

We Kept Fixing The Wrong Thing

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A story about a puddle, and what it taught me about every problem I've ever tried to solve.

For weeks, water pooled in the same corner of our kitchen counter.

Not a flood. Just an annoying little puddle that kept reappearing. We tried everything. Moved the drainage rack closer to the sink. Changed the orientation of the drying mat. Bought a new holder for the cleaning sponges to declutter the corner. None of it worked. The puddle came back every time.

It wasn't until the rest of the family went on holiday — leaving me alone with the dogs and no one to talk to — that I finally stopped reacting and started looking.

I poured a glass of water and watched.

There it was. Not the rack. Not the mat. Every time someone reached over to grab the washing-up liquid or the hand soap, their wet hands dripped in exactly that spot. The source had been in front of us the whole time. I moved the bottles. Puddle gone.

We'd spent weeks fixing the wrong thing.

How Often Do We Firefight?

That kitchen corner is a near-perfect metaphor for what happens in teams and organisations every day. You hear the phrase constantly: "We're always firefighting." People say it with exhaustion, as though it's simply the nature of things.

But firefighting is a choice. It's what happens when the incentive is to make the problem disappear rather than understand it.

I see it in the organisations and schools I work with — in the outdoor education sector and well beyond it.

A team that keeps having communication problems gets a workshop on communication. Doesn't fix it — because the real issue is that two people have had an unresolved conflict for three months and nobody wants to name it. A school programme produces students who score well on reflection exercises but can't apply any of it to real situations. So the programme gets a new debrief model. Doesn't fix it — because the real problem is that the whole programme was designed around what looks good, not what actually develops anything. A client complaint recurs month after month. Staff turnover continues despite improved benefits packages. Deadlines keep being missed despite process changes.

The fix gets applied. The puddle comes back.

The irony is that firefighting feels productive. You're visibly doing something. Moving things. Taking action. It's only later — when the same problem resurfaces — that the cost becomes clear: time, energy, and resource poured repeatedly into the same symptom, when a single well-aimed fix would have closed the loop for good.

Three Steps That Work in Practice

After my kitchen revelation, I started applying a different approach. It's embarrassingly simple — but it requires something that feels counterintuitive under pressure: slowing down.

- 1. Pause and Assess.** Before you touch anything, observe. What are the patterns? When does the problem occur? What changes in the moment before? The answers are often hiding in plain sight — but only visible if you stop long enough to look. In most organisations, nobody has actually stood and watched the puddle. They've just kept moving the rack.
- 2. Test and Validate.** The moment I thought *wet hands*, I poured water deliberately to confirm it. Don't just diagnose — verify. Make small adjustments and observe whether they affect the root, not just the surface. Assumptions feel like insights until you test them.
- 3. Implement a Targeted Solution.** Once the cause is clear, the solution is usually much simpler than expected. Moving two bottles. It doesn't need to be expensive or complicated — it needs to directly address what's actually driving the problem. Precision beats effort almost every time.

What This Looks Like in Practice

The pattern is consistent across contexts:

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.

I've spent 25 years in outdoor education partly because I believed — and still believe — that real learning happens when the problem in front of you is genuine. Where the consequences are real and the water isn't metaphorical.

But I've come to realise that even in outdoor settings — maybe especially there — we can spend a lot of time firefighting. Adjusting activities, swapping facilitators, tweaking timings. When the real issue is something simpler and more uncomfortable: the programme was never designed to solve the right problem in the first place.

Practical Takeaways

- 1. Name the pattern, not just the incident.** A recurring problem is telling you something. One occurrence is an event; three occurrences is a system.
- 2. Slow down before you act.** The urgency of a problem pressures you to move. That urgency is usually what causes the wrong fix to be applied.
- 3. Separate symptom from cause.** Ask *why* at least twice before reaching for a solution. The first answer is almost always a symptom.
- 4. Test your diagnosis.** A hypothesis isn't a fix. Make a small, deliberate change and observe what actually happens.
- 5. Expect the solution to be simpler than the problem felt.** Root causes are usually mundane. The complexity was in the misdiagnosis.

What's the puddle in your corner? The problem you've been managing for months, maybe years. The one you've tried three or four solutions on, none of which quite fixed it. Sometimes the answer becomes obvious the moment you're willing to stop and look.

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