

Clumsy solutions for wicked problems: decision-making in uncertainty and the role of systems leadership

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Wicked problems are a stubborn thorn in public services' side. How we 'fix' the NHS and care service, resolve the Covid-19 crisis, and develop innovative organisations are just three that sit across multiple systems. Often they appear immune to conventional linear or logical 'solutions' that fail to transcend organisational cultures.

To tackle them, we need to work collaboratively and adopt 'clumsy solutions' that can sometimes appear counterintuitive. This means we need leaders to support experiments, accept errors, and understand that their role is to ask questions and mobilise the collective into action, rather than provide all the answers.

Public service problems

Most decision-making occurs when faced with three categories of problem: tame, critical and wicked.

Tame problems comprise about 75% of our professional lives and revolve around existing techniques and knowledge. They are the province of management as a decision style and require expertise. *Critical* problems are crises that require an authoritative answer. *Wicked* problems either do not have answers or do not have easy answers. They require the decision-maker to operate as a leader – to engage the collective to act across systems.

Since we cannot know the answer to a wicked problem, the pitfalls are numerous. For example, we often operate with a 'can-do' attitude that makes failure unthinkable, yet we know that some problems are beyond us: completely eliminating crime, for instance. The consequences of this culture, associated with a short-term political cycle, and an administrative system splintered into departments and units, are that we either ignore wicked problems or try to restructure our way out of them.

Addressing wicked problems

So, how can we begin to tackle wicked problems more effectively?

First, we need to be more stoical: to acknowledge that some wicked problems do not have answers. Often the best we can hope to achieve is to stem the problem, not eliminate it.

Second, we need to adopt the clumsy solutions 'model', but treat it as a rule of thumb, not a recipe. It contains alternative suggestions, not a sequence of moves that must be deployed in the correct order for this to work. The approach is experimental and pragmatic. If what you are doing is working, then you have tamed or are taming the problem. If not, try something different. Because you cannot know what will work when facing a wicked problem, the approach taken must be reversible. So, we need more *bricoleurs* in the public sector – pragmatic experimenters who are comfortable with, and supportive of, making progress by accepting that mistakes, error and failure are the *sine qua non* not just of science, but of wicked problem-solving. That means following the steps of the aviation industry and developing a 'just

culture', in which people are encouraged to come forward with mistakes and failures, but where the line between human error and unacceptable negligence is clear. This should replace the 'blame culture' that usually inhibits innovation and risk taking. For example, after a plane crashed onto a school in Bologna in 1990, the Italian Air Force introduced a Just Culture that radically reduced the number of accidents because all errors had to be reported within 48 hours.¹

Third, leadership with wicked problems is about mobilising a community into addressing its own problems. An example of this occurred in Vietnam when Jerry and Monique Sternin helped the government to recognize that child malnutrition in rural villages was a consequence of cultural practices, and that some of the lowest status mothers had ignored those practices and thus raised much healthier children. In effect, the 'deviance' of these particular mothers had generated 'positive' outcomes for their children. This 'positive deviance' approach, then, suggests that most answers do not sit in think-tanks or with experts, but amongst those most affected by them.²

Fourth, because wicked problems often do not have solutions as such - just better or worse developments - then the role of the leadership, individual and collective, is not necessarily to lead people 'over the top' to a utopian future. Instead, it might be to disappoint people at a rate they can manage.³

¹ Catino, M. and G. Patriotta (2013), '[Learning from Errors: Cognition, Emotions and Safety Culture in the Italian Air Force](#)'.

² Pascale, R.T., J. Sternin, and M. Sternin, (2010), *The Power of Positive Deviance*.

³ Heifetz, R.A. and M. Linsky (2010), *Leadership on the Line*.

Way forward

What needs to happen next? There needs to be a cultural shift that is the equivalent of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom'. The recalcitrant nature of wicked problems mean prototyping and learning from mistakes are a better approach, not waiting for 'experts' or political leaders to impose top down, universal solutions.

It is also incumbent upon those engaged in long term approaches to wicked problems to continuously assess and reflect. This implies keeping experiments running long enough for them to be seen to work - or not - rather than engaging in a sequence of short-term policy changes that are neither evaluated nor sustained.

That, in turn, requires public sector leaders, and initiatives such as the National Leadership Centre, to take ownership of the research and to protect it from the vacillations of political turmoil. So often in the past (and the Sunningdale Institute and the Police High Potential Development Scheme are just two of many such ventures) new strategies and institutions are launched amidst great optimism, only to be sunk prematurely and often in the absence of any evidence base. If this centre is going to be any different, it will need to be forcefully protected.

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