

Problem Framing

Strategic Thinking | Six Levels (L4-L5) -- Cognitive Altitude (Architect to Strategist) -- PAD

SPG RESEARCH GROUP

DEFINITION

The ability to identify what is actually being asked -- not just what appears on the surface -- and to structure the right question before investing in analysis or solutions. Problem framing precedes and shapes every subsequent decision about what to do, who to involve, and what success looks like.

WHY THIS MATTERS AT DIRECTOR LEVEL AND ABOVE

At the director level, the cost of solving the wrong problem is systemic. Unlike tactical roles where a misframed problem can be corrected mid-stream, senior leaders commit organizational resources, political capital, and time to a problem definition before they begin. A director who accepts problems as stated -- rather than stress-testing the framing -- builds solutions on foundations that cannot hold. This is the single competency most predictive of impact at director level and above.

KEY BEHAVIOURS OBSERVED

- Pauses before scoping a project to ask what would need to be true for this to be the right problem to solve.
- Surfaces hidden assumptions embedded in the problem statement and makes them explicit before work begins.
- Reframes problems in terms of decisions that need to be made, not facts that need to be gathered.
- Distinguishes between the presenting issue and the root structure creating it.
- Builds evaluation criteria for a good answer before beginning analysis.
- Checks whether recommended solutions would survive if the problem framing changed.

PROFICIENCY SCALE (LEVEL 1 TO 5)

LEVEL	PROFICIENCY DESCRIPTION
Level 1 Foundation	Accepts problem statements as given. Focuses on solving what is asked. Does not test framing before beginning work. Produces high-quality answers to potentially wrong questions.
Level 2 Developing	Begins to ask clarifying questions about scope and expected outputs. Occasionally notices when a problem feels ill-defined but lacks a systematic approach to reframing. Reactive rather than proactive.
Level 3 Proficient	Routinely distinguishes between the presenting issue and the underlying problem. Can propose an alternative framing and articulate why it matters. Does this reactively -- when something feels off, not as standard operating mode.
Level 4 Advanced	Proactively tests problem definitions before accepting them. Builds a structuring habit: what is the real decision, what would need to be true, what evaluation criteria apply. Does this as standard practice, not only in difficult cases.
Level 5 Transformational	Designs systems, governance structures, and decision architectures that institutionalize good problem framing across an organization or practice. Others learn to frame problems better by operating within structures this person has built. The capability no longer depends on their presence.

TOP PERFORMANCE PROFILE

At Level 4, a director begins every significant engagement by writing one sentence: "We are solving for X, not Y." That sentence is tested against multiple stakeholders. They can articulate what they would need to see to conclude the framing is wrong. They build evaluation criteria before committing analysis direction. Their teams develop stronger framing discipline because they are regularly asked "is this the right problem?" before beginning work. At Level 5, the framing discipline is embedded in the structure of the organization itself -- meeting protocols, proposal templates, and decision gates that require problem framing before resources are committed.

MISMATCH / TOO LOW FOR THE ROLE

A director operating at Level 1-2 on this competency is identifiable by their outputs: detailed, technically correct analysis of the wrong problem. They deliver well -- on time, well organized -- and the work does not change anything. They mistake thoroughness for strategic value. They are in the weeds of a misframed problem, often defending the framing if challenged because they have already invested significant effort in it. The volume of output can actually obscure the relevance gap for years.

UNDER PRESSURE SIGNATURE

Under pressure, a director with underdeveloped problem framing reverts to action. When timelines compress or stakes rise, they accept the fastest available problem definition and begin executing. Questioning the framing feels like slowing down. This is when the mismatch is most visible: the work accelerates, the precision increases, and the relevance drops. High-stakes moments reveal the gap most clearly because the cost of being wrong is highest and the appetite to question the framing is lowest.

GREEN FLAGS -- HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION	RED FLAGS -- HEADING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION
Regularly asks "what decision does this work need to support?" before beginning analysis	High volume of high-quality work that does not connect to decisions or outcomes
Spontaneously offers an alternative framing and explains the implications of each option	Defensiveness when the problem framing is challenged after work has begun
Visible discomfort when asked to begin work before the problem is clearly defined	Equates being busy and thorough with being strategic
Frames recommendations in terms of what they rule out, not just what they recommend	Asks primarily "how" questions, rarely "whether" or "why this problem" questions
	Jumps to solutions before defining what a good solution would need to accomplish

GUARDRAILS

The overuse risk at Level 4-5 is paralysis -- subjecting every problem to a reframing exercise when speed and action are what is needed. The discipline is knowing when to test the framing and when to accept it and move. High-altitude framing applied indiscriminately can become a form of avoidance. Guardrail: set a time boundary for the framing question. "We will spend 30 minutes testing whether this is the right problem, then commit and execute." The director who questions everything equally is as misaligned as the one who questions nothing.

COACHING NOTES

- Most effective entry point is retrospective. After each significant engagement, ask: "Was that the right problem?" Not philosophically -- diagnostically. What assumptions were embedded in the problem statement? Were they load-bearing? What would have changed if the framing had been different?
- Use the reframe test: ask the learner to write the same problem at three levels of abstraction (operational, systemic, structural) and identify which level the current work is addressing. The gap between where the work is and where the decision lives is the framing gap.
- Common coaching mistake: teaching frameworks for problem structuring before the learner sees the cost of a misframed problem. The better entry point is surfacing a specific case where the wrong problem was solved and analyzing what the framing cost the organization.
- Watch for the learner who can articulate the concept perfectly but cannot apply it to their own live work. The transition from "I understand problem framing" to "I practice problem framing" requires deliberate application to real cases, not conceptual mastery.