

Cotton, David – The Smart Solution Book

FT Publishing, 2016, [Business] Grade ★★★★★

Some books will hardly blow your mind but they can still broaden your professional toolbox and as such be very handy and practical. Independent on which line of business you are in you will have to solve problems and this book presents a number of tools for doing this. David Cotton is a former employee of Arthur Andersen and PwC turned freelance corporate trainer and author. The focus of many of the solutions Cotton discusses is to use the so-called wisdom of the crowd – or at least a small group – to generate the desired results or insights.

The book has a center part where each of the 68 problem solving techniques gets a short chapter. The tools are further divided into those that are more suitable for individuals and small groups, for larger groups and for groups engaged in business games. In reality though, many of the methods can be scaled up or down to work for groups of varying sizes so the division is hardly set in stone. Two introductory chapters and one closing chapter frame all these methodologies. In the introduction Cotton discusses which tools to use plus some problem solving essentials. The text on essentials I found to be perhaps the most rewarding part of the book as it looks to more overarching and general themes in problem solving such as the stages the process often contains and the problems that frequently occur. Then the closing chapter very briefly discusses how to share and implement the solutions that have been generated.

For each method Cotton starts the section with a description of the tool, when to use it and what is needed in terms of material. Then he presents a chronological checklist on how to practice it and finally brings forward the potential pitfalls in its usage. The recurring headlines make it very easy to get a grip of each

tool but it also makes reading the book from start to finish a bit choppy. Each of the 68 tools is presented over 1 to 4 pages. Some are more elaborate but some are quite simple.

The author places a heavy emphasis on activities meant to foster free associations and to get everybody in a group to contribute their creativity – improved varieties of collective brainstorming. Often the methods are meant to get to the core of a problem or to bring forward details around it through harvesting the opinions of many and without letting dominating persons in the group biasing the solution generation process.

When there are so many tools to choose from it is easy to find a number of personal favorites. I appreciated some like Cartesian Logic (#7), GROW (#13), Osborn-Parnes' Critical Problem Solving Process (#15), Deming's PDSA Cycle (#21) and Challenging Assumptions (#29) that helps you structure the problem solving process; Reverse Brainstorming (#5), Appreciative Inquiry (#16), Who Else Has Solved This Problem (#31) and Retirement Speeches (#58) that allow you to change perspectives; and finally The Ripple Effect (#39), The Solution Effect Analysis (#43) and Action Learning (#49) which allow you to analyze the potential consequences of a proposed solution before it is implemented.

Still, the tools portrayed in *The Smart Solution Book* are in my view mainly targeting the internal or external person who is to lead exercises at corporate events. For me this is a bit too narrow to generate a top rating. For someone that is about to host such a session it could instead prove very useful. Indeed, simply finding one tool that solves the Gordian knot and delivers the business result required would obviously make the book a bargain.

Mats Larsson, August 06, 2017