

## Hollywood's take on problem solving

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If only there was an Oscar for best problem solving, Moneyball probably would have won.

Have you seen it?

Well, I finally got around to watching it last week – for some reason I had been hesitating because I can't remember the last Brad Pitt movie I liked, and well, I am more of a basketball fan than baseball – but surprisingly, I quite liked it.

I also found it quite relevant to the field of product management and innovation.

Here was this baseball team (Oakland A's) who were pretty much down and out – a dying product if you will – and yet, when Brad Pitt's character (GM Billy Beane), took the time to think about what the real problem was they needed to solve, and then insist that it be approached from a different angle than any existing one – well, the result was a ground breaking, disruptive innovation within the world of baseball.

This product management correlation first struck me (but not out!), when as a group, the recruiters and GM were sitting around the table trying to figure out how the financially drained Oakland A's could compete with rich team like the Yankees – who could pretty much afford any player they wanted. The Oakland A's had lost their best players in the off-season, and were all sitting around trying to figure out how to replace them, in order to stay competitive.

A few people started rhyming star players off a list, with similar skills to the ones they had lost, when the GM, Billy Beane, firmly stated:

“Guys, stop. You’re talking like this is business as usual. It’s not.”

To which someone at the table replied:

“We’re trying to solve the problem.”

And Billy quickly shot back:

“Not like this. You’re not even looking at the problem.”

The discussion continued further, with the group telling Billy that not only did they know the problem, but they had faced it numerous times previously and insisted that they knew what they were doing.

But Billy had different ideas, and after asking them to define the problem, could only get the reply:

“The problem is that we’ve lost three key players that we now have to replace.”

The look on Billy’s face said it all, and he insisted that was not actually the problem they need to solve, and them to try again. And again, and again – until exasperated, he finally said:

“Okay, stop. The problem we’re trying to solve is that this is an unfair game. There are rich teams, poor teams, 50 feet of crap, and then there’s us! And now we’ve been gutted .....Is there really another first baseman like Giambi?”

After realizing they cannot simply replace what they had lost, especially within their financial constraints, they all sat in silence staring at one another, hesitation etched into their faces.

“I’m asking you guys to look at this game differently than you’ve ever looked at it before.” Billy told them.

Almost everyone in that room thought that it was a straight-forward problem that needed solving - Billy knew that the real problem was not finding a way to replace what they had lost – it was about finding how to win against bigger, richer teams, while staying within the financial constraints the Oakland A’s had. And he also knew that to do so, they would have to abandon the typical ways of solving a problem and think outside of the (batters) box, to find a solution.

The rest of the movie is all about how he went about doing that – and how thinking outside that batter’s box led to a ground breaking innovation in how to build a baseball team – and eventually led the Oakland A’s to setting a new precedent for how all baseball teams would build a team in the future.

And the details of his approach, really falls in line with how you go about solving what we call level 3 or 4 problems, or in other words, just really big problems, that we can’t typically solve using known methods inside our own specialty – but by brainstorming and bringing in resources from outside of our specialty.

In the case of the Oakland Athletics, Billy Beane chose to stop thinking in terms of baseball, and started thinking in terms of economics and statistics – in the movie, he does this by bringing in Peter – a recent Yale economics graduate, with almost zero experience in building a baseball team.

From that point forward, Billy and Peter built the Oakland Athletics team, or their product, by solving the problem not by signing the superstar baseball players who were outside of their financial constraints, but by looking at the players who cost less – but were able to get on base, and strike people out. By solving the problem in a way that was different to the typical solution of recruiting good-looking, popular superstars, and instead recruiting the less-costly, even lesser-thought-of , yet statistically sound players who they knew could get on base and score runs, the Oakland A’s started to innovate a new way of building a winning baseball team.

As someone in product management, I thought this was pretty neat. To go from a team that was down and out, to one which worked within its constraints to first identify what the real problem was, and then go outside of their own specialty to try and solve the problem in a new way never seen in baseball – and to be successful at it, was a real accomplishment. It took a lot of trust in the solution approach, and a trust that sometimes taking risks can really pay off - because of course the approach did not come without resistance from many of those who surrounded GM Billy Beane - but he stuck with it, even fought for it, and in the end was recognized as a true innovator in building a successful baseball team.

I think it just goes to show how important taking the time to identify the right problem , and to think of the right level of solution for the size of that problem , really is. It can be the difference between no success or large success, between no innovation, or ground-breaking innovation.

And as the Bill James quote which opens the movie says:

*“There will always be people who are ahead of the curve, and people who are behind the curve. But knowledge moves the curve”.*

Where does your product lie?

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