

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/are-you-building-a-bridge-or-an-island>

Adam Pisoni, founder and CEO of Abl Schools, describes his view on how entrepreneurs approach problem solving: by creating bridges or islands. Islands must educate customers about a problem or opportunity. Bridges offer solutions to problems that customers already understand and create paths to new possibilities. Pisoni advises entrepreneurs to work on bridge solutions that address scalable, middle-of-the-market needs.



## Transcript

- When you're talking about a solution to change the world or start a business, there are really two types.. There are bridges and islands.. So let's talk about how these, what an island is and I'll give you an example that'll make this clear.. People look at the education system, and I'll use these examples because I'm in that system, but people look at the education system and they say it's totally broken.. It's so complex.. It's not helping students.. And it's really hard to change.. So I have all these ideas.. I want project-based learning, and competency-based, and I want social-emotional, but it's too hard to do in the old system.. So what people do is say, I'm gonna do it elsewhere..

I'm gonna go off and find an island where I'm gonna start my own school.. I'm gonna start my own private school or a charter school.. I'm gonna prove what's possible.. Their belief is that if they can prove what's possible and that it's better, the world will change.. And that is the misconception.. That is one of the cardinal mistakes of Silicone Valley.. That's not how businesses or institutions of the world changes.. Now, these islands are incredibly important because it is true that we need exemplars.. We need to understand what's possible.. Islands create demand for change, but they're not the supply of change..

To create supply for change, you have to create bridges.. A bridge is a thing that starts where you are today, where your customers are today, but it goes to the island.. So a bridge is, I'll get to what we're working on, but I had to decide as I went into K-12, did I wanna build an island or a bridge? There's value in building either islands or bridges.. If you wanna start a company, you have to decide which one you wanna do.. If you wanna join a company, you have to understand where they are.. So how do you know if you've built an island or a bridge? If you have to educate your customer about the problem you're solving, it's an island.. It's not a bridge.. Earlier, I talked about the B to C strategies where you leverage economies of scale to reduce your cost of acquisition.. It's very tactical, but that's how it works.. In B to B, if you go after your early adopters, you are not gonna get the signal as to whether you're solving a problem that they understand..

And the moment you go to sell your product or service or solution into the middle of the market, your cost of sales will skyrocket because you have to educate them on the problem.. And so, what I tell people, especially if you wanna solve big problems, you can build islands and there is value in islands but if you wanna do something at scale, you have to go after the middle of the market right away and find problems that they understand.. That you don't have to spend time or money educating them on.. Now, you may be aiming at a bridge, an island, I mean, you may be trying to get them somewhere else.. The challenge is how to scaffold them one step at a time to that point.. But this is how you know whether you're building a bridge or an island.. So when I went into K-12, I saw a ton of islands.. I just saw island after island.. I saw a lot of really awesome private schools and charter schools and district schools that were doing things that were having meaningful impact on the students that they were helping.. That has a broad set of, deep set of academic skills they were teaching, plus social-emotional, plus cognitive skills, and yet I knew that just the existence of those wasn't gonna help them scale..

That traditional district schools of which there are 130,000 in this country in 12,000 districts with 15 million kids are dealing with today's problems.. People don't buy the future.. Businesses don't buy the future in mass.. They buy the present.. And your challenge is to find out how to scaffold them to the future...