missing from this? And that's what drove a successful solution.

Stephen Lahey: Interesting. And there are, I think, two things, questions that not only position properly in the mind of a potential client/customer, but also ones that polarize just a bit so that unqualified prospects kind of raise their hand and say, hey, I'm not the right person, I'm not the right prospect. Right?

Mike Lehr: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: And that's so important. So let's think about it from the perspective of a solo entrepreneur. What are some of the common barriers that we might face – barriers to effective problem solving in our own business? And what are the ways that we might, without even knowing it, hamper or even derail the process of actually solving problems?

Mike Lehr: Well, Steve, and not only examples, but I can actually show you, especially if you're in business for yourself or running an enterprise less than 30 or 40 people. So when you or the listeners are waking up tomorrow, go to the mirror first thing, before you do anything else, and what you see in the mirror will be the number one barrier to effective problem solving.

Now, that figure you see in the mirror comes with a whole host of biases, experience, education, stories, events, skills, personality, thought processes, et cetera. That is the major barrier to problem solving. And that's why I often say that the number one problem to problem solving is often the leader in a particular organization because, again, the leader is going to be framing the problem in a way that fits their skills. Very few people are going to fit problems into a way that will lead people to believe that they should no longer be the leader, for instance.

Now, after you do that, go shave, shower, style your hair, get ready to tackle the day; but before you leave, take one last look in the

mirror. And what you see in the mirror is also the solution to the problem you saw when you first woke up. So in us are the solutions if we're aware of these things.

And beyond that, these are some of the common psychological biases we tend to fall into. [My blog](#) has many more in the series *Why Problems Happen*. For instance, as I mentioned, we tend to define problems in ways that fit our skill, experience, and background and that kind of fits in with the proverbial if you're a hammer everything is a nail type of thing. If you're a hammer, you're not going to define a problem in which you may need a screwdriver instead.

We also tend to define situations as being far worse or far better than they are. When we're on a high, things are generally seen as better than they really are. If things are really bad, we tend to view them as far worse than they really are. So these kinds of things influence our problem solving – and they will tend to lead us to one extreme or the other.

We also tend to believe in the silver bullet. That solving one key aspect of the problem will solve the whole thing. So, it's the whole theory of the scapegoat. It's not only “the scapegoat” with people, but also with certain things. But in reality, though, when you study problems and disasters, *many* things tend to cause a problem and they all tend to coalesce at once.

So problems will tend to have many moving parts and in reality we tend to define problems that will solve maybe one small part of the total problem. So, typically with people it's, oh, we need to fire this person because of something that happened. Well, maybe the violation of the policy or the breaking of the rules was promoted by the company's culture and just firing this one person isn't necessarily going to solve the overall cultural problem.

But in short, we tend to define problems in ways that make them easy to solve. We tend to fall prey to the KISS principle, keep it short and simple, and we need to realize that just because we explain a problem simply doesn't mean we've explained it correctly.

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So those are some of the common biases and so on. But essentially when we look in the mirror, we're the problem, but we're also the solution and we can overcome these things if we're aware of them.

Stephen Lahey: It's very interesting, too, how an outside perspective can really give us a fresh look at problems and solutions, and I value that so much myself. Especially, as a solo, and I've been a solo for a long time, almost 15 years now, what I find is that sometimes when I've worked on a problem, I've worked to define it, at least in my terms, and then I offer up that same problem to someone with a different perspective, a different set of skills. . .

Mike Lehr: Exactly.

Stephen Lahey: I find it can be tremendously valuable. And consulting with more people is helpful if you want to add to the dimensions of what you can see, kind of take your blinders off so that you can see more, not less.

And one of the things that I also find when you talk about challenges, and difficulties and problem solving, is that our ideas about the “problem to be solved” are relative to our strengths and weaknesses. So, if I'm really good at math, you know, if I'm Einstein, then a solving really tough math problem is actually something I find quite satisfying. It may be work, but it's satisfying work to me and I'm driven to do it. I'm sure Einstein was passionate about mathematics and complex problems.

Mike Lehr: He was.

Stephen Lahey: Alternatively, in terms of a weakness, it might be thinking, well, this technology problem is too complex and I'm not even going to touch it because I feel intimidated by technology.

Of course, I could always talk with people who have an educated perspective on my problem from a technology standpoint. But to do that I think we need to get beyond that fear of feeling like we don't know something when we think we should. As solos we sort of pride ourselves, I think, on our independence, but I think that in itself can be a problem. That pride—

Mike Lehr: Yes. Exactly.

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Stephen Lahey: —to knock our ego down a notch doesn't feel all that great sometimes, but I think it's just a smart thing to do in a case like this. So that's how I'm framing it for myself – that it's the “smart thing to do” to look outside and to try to get a fuller sense of things. So I mean, I think there's some personal development involved in this. Isn't there?

Mike Lehr: Yes. There definitely is. And there's two key things that I would emphasize in what you just said. That is the perspective. A different perspective. One of the biases that exists is that we tend to associate with people that are like us, that agree with us. The challenge is that a lot of times that we may just be getting an echo feedback rather than real feedback. We're getting people who look at things the same way we do. And that's why sometimes it's a challenge, Steve. Because you may hear things from people and you may not like the person, you may not perhaps like the idea, you may not perhaps, but it can get you thinking. It doesn't necessarily mean you have to buy into that idea, but if you use that as a basis for rethinking or looking at your situation a little bit differently, it helps a lot. And that's the challenge. So that's one of the biases.

Now you mentioned about mathematics and loving that kind of work. That is another bias, too, that we will tend to favor solutions that are going to work into our skill sets or at our comfort level. For instance, I have a trick that I do and I say to people, hey, next time there's a problem, find out what the solutions are, don't listen to the problem, but assess the person's personality, and a lot of times the personality is going to match up with—you can predict what the solution is going to be without even knowing what the problem is.

I used this example with, I was presenting to an engineer and there were two solutions. One was a software solution, one was a training solutions, and I asked him, I won't tell you what the problem was, which one do you think the engineer picked?

Stephen Lahey: The software solution.

Mike Lehr: Exactly. And the software solution was even more expensive than the training solution for these operators on a machine. But that was the solution he chose. You have to prevent those biases. So those

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would be the two things I would emphasize based upon what you just said.

Stephen Lahey: So let's think about it from this perspective, Mike, and at the time that we're recording this it's November of 2014, so I'm thinking about my plan for the New Year and I'm saying to myself – what is my problem to be solved? All right, well, here's “the problem” – I don't have enough referrals. Let's say that's how I'm defining it, in 2014. If I only had enough referrals, then everything would be great.

So let's say I start there. Would you have any advice for me so that I don't end up going down the wrong path and thinking that the be all and end all to improve my business is based on getting more referrals? I mean, it might be.

Mike Lehr: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: But it seems like a pretty simplistic, silver bullet type of idea—

Mike Lehr: Well, that would be the first thing. Try to get good feedback on whether or not that's the real problem.

Now you may be part of networking groups or what have you where you can get diverse feedback. Again, the key is making sure the group is diverse enough, not so much from a demographic perspective, although that helps, but mainly from a personality and problem solving process perspective. You need different perspectives. Have them take a look and help ensure that you're dealing with the right problem.

Now, the issue you mentioned, not generating enough referrals, and I know you have experience with this, well, that can open up a host of many different solutions so it's a matter of trying to take a fresh look at what's going on.

But thirdly, I still go back, even though it's humorous, I still go back to trying to show what the common barrier is. That is you've got to look in the mirror, and you've got to say, okay, what is it that I like to do, and what is it that I don't like to do? If I'm not a good prospector or networker, what do I need to do to compensate for that? Do I need to hire someone? Do I need to contract

somebody? You need to really look at your own skill set from that standpoint.

So that's the first thing is trying to make sure you're getting a realistic assessment of the situation, talking to different people, even having an outside advisor that you pay and you have them take a look at the situation, and then come up with, okay, not enough referrals, how do you define that as a specific problem that will allow you to come up with a proactive solution to it?

Stephen Lahey:

And, Mike, one of the things that just hit me really hard right now, which I think is so important and yet I literally have 15 years of being in business for myself, but I haven't thought to ask this of anyone, which is hey, Mike, you know me, *how am I contributing* to my lack of referrals, or whatever the problem is. How do you think I might be contributing to that problem? You want them to be honest. And if you ask enough people that question, I think you're going to start to get some answers.

One of the answers might be, for example, well, what you do is kind of hard to define, Steve. I'm just not sure that everybody knows how to talk about what you do or who the customers are that are right for you because you never self-promote. I don't know specifically who to refer to you or even exactly what you do.

How am I getting in the way of the results or solution I want? That's a crucial question. Do you agree with me that that's a really fundamental question?

Mike Lehr:

Yes. It is. And also as your business grows, too, you have to realize that you can't do everything, so there are going to be core things that you are really good at that you want to focus on, that your passion is focused on and those are the things you'll do.

The other thing is, speaking specifically to the issue you brought up about referrals and networking, is also to realize that you can ask a lot of different people about networking, but you must realize there are a lot of different ways to network and you have to decide if that is where you want to go and what you want to improve as there are different ways to do it. For instance, I find extroverts and introverts will—and I wrote something on this—network differently. Extroverts will want to go in and they're going to want to measure how many people did they talk to, and they're going to

be really outgoing, talking to all these different people. Whereas, introverts are likely to have deeper, more in-depth conversations with the people that they network with. Now both ways can work. The thing is making sure you identify how you like to network, how you like to get referrals, and make sure it works naturally for you. That is one of the key things. So, you need to do a proper assessment of your talents and skills and inquire from other people, too, and go from there.

Stephen Lahey: I love what you just said there, too, because my biggest complaint as I look at the world of “hey, we’re the experts and we can make your business better” is that so many of their “solutions” are imposed on you and your business without knowing much about your situation. We could do hours of conversation on what that cookie cutter approach assumes and why that has a likelihood to be wrong. They may sell a lot of those boilerplate-type training programs, but that doesn’t mean they are a fit for you.

So, like you said, I think it's so important for us to look in the mirror and know ourselves well. I really feel like that's one of the central themes of this interview. You have to know yourself and you have to know your biases and if you can do that, that's going to be immensely helpful.

Mike Lehr: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: There's no doubt about that. As an example, you and I are very different, Mike. You're what I would call a polymath, right? Something like that. You're great at math.

Mike Lehr: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: I'm not. So you may approach a problem a bit more from a quantitative perspective. You may—

Mike Lehr: Right.

Stephen Lahey: —break out the spreadsheet. So, you have to know where you tend to gravitate when solving a problem and the limitations of that.

Mike Lehr: Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying. It's like that Clint Eastwood movie, he says every person, well, he says every man, so I apologize for that, but every man's got to know his limitations.

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- Stephen Lahey: Yes, it's actually true.
- Mike Lehr: Yes.
- Stephen Lahey: And I think a lot of times, again, we don't want to look unfavorably on ourselves. But it's not about being favorable or unfavorable, it's just really being accurate and trying to see things as they are.
- Well, I know that we've spoken for quite a while now – so we have to wrap up. This has been a fascinating conversation and I am going to bet that a lot of listeners would like to connect with you online, check out your interesting blog, subscribe to your updates, and so on. How can they do that, Mike?
- Mike Lehr: The best thing to do is just go to the blog using MikeLehrBlog.com, using that URL. It will take you there. I'm also very active on Twitter, which I believe that's where you and I met, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Google +, so you can find me there usually just searching "Mike Lehr" there are not too many so it should be fairly easy to find me. We can connect that way. And if there are specific questions that you have about business or problem solving, then I could either provide links to the blog or give you short advice on that. Just request my email address and I can go ahead and do that, too.
- Stephen Lahey: That's a very generous offer. And I would say to everybody, do check out MikeLehrBlog.com because it's a rich repository of information. Thanks a lot for a fascinating interview, Mike.
- Mike Lehr: Well, thank you again, Steve. I enjoyed it and look forward to communicating with you and your listeners again.
- Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, I encourage you to visit SmallBusinessTalent.com now and subscribe to the podcast by email. When you do, you'll be alerted whenever I post fresh podcast content, of course, but you'll also receive special resources for email subscribers only, including my LinkedIn guide to social selling, and much more. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.
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