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Handling Wicked Problems at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Making Modern Public Organizations Manageable

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Abstract

This case study presents reflections on a research intervention conducted at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs completed in 2004. The subject was the practice of administration. Its objective became to understand its "wicked problems" and to create action principles. Another objective was to kick start a discussion on the subject amongst top level managers. It was an analytical endeavor a well as a learning intervention. Wicked problems are those that have a large impact on an organization's functioning and that persist regardless of numerous efforts to remedy them. They are characterized by complexity and are by no means exclusive to the Ministry. Since complexity is unlikely to decrease in the 21st Century, the lessons learned might be of interest to other practioners. One challenge is to understand the content complexity. How do the problems manifest themselves? How do they reinforce each other? What mechanisms perpetuate them? How have past efforts played into them? What principles can make a difference? Another challenge involves process complexity. What is the most effective role for the consultant/researcher? Who to involve in the process and how to present the outcomes so that it empowers rather then gets lost in the mix of different interests and values. This paper includes a complete description of the case, including initiating and setting up the research, the findings, the discussions and the aftermath. Special attention is given to intervention paradoxes that arose. In the last part of the paper we reflect on the case and pose some guiding principles for dealing with "wicked problems".

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1. Introduction

This paper presents reflections on a research intervention, mostly conducted in the Spring of 2004 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands. The research subject was the administrative practice at the Ministry and its effectiveness, popularly labeled as 'how steering works at the Ministry'. Its objective became to critically assess and characterize this practice and to come up with additional principles that could improve it. But we also wanted to kick start a discussion among a semi-formal group comprised of the Deputy Secretary General, Deputy Director Generals and the most important Directors of Staff Departments. At the time this group consisted of the people most focused on organizational matters amongst the top 20 managers of the Ministry.

The research assignment was an exercise in dealing with dualities. It entailed analytical endeavors to uncover underlying patterns and new principles for a whole organization, but was also a learning intervention for a small group. The assignment was limited in time and budget, but ambitious in its analytical scope and depth. Also, while the assignment was formally contracted with its principal, it was initiated by the research team itself and designed to challenge rather than to meet expectations. Lastly the research approach and desired outcomes were designed in advance, but deliberately shifted as time went on. It is our view that dealing with dualities such as these is very much part of doing research as a practitioner, where having multiple objectives and responsibilities comes with the territory.

We believe our research findings contribute to an understanding of the complexities and dilemmas of running a large public organization in the 21st Century. However we also want to take the opportunity in this paper to reflect first and foremost upon what we did and why we did it in terms of the research- and intervention process. This, for us, lies at the heart of our profession as management consultants.

1.1. Relevance of the case at hand

During the research we came across problems within the Ministry that persist despite the numerous efforts to remedy them over the years. Such types of problems are not unique to Dutch government agencies and exist in most organizations. Rittel and Webber (1973) have labeled them as "wicked problems" in contrast to tame ones. Mitroff and Sagasti (1973) use the label "ill structured problems". What their definitions have in common with our observations is that such problems are characterized by:

- *Content complexity.* The problems are multi-dimensional, often even related to contrasting rationalities. The problems are interrelated: they are often symptoms and causes of each other. They are also ambiguous, fuzzy and hard to pin down. One cannot understand the problem without getting involved and addressing it.
- *Process complexity.* Many actors in various roles are involved in perpetuating the problem. There is considerable diversity in their ideas and values. As a result,

evaluations of the problem varies amongst them as well as well as felt needs for or beliefs in a solution. Participation is ambiguous and ill structured.

Understandably, organizations have a hard time addressing such complexities. In failing, dejection and acceptance compete. In any case the existence of wicked problems can put a strain on organizations, be it in terms of resources, added value or job satisfaction. This makes understanding and intervening a relevant topic, especially since complexity – if anything – is not going to decrease in the 21st Century. In conducting the research we therefore wrestled with the following tasks:

- *How to understand the content complexity.* What are the wicked problems in the Ministry and what mechanisms perpetuate them? What are the interrelationships between them? How have past change efforts reinforced this?
- *How to intervene in the process complexity.* Who to involve in the process and how to present the outcomes so that they actually empower rather than get lost in the mix of different interests and values. What is the most effective role for the consultant/researcher? And how to prevent the analysis from becoming just another viewpoint among the many?

1.2. Putting wicked problems on the agenda

Management needs to handle wicked problems successfully because of their impact on the organization, its employees and 'clients'. While other problems are eventually resolved in organizations, wicked problems by their very nature create chronic imbalances in an organization. As they persist, managers are inclined to stay away from them, knowing that it is difficult to solve them successfully. Especially when the organization is also a political arena, managers prefer to play it safe. As a result the wicked problems can dissappear from the organization's agenda. In an organization - such as the Ministry - where employees often remain employed their entire working life, the symptoms of wicked problems can even become regarded as perfectly natural. Even trying to address or solve them becomes a controversial idea. For this reason they get ignored by consultants who are generally neither requested to address them nor appreciated for trying to do so. Thus we condemn ourselves as practioners to less relevant work. This produces a variation on Parkinson's law: successful consultants and principals keep on decreasing the risks for failure until change assignments have an added value that is almost negligible. Where clients ask for proven methods and benchmarks, the consultancy business can reply with productifying and moneyfying standardized solutions. These are by defenition not successful to deal with the dilemmas and ambiguity inherent of wicked problems.

The organization is not necessary made better off by choosing to tackle wicked issues with a more suitable - and thus for the organization less common - approach. Attempts to bring about permanent change in something so embedded and accepted can still easily fail because of the stabilizing resistance of the dominant existing systems. The organizational response is normally to water down the new approach so that it is less at odds with existing practice, which takes the punch of out the new approach. By doing this organizations prove to themselves that alternative and more suitable strategies do not work. The challenge for change agents is to create a realistic ambition level. Not everything *has* to change all at once, given that the organization has grown accustomed to living with the symptoms of wicked problems anyway and that there are undoubtedly also pay offs for having wicked problems. Not everything *can* change at once either: the more fundamental the issues that are addressed, the more likely that change will take many years. This is where we encounter a vicious circle. It is precisely with wicked problems like, e.g., cultural issues that the desire for reduced uncertainty, shows of strength and standardized solutions is the highest. These however, are also the most dysfunctional responses. Not only, do they not work, but they create additional resistance against future efforts to deal with the wicked problems. In such cases, one is better off not trying at all. This, unfortunately, is not an easy option either. Once a wicked problem is placed on the agenda, the decision to just leave things as they are until – sometimes years later - one can create the extraordinary conditions necessary to deal with it over a prolonged period of time and with all the incumbant ups and downs it may be wise but is also a hard sell.

1.3. Working through intervention paradoxes

Clarity of analysis is one thing, having people use such analysis to address wicked issues in new ways is quite another. As the actual use of the analysis is paramount for successive change to happen, both the analytic process and - content must be geared to facilitate such use. The paradox of feasibility may well be that researchers/consultants who are serious about the practical uses of their work, can succeed only if they not only understand but *also* utilize the dynamics of the existing dominant practice of their client's organization (see, e.g., Dutton and Ashford, 1993). Not doing so, usually results in insufficient attention being given to the problem to solve it, or the message and its bearers being disqualified. However, if one conforms too much to the existing practice, the clarity and credibility of one's message can also get lost. It becomes just more of the same. This intervention paradox manifests itself in different ways.

Firstly, with regard to the analysis itself, one must decide how much the *content* agrees with prevailing mental models and participant's expectations. How much should complexity be reduced so that the analysis remains accessible for those involved? In this assigment, we needed to search for a fitting level of abstraction. How critical can the analysis be without fueling defensiveness? How much light may be shed on 'hidden' organizational behavior before being deemed inappropriate by the target group? And how transformative can action perspectives be without being disqualified as unrealistic? Should these perspectives be rendered as principles or should they be actionable right away? There are no quick answers to these questions, but failing to deliberate the choices involved will definitely land practioners in trouble.

Secondly, with regard to the intervention process, one is faced with the choice whether to play according to the normal *interaction rules* or to bend them. Research interventions in the Ministry typically result in the presentation of executive summaries (preferably only a few pages long with bulleted highlights) for a hierarchical decision platform where people have little time to discuss it. They then negotiate amongst themselves, mostly about the conclusions and recommendations, and generally hardly about underlying insights of ideas. If this gets stuck, discussions are continued in coffee rooms and hallways until a solution is found that is acceptable for the most relevant stakeholders. Implementation is delegated down the line. It is clear that such an interaction game is not conducive to learning, nor for exploring and strategizing about wicked problems. Yet, a learning environment cannot be forced on anyone, no matter how desired such an environment might be. As stated earlier, wicked problems are best understood through the process of trying to solve them. Thus the preferred intervention platform is a group with mutual task dependencies who are able to experiment collectively with the findings on the job. This is in contrast to an echelon of managers, which is the logical presentation platform at the Ministry.

Thirdly, the paradox plays out in the *consultancy/researcher's role*. To what extent do we choose to be entrepreneurial change agents instead of service providers? Do we deliver what is being asked for or do we surprise our clients with unrequested interventions. It is clear that wicked problems require more than living up to expectations, but by not doing this one can easily lose the client. As researchers/consultants our stay is temporary, so there is also an ethical issue concerning the extent to which we can raise issues and kick start change if we are not likely to be the ones taking professional responsibility for it down the line. To what extent are we responsible for future consequences or needed continuity of our interventions?

Another issue is to what extent our role should be in line with the central tenet of the report. As the nature of wicked problems implies a lack of reflection on them within the organization, we prefer not to produce an expert report at all but rather to actively enlist employees in a co-researchers' roles: it would be a contradiction to plead for more reflection while excluding others from taking part. However, this does require uncommon reflective leaps by the insiders in the research team in order not to compromise the quality of analysis.

During this case we struggled with these intervention paradoxes and in the following description, we highlight the choices we made to illustrate these points further and to encourage and facilitate further discussion.

2. Case description

For the last two hundred years the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been the channel through which the Dutch Government communicates with foreign governments and international organizations. It coordinates and carries out Dutch foreign policy ranging from maintaining good relations with other countries to promoting international stability, from furthering European integration to assisting poverty reduction. In doing so it often has to work together with other Dutch ministries (e.g., in promoting trade). The Ministry's budget for 2004 is € 5.3 billion (1.1% of GNP), of which €3.8 billion (0.8% of GNP) is reserved for development cooperation. The Ministry employs 3000 people – many for their whole working life. The headquarters are in The Hague where most of its staff (62%) works. The remaining staff works abroad in one of the 155 missions (embassies, consulates, and permanent representations). This division appears more strict than it is: most employees switch positions every three or four years, sometimes living abroad, sometimes living in the Netherlands. The organization has a well developed 'esprit de corps': there is a certain pride in working for the Ministry and people cherish a sense of prestige associated with diplomatic service. The staff is higher educated and higher paid than in the other ministries because of the perceived demands of the job. The organizational structure was last changed about eight years ago. In The Hague there are now four main directorate-generals that do policy work: one on political affairs, one on European cooperation, one on regional policy and consular affairs and one on development cooperation. Their activities often intersect and much work is done across these directorates. Support departments serve the Ministry in areas like finance and personnel and report to the Secretary General (S). The other senior civil servants are four Director Generals (DG). Together with their deputies and some of the most important support department directors they form the top 20 of the Ministry and report to three government members: a Minister of Foreign Affairs, a Minister for Development Cooperation and a Minister for European Affairs. All in all the Ministry consists of a lot of people in lots of locations doing lots of interrelated tasks bound together by both the formal bureaucratic organization and by its 'esprit de corps'.

2.1. Context of public management reform

The first round of public sector reform efforts started in some English-speaking and Scandinavian countries in the late 1980's as a response to criticism about the 'bureaucratic' nature of governments and the need to increase efficiency with ideas borrowed from the private sector. While progress was made, negative side effects also occurred, due to for instance a lack of appreciation of the contrasting values of private trade versus public governance and an over reliance on formal systems of specification and measurement. Nevertheless, reform stayed on the agenda and even widened to include for example:

- increasing public transparency and accountability, e.g., by performance targets, measures and indicators);
- downsizing civil service, partly also by privatization or creating arm's-length public bodies;
- cutting down on procedures, being more selective in priorities;
- delegating power to local governments and to departments;

The Dutch political arena has been embracing many ideas of this public sector reform movement and the present administration has made public statement to its renewed commitment on this front, spearheaded by the program 'a different government'. Without us trying to separate rhetoric from reality, it is still abundantly clear that this context is greatly influencing the change agenda of the Dutch ministries. Representative of this is the change process called 'VBTB', a Dutch acronym roughly translated as 'from policy budgeting to policy accountability', which started in 1997. Its aim was and still is to link policy and budgets to the measurement and review of actual performance.

2.2. How it started

In March 2003 informal brainstorming began between the project manager of the VBTB (C), his colleague (A) and one of the consultants who was known through the grapevine to have successfully completed organizational development at Dutch embassies. Basically the project manager felt that the VBTB initiative was running out of steam, that the approach might have become too instrumental and that it would be good to step back and take stock. But how to organize this? The consultant and the colleague helped C to come up with an approach and make it work. The most likely platform for taking stock was identified as the VBTB steering group comprised of the Deputy SG and Deputy DG's as well as the most important Directors of Staff Departments. A round of interviews was held with its members to draw preliminary conclusions about the introduction of performance management within the Ministry.

The opinions voiced in these interviews varied. While most supported VBTB in theory, a few felt that the intended focus on results was often too much associated with just financial controlling and cracking data rather than quality, with top down control rather than decentralized accountability and with reacting to the government's commitment to VBTB rather then a felt need within the Ministry. Somehow this did not do justice to the more messy reality of the Ministry's work which was conceived of having to deal with not only the control rationality of VBTB, but also the political rationalities of policy formation and the professional realities of policy implementation. It is not easy to do result based management on, for example, the Iraq war. A need for differentiation and pluralistic views was suggested by C to the steering group with open discussions on 'steering' as a starting point. The conclusion was controversial and perceived by some interviewees as a threat to the VBTB initiative. Nevertheless, after some debates and some editing work, the conclusions were accepted in June 2003. It also led to relabelling the steering group VBTB as the plvDG council who would from then on address a wider scope of issues.

Debate on steering?

Informal brainstorming continued between C, A and the consultant on how the suggested open discussions could become a reality in the plvDG-council. Most of our ideas were too ambitious: holding several discussion meetings, doing explorative research together with council members, etc. The VBTB conclusions might have been approved by the council, but the members' time was sparse, their interests and agendas diverse and there was no real urgency felt for extensive collective reflection on a subject that was so complex and for which no clear solutions where in sight. This created a dilemma because understanding wicked problems goes hand in hand with trying to address them: this speaks for a participatory approach with the council members. Making the most of the situation we decided to scale down intervention time. Could we do something in only 2-3 meetings that would create enough insight and buzz to spark further inquiry? In August 2003 an idea took shape to organize a debate on contrasting perspectives on 'steering'. We wanted to create a learning setting for the council rather than the more usual business like settings of political agenda. We would invite three experts to each represent a contrasting rationality - each making their case on how steering could be improved based on a quick scan of the present practice. This would hopefully fuel a debate amongst participants where each of the perspectives would come to life but where the impossibility to prioritize them would also become more acknowledged. The objective was to demonstrate the need to look at administrative problems in a pluralistic way. While we went looking for the right team of experts, our apprehension about the conditions for organizing learning for the plvDG-council was confirmed soon enough. First, the intended start was postponed: a need for quick action perspectives as input for the Secretary General's New Year's speech took precedence at the Ministry. The plvDG-council spent its time on a half-day groupware-supported inventory of existing opinions rather than on a debate of the ideas behind them. Secondly, a December kick off meeting with the council to manage expectations for the debate and to introduce a concept on contrasting views of change was canceled. Lastly, we had still been unable to negotiate a formal contract. After nine months of informal help without a clear plan, we began to wonder if it was time to throw in the towel.

Research as an intervention!
We re-thought our approach one last time, abandoning the idea of a debate with experts. We deemed the risk too high that new principles for ‘steering’ the Ministry would not be convincing if we did not first lay bare the actual mechanisms and beliefs that kept wicked problems in place at the Ministry. It was only because of these mechanisms and beliefs that new principles were needed in the first place. As there was no shared mental map in the council of what these debilitating mechanisms and beliefs might be, such a map would first have to be created. But laying bare such a mental map was likely to challenge existing notions and trigger defense mechanisms. This made us reluctant to rely only on the spontaneous enquiry at the debate alone and convinced us it was necessary to get the content of the analysis right beforehand. We decided to form a small team as a learning community consisting of three external consultants and the two internal initiators (C and A), who would first map the wicked issues, describe the practices that keeps them in place, and sketch the action principles suitable to tackle them more effectively. We hoped that having people from both the inside and the outside would allow us to combine professional and experiential viewpoints. We decided to looking for rich experiences in interviews and documents to allow us to get to the nitty gritty of things and illustrate our findings. While doing our analysis we intended to reconnect with the council, to manage expectations as best we could and to figure out how to create a good learning setting for an in depth discussion of our findings. Our re-thought approach had pretty much taken shape in our heads independently from the intended principal (Deputy SG) and the client platform (plvDG-council) with whom only fleeting encounters took place, confirming that ‘open discussions’ should be organized on the subject at some point in time. These encounters proved sufficient for the Ministry to initiate a tendering process. Early February 2004, almost a year after first contact, a formal contract was signed. We had 2-3 months to do the research. It ended up taking twice the time because of the logistical nightmares of scheduling interviews and discussions, which turned out be to our advantage as we certainly needed the time in the end.

2.3. Doing the research and writing the report

Getting meaningful data
We realized it would not be the first time that the Ministry would address the topic of ‘steering’. In the archives of the Ministry and in the minds of the administrators information on the topic was piled up: minutes of discussions, evaluations of organizational change, policy audits, impressions of the organizational culture, farewell letters of employees, anecdotes, newspaper articles, rules of etiquette, codes of conduct, memo’s ... even diplomat’s novels. Every piece highlights part of the practice. There was surely no lack of information, problems, tips, cases or articulated opinions. But because of the abundance and fragmented nature it was difficult to determine what mattered and what - given the limited research time – really needed to be analyzed.
Also information generally focused on the formal, conceptualized and desired aspects of the Ministry rather than the informal, experiential and actual. That sure would not suffice. It was a challenge to access enough complementary pieces of the puzzle to get a sense of the complete picture. We observed early on that the quality of storytelling was well developed amongst diplomats and that many anecdotes circulate in the organization. We thought it could be a guiding principle for our research to mine meaningful stories out of the archives, interviews and experiences.

We would look for critical or typical incidents rather than opinions or solutions. The data would be ‘softer’ but probably richer and more complete.

Getting the plvDG-council involved

We analyzed a yard of documents, described about 30 cases and held about 20 interviews with people from various parts of the organization. Most of the interviews were meant for data collection. The interviews with members of the plvDG-council also served to establish rapport. We discussed with them their concern about wicked problems and how not to get stuck in ‘more of the same’ fixes. We enlisted their thinking. Once they got their story off their chest they would be more open to explore, we figured. At the end of most conversations we would start questioning some of the cherished notions and pose alternative viewpoints. After having experienced ownership for this research ourselves for a year, we wanted to start shifting it to the council, knowing quite well that the intended open discussions of our findings at the end of the assignment would not spark much insights or initiatives if it didn’t land on fertile soil.

Dealing with fuzziness and superficiality

What is ‘steering’ - the agreed research subject – anyhow? Is it about management styles, about culturally enforced rules, about directing organizational change or about how to monitor the primary process of the Ministry? Different stakeholders had different implicit definitions and would mention diverse aspects. All of which seemed, in the stories mined from interviews and documents, quite interrelated. We decided to interpret this fuzziness as an intrinsic part of the subject matter, not something to be remidied by one more definition on our part as this would only oversimplify the issue and likely alienate some of the stakeholders.

We also learned that much time and energy had already been spent in trying to solve these issues related to steering. And we learned that people weren't too satisfied with the outcomes. There was no lack of opinions as to how to fix it once again, all of them different. How to prevent that our analysis and perspectives would just be adding to that pile? We decided to go down some levels in our analysis: not to write about symptoms and remedies on a concrete level. We aimed to describe the underlying mechanisms that keep wicked problems in place and the underlying principles that could inform future initiatives to tackle them. These principles would not be actionable right away. This, we felt, could help keep the plvDG-council out of their decision making and delegating mode. Wicked problems call for learning, not for action reflexes. In order to get past symptoms and actions, we used sensitizing concepts at a more abstract level: related to dilemmas, loose coupling, hybrid organizations, types of systems, sense making, etc. We found it reassuring that hidden underneath the diversity of opinions in reports and interviews, lay complementary insights into underlying mechanisms be rather fragmented and partial.

Appreciativeness

In understanding the underlying mechanisms of wicked problems, it helped us to choose an appreciative approach. We did not think the Ministry was a ‘sick’ organization. It made absolutely no sense to us that an organization of well educated, reasonably motivated and socially adept employees would knowingly and willingly do things that were destructive if not in some way there would be incentives (perverse or not) to do so. The problems do not exist without reason. Our hypothesis was that if we had worked 10 years in the Ministry we would probably exhibit similar behavior. Also we noted in previous reports that much emphasis was invariably put on outlining what was wrong in the organization as if there was no upside to wicked problems. Each time such emphasis would rouse resistance from those who felt blame was implied. As one person put it later: “the blood is still dripping from the walls from the last consultants that diagnosed the big picture years ago”.

Causal loop diagrams and the use of jargon

Within the research time we spent much time sharing meaningful stories out of documents and interviews and trying to discern a structure of underlying mechanisms that would allow us to produce a map of underlying mechanisms. We must have disregarded at least five such mental maps until we decided to use causal loop diagramming to produce the maps. This assisted us to pay special attention to both reinforcing mechanisms and to their less obvious pay offs. As a bonus, this also made us more sensitive to the interconnectedness of mechanisms (connecting loops) which is a characteristic of wicked problems. We hoped they would work well as a teaching tool too. A picture can be worth a thousand words, although some people do show some allergy to arrow studded pictures. We decided to take a dual approach: next to the causal loop diagrams we would write stories that graphically illustrate the mechanisms in a very different way: not by arrow diagrams but by anecdotes.

This also allowed us to cut down on consultancy jargon. We maximized the use of Ministry jargon especially by way of quotes or examples of typical incidents. This was relevant as the organization lacked a common framework to describe complexity and demonstrated mixed feeling toward consultant’s speak. This also created a dilemma: it’s more doable to write about mechanisms behind present practice without introducing new language than it is to do about new perspectives. For the first incidents and stories abound. For the second, they do not: otherwise the problems would not have been wicked. So there we introduced and explained new concepts leaving out academic terminology or references.

Intelligent simplification, also for the anticipated informal readership

We pressed ourselves to find a level of intelligent simplification for our findings. Simplifying matters too much makes the complexity get lost. Too little and the findings could no longer be dealt with a good half-day discussion with the council. We also intended to write down our insights and new perspectives for action. Our initial idea was actually to just produce discussion maps with maybe 10 pages with some background text for the council members as quick reference. At that time we regarded the report as a side product only. We realized as time went on that no matter what we would write, it probably would not be held confidential for long. Nothing that was considered hot or interesting ever does at the Ministry. Thus we wrote it in such a way that it could be independently read and hopefully understood without our help. We optimistically strove to condense our findings in 10-15 pages, but in the end we boiled hundreds of pages of raw analysis down to a report of about 60 pages (small font, single spaced) including lots of diagrams and stories. We did not write an executive summary for the simple reason, that it the value lay not in the conclusions but in understanding underlying mechanisms and principles and in the absence of discussion this a least requires reading the lot.

We edited many many times and had it proofread many times: in the end we settled for people getting the descriptions of the wicked problems and underlying mechanism, but remain puzzled by the much shorter expose of suggested principles for action. We figured the last ones should be discussed anyhow and a sense of puzzlement might serve the cause better than a false sense of comprehension.

2.4. Impressions of the report's content

In the report, we consecutively paid attention to:

- the actual practice of administration within the Ministry and its effectiveness-in terms of wicked problems and persistent qualities,
- a mental map describing the mechanisms behind wicked problems – captured conceptually with causal loop diagrams and illustrated with real life stories,
- additional perspectives to tackle wicked problems more effectively – in terms of six principles elaborated on with a concept and some examples
- In other words: what we saw and heard, how we explain what we saw and heard, and what we recommend doing differently. Knowing that the report would not answer most diplomats' expectations we also spend the first pages sharing some of the research dilemmas and explained why we produced something so lengthy, so without clear cut solutions and so full of arrow studded diagrams showing why things are the way they are. This, we hoped, would manage expectations, especially of the independent reader.

Wicked Problems and persistent qualities

Looking back, the easiest part of the analysis was to write what the Ministry's persistent strengths and wicked problems are. To our surprise we heard much the same things, even though they were not reported comprehensively anywhere. This was in sharp contrast to the conflicting views on what creates or can fix problems. We spend no more than 2 pages summarizing problems and qualities. These pages have never sparked any discussion since – this in contrast to the rest of the report. Qualities are e.g. that most employees are highly educated, generally well read and have a quick wit. Also the well developed informal network that disseminates information swiftly around the world can be regarded as a strength. Or the strong sense of loyalty towards the Ministry, its mission and its ministers coupled with a sense of humor amongst colleagues about the diplomatic service. We stressed some of the complexities that are inextricably bound up with the kind of work the Ministry does, like:

- the need to be dispersed over hundreds of locations across nations
- the diversity or production processes in terms of character, rules and rhythms e.g. presiding the European Union in 2005 next to development cooperation
- thriving in the national political arena at the same time as runnning as an efficient and transparent operation as possible.

The wicked problems, freely translated, are listed in box 1. Even though each bullet might well lead to a desire to have it more clearly defined, we will not do this in this article as we want to focus more on the process of the assignment than on the content. Also it is the nature of wicked problems that they are ambiguous and overlapping.

Box 1. Wicked problems in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

- Policies are driven by incidents and show lack of priorities and posteriorities
- Professional know how leaves to be desired / Specialist knowledge out the window / knowledge management regarded as chore
- Coordination load and constipation in work processes / tier (this is not my department) behavior and proliferation of consultation
- Internal focus / no contact with the general public and little say for partner organizations
- Keeping the peace at any price / consensus driven / non intervention behavior
- Too much blueprint approaches to organizational change / one size fits all / disappointing success rates
- Overloading the change agenda / oscillating (pendulum) behavior and change fatigue
- Little learning behavior especially in the formal organization / all sorts of tensions and conflicts in cooperation
- Not result-driven / reputation and perception is cherished as one's working capital
- The best diplomat is not necessarily the best manager / lack of diversity in careers and development.

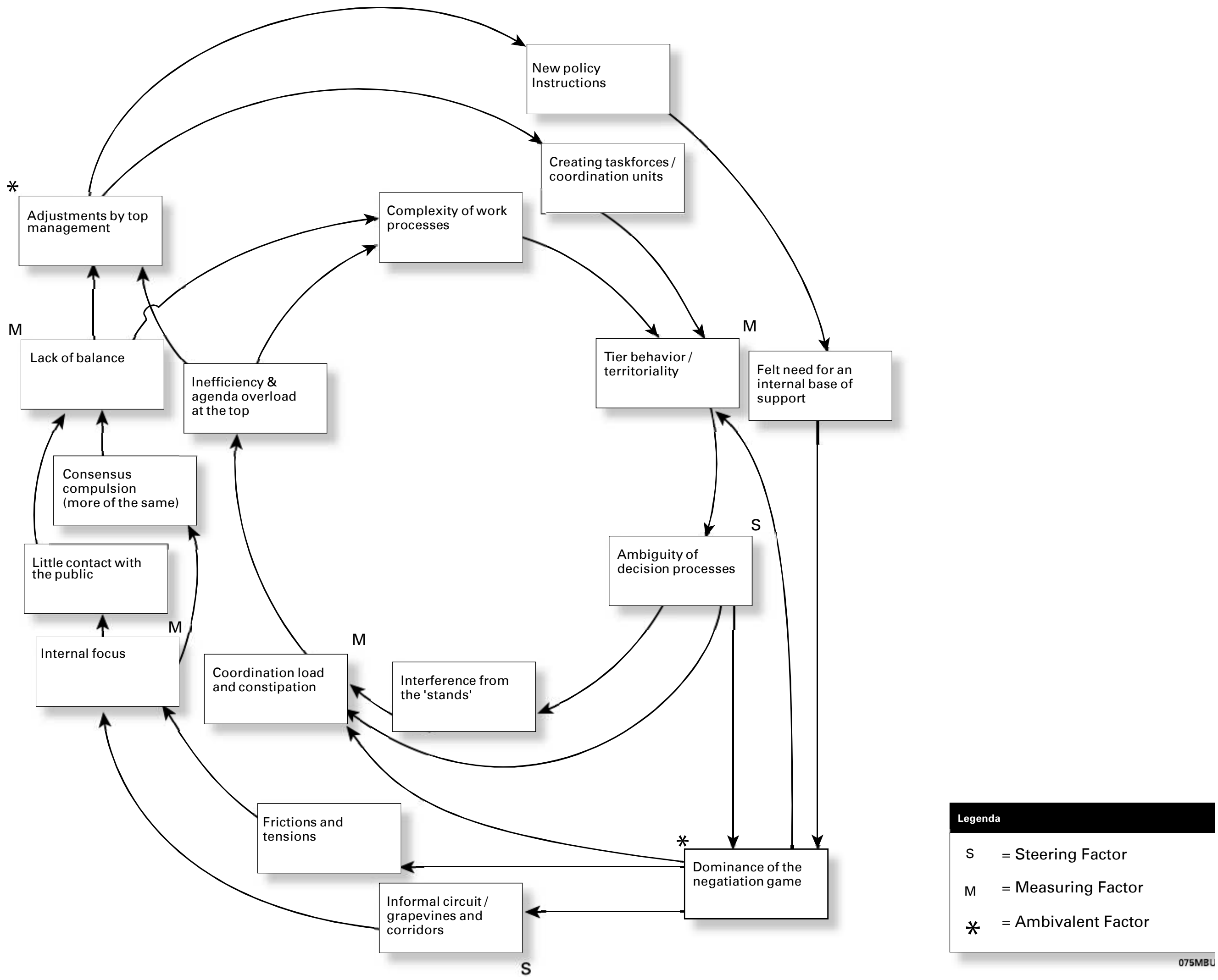
To give an impression, wewill sketch some characteristics of the first bulleted problem. One interviewee sighed "Nowadays is seems everything is *the* cornerstone of our foreign policy". This referred to the tendency to allow everyone with some clout in the organization to have some say over a new policy in order to guarantee enough base of support. As a result "Everything becomes a priority" even if it becomes quite a haphazard accumulation of issues. In cases where widespread internal consultation was not organized, this would later be criticized in audits as not taking the viewpoints of relevant departments into account. Policy is an important vehicle for the Minister to show the parliament and the public that the Minister is taking action on anything that would be in the media at the time. As a result, migration issues or terrorism would necessarily get more attention than the long term development of, let's say, Mali. In other words: what is hot takes precedence over whatis important, the short term agenda dominates the long term one, and the formulation of policies gets more attention than their implementation. To retain the ability to be flexible and swift in response to new issues, the inclusion of lessons learned from the past and the participation of external partners in policy formation would be quite controversial: this could severely limit room to maneuver. This, of course, has a down side: the risk to make old mistakes again and to be overly focussed on internal matters. This last sentence illustrates how wicked issues fuel each other.

Mechanisms and stories behind wicked problems.

The interconnectedness of wicked problems became clear when we were unsuccessful in articulating separate explanations for each of them. Thus we crafted an overall causal loop diagram for all of ten problems combined. Through trial and error we created one that was not too complex and actually readable. This overall diagram appeared to consist of six parts, each of which could be regarded as a subsystem reinforcing itself. These six became the building blocks of our mental model: six causal loop diagrams that were interconnected and together paint the whole picture. The six diagrams were labeled: policy dynamic, coordination dynamic,

steering/change dynamic, cooperation dynamic, personnel dynamic and profession dynamic.
To give an impression of the six diagrams, one is translated and included here. In the report we chose not to conceptually explain the diagram word for word, but rather to illustrate the dynamic with sufficient concrete events and stories from the Ministry that together cover the whole diagram. This took a couple of pages for each diagram. It does not fit the format of this paper to paste these texts. Instead, we'll give a brief conceptual summary of figure 1 with some quotes from the stories.

Figure 1. Coordination dynamic



Basically, the diagram conveys that the Ministry's working terrain consists of complex tasks: employees operate in many arenas on many themes, and all these efforts must be managed and coordinated. This complexity is very much a result of the diversity or production processes in terms of character, rules and rhythms that we mentioned earlier. As a means to create some order in all this, the Ministry has set up directorates, departments, groups task forces and so on: one could safely say that around each theme, region, country or project an organizational unit of some sort has sprung up to legitimize and organize that enough attention is devoted to it. This works so well, that it creates it's own problems in turn. Each organizational unit has its own agenda and there are inescapable frictions between them. One interviewee would summarize this as "One's real enemy is generally only one floor away". It creates a catch 22: "Not fighting for one's own limited agenda reflects badly on the functioning of the unit and it's employees, but fighting for it leads to sub-optimalization". Running one's own department is one thing. However, broader cohesion and cooperation across departmental boundaries and hierarchical layers – now that's quite another: it is the Achilles heal of the Ministry and limits its ability to tackle the complex issues for which this diversity of units was created in the first place. Ensuring some cohesion requires a substantial amount of formal and informal negotiations and consultation between various tiers and layers within the organization: between the field and the home office, between theme departments and regional departments, between political affairs and development affairs, etc. It does however make resulting decision processes laborious and creates inefficiencies. Also the diversity of interests and points of view causes frictions, especially under time pressure. The outcome is often viewed in terms of winners and losers: this focus on assessing others is not sensation driven. Rather, it is deemed part and parcel of being a diplomate to know the players, their agendas and power base – be it in- or outside the ministry. At the end of the day, when the organization gets too bogged down by it all, the top of the organization tries to break the too internally focussed negotiation game. However, this is generally done by setting up a task force or project which in a way reinforces the dynamic.

The diagram goes round and round in circles. In contrast to linear strings of causes and effects this makes it harder to assign blame ('What or who has done it'). This helps thwart a focus on winners en losers as well as on quick fixes ('If that/they is/are the problem, then it's up to them/that to remedy it'). The shape of the diagram is somewhat lob sided: the reason is that it is drawn to fit snuggly on four sides to other dynamics as cogs in a wheel. For instance, the factors 'informal circuit', 'frictions and tensions' and 'dominance of the negotiations game' are also part of the dynamic that describes how people cooperate both informally and formally within the Ministry. At the heart of the combined 6 diagrams is the 'negotiation game': this is a very pervasive factor. Not surprisingly, it is also very much a cultural trait beyond the Ministry's walls: the "polder model" represents a Dutch political trait to strive for consensus at all cost. A model that has solid historical roots and was up to 2-3 years ago regarded as one of the underlying strengths of Dutch society.

Principles for handling wicked problems at the Ministry

This part of the report contained substantially less detail than the previous section. We figured that shared understanding of how present administrative practice creates wicked problems was a pre-condition to any realistic improvement effort. Therefore it was worth investing in charting that more than anything in detail and driving this awareness home. One of the top 20 leaders of the Ministery asked us before the assignment: "The Ministry has stated for some years we want to be a learning organization. What kind of program should we put into place to create a climate of learning? " Our answer at the time was that we couldn't think of anything we could add to the existing overload of change programs that could effectively counter how everyday actions confirm that learning is something you are not supposed to do openly in the workplace. (Not that diplomats do not learn: they learn all the time, but

mostly individually by ‘copying the art’ or with selected network contact over drinks, etc.). Without deconstructing how the present culture is created every day, any transformative change effort would be like building a dream house on quicksand. The diagram of present practice is such a deconstruction and allows any change effort to be tested and considered against: what impact might this have, what resistance is to be expected, how realistic are our objectives, etcetera.
The first of the principles continues in this vain: it makes the argument that wicked issues are not going to disappear easily, no matter what the Ministry does. The success rates of organizational changes on these issues at the Ministry reflects this quite clearly. We advocated scrapping a lot of the ambitious change targets that at the time had ‘more of the same’ change programs attached to them: generally large scale, top down and policy or procedure oriented. We felt this can ease much change fatigue, free up a lot of time and energy and show respect for lessons learned from past change efforts. They would be all quick wins in a way. To spark discussion, we listed examples of change efforts at the Ministry that fall in this ‘more of the same’ category and of the few that don’t.

We formulated the principles in the form of six provocative statements worded as pieces of advice. We substantiated each with an argument, a concept and some examples - all very brief, about two pages each. We felt the newness of the principles for most of the readers would mean they would come to live only by learning about them. Using it to tackling wicked problems would, given their nature, require a lot more than superficial understanding. We had little trust in the depth of learning by reading alone. We therefore decided to word the principles in a way that would rouse interest, cause constructive confusion and trigger interest of those who would be willing to experiment in their own working environment. In that sense it was not the hardest thing to spot the principles: we had done some transformative work in the Ministry at embassies and had a sense of what worked and what didn’t. It was hardest to word that in a way that would not lead them to be disqualified as ‘not the way we do things here’. The principles were an eclectic bunch. For instance a plea to not try and fix intrinsic dilemmas in the organization but rather to embrace competing rationalities that are needed to deal with complex issues. For this end we supplied a mental map of contrasting rationalities at the Ministry and ways of dealing with them constructively versus destructively. Also, there were principles on how to look for points of leverage in change programs using systems thinking and an overview of what these points of leverage and possible interventions could be if one used the causal diagram of the report as basis. Another principle dealt with using small learning communities and small wins for transformative changes instead of large programs. We tried to argue that the 6 principles, like the 6 diagrams before, are not independent of one another: any change effort would have more transformative power when all of them are combined in small work systems.

2.5. Preparing and facilitating discussion in a castle

The discussion session with the plvDG-council took place in June 2004. We were bent on it becoming a good setting for learning. Knowing how hectic life at the Ministry can be, we had the meeting organized in a classy castle amongst stately gardens: an afternoon for discussion and a dinner for reflection. As is turned out there was a special tension in the air that evening as the national soccer team would play its German arch rivals in the European championships.

We had thought often about an appropriate ambition level for the meeting. What can you cover in a good half day? What results would we want from those few hours? Up to a week before we were not entirely sure yet what the best angle would be. We were torn between two options. On one hand, we wanted to carefully convey our research work, share our findings and considerations, to allow this knowledge to become part of the council's knowledge base. It would imply a lot of presentations from us and only limited discussion. On the other hand, we preferred dialogue over knowledge transfer, reflection on one's own role and issues over consumption of concepts. This would imply we mostly facilitated a discussion after kick starting it with a brief presentation of some key questions or some provocative perspectives. A week before the castle meeting we had a prep-session with the Deputy SG to fine tune the agenda and approach. As we might have expected, given the consensus reflex in the Ministry, he wanted both and more: we should present our findings as experts, but also facilitate the meeting. He suggested we present experiences and lessons from beyond the Ministry's walls, but also address concrete issues at the Ministry, etcetera. We felt an intervention paradox at play: only being experts would thwart learning by a lack of interaction, only being facilitators would thwart learning by not introducing new ideas and analysis, trying to do both might thwart learning by mixing and mashing different consultants' roles and interventions making each of them lose focus. This last choice, especially, would be counter to one of our principles: how to effectively deal with different rationalities:

We resolved it by micro-separations within the castle meeting. We cut the report's content in 13 pieces (introduction, 6 mechanisms and 6 principles) and presented for each - in roughly 5 minutes - the key notions and one telling illustration. This was our expert mode. After each 5 minute introduction, we then shifted into facilitation mode and asked the participants to think of examples in their own arena and explore them. Our ambition level was limited. As experts we wanted them to get an overall and interconnected sense of the findings. As facilitators we wanted them to look at their own functioning at a distance, to become aware of the arbitrary one-sidedness of how some things are done and to get a sense of small transformative steps that might be possible in their own surroundings. It is interesting how even the smallest of choices can have repercussions. One such choice was whether to send a copy of the report to the participants in advance or not. It would prepare people for the meeting, and we could perhaps reduce presentation time a bit, allowing more time for reflection. However, the arguments against had the upper hand: we felt pretty sure not all participants would read the 60 page report, creating different needs at the meeting itself. More importantly, we felt that if our analysis was accurate that people - as a reflex - read reports as helping or hindering their department's agenda, this would also happen with this report. Sending it beforehand would make it all the more likely that the council members would enter the castle with a judgment of the report's findings and opinions as to what should be done with it : all not very conducive to learning where one's judgment is better suspended in favor of first exploring and understanding what's on the table. We therefore chose not to send it.

Knowing that another occupational hazard of diplomats is that they are generally impatient to know the bottom line, we decided to share this as an opening to the program. This would hopefully allow us to then get on with learning and get people's attention back to the details. Also in that way, it would be clear that we at least had no other agenda. We used about 15 minutes to summarize the formal assignment, the intervention paradoxes we faced, the set up of the meeting - but especially also the good and bad news, what our normative messages are and what outcome we would be satisfied with that day. We tried to do this in a somewhat playful mode because we figured a sense of humor and certain lightness would balance the wickedness of the subject matter. As an example, a conducive mix of laughter and indignation was roused by presenting as:

- bad news that there are all kinds of wicked issues in the Ministry over the last 10-20 years that do not seem much affected by change efforts
- good news that people at least *agree* on what these wicked issues are. It would be much more difficult if they didn't
- more good news that the Ministry can scrap a lot of change efforts as they don't do any good any how, which frees up a lot of time and energy
- grave bad news that there is a risk of 'catastrophic learning' (Cornelis, 1999). The plvDG-council, being part of the Ministry, is subject to the same mechanism that prevent learning on these problems in the Ministry as large
- and the final good news: that we would proceed today as if catastrophic learning does not scare us one bit .

Our key messages were roughly that a shared mental model with regard to steering was needed to understand why and where steering works and does not work, that this would allow them to test change initiatives and own cherished ideas, and that innovation is possible but only on a small scale. We stated further that the notion of one center of control in the organization is a bogus idea, making it all the more relevant to rethink what role they as plvDG-council could realistically play in managing and changing the organization.

The program of the afternoon flowed naturally. The group members provided a high level of participation. After our 5 minute inputs, they had no problem jumping into discussion mode which - to their credit - was generally not aimed at disproving the findings but at exploring them. Of course, requests would pop up for us to substantiate the findings with more practical examples. The challenge for us was to refrain from over-explaining, and instead leaving the group to think it though amongst themselves, rather than having an 'us and them' conversation. As a result the council came up with lots of new examples to illustrate and discuss our findings. Sometimes, the group was inclined to put the causes of the problems outside their field of influence ('It's part of Dutch culture' or 'These are general principles of Dutch government' etc). By bringing the attention to actual cases within the Ministry, the conversation would veer back in focus.

The meeting was concluded at the dinner table. To signal the transfer of ownership of what happens next with the report, we hanged back a little while the Deputy SG chaired the discussion. He asked each participant to take a turn, share what he/she had gained from the meeting and how they could see themselves use it in their own or in the council's domain. We did little more than suggest to not go into formal decision making mode which was readily accepted. Many showed appreciation and surprise at the content and tone of the meeting. Different ideas surfaced, ranging from pruning the council's change agenda, or using some of the ideas to reshape the role of one specific department together with outsiders who are beneficiaries or partners, to raising the level of knowledge amongst would-be managers on dilemmas of steering.

2.6. What's happened since

The formal assignment was over. As we left for holidays there was an unexpected request for 50 extra copies because the participants wanted to share it with colleagues. Others started photocopying. New requests came in. A few months later we guestimate that well over two hundred copies are circulating in the Ministry meaning that soon about ten percent of its employees will have somehow been exposed to the content. The report is referred to as a 'must read'. We felt relieved about making it 'independently readable' and recognized the strength of the informal circuit where 'hot stuff' is always distributed really efficiently within the Ministry.

Then responses came in through the grapevine, in corridors and through emails, often from private email addresses. They were mixed, though most were positive. Generally people had no trouble understanding the list of wicked problems nor the mechanisms sustaining them. Some felt a sense of depression in reading the report as it spelled out so graphically how wicked problems are kept in place. When getting to the chapter on action perspectives they couldn't help wondering if it was not a contradiction to what they had just read about the persistent nature of wicked problems. Others felt relief and some support as they recognized their own struggles in the descriptions. After initial criticism about the report being not too actionable to help them through tough times, some shared later it did help them relax and alievated stress when faced with resistance next time around. This was because the report's findings had helped them realize that resistance was not necessarily linked to them personally not having the answers but to dealing with persistant organizational dilemmas. Generally it was regarded more as a Ministry-report than a consultant's report, partly due to language, partly to the mixed composition of the team and to the distribution through the grapevine. The part of action perspectives was hardest to deal with. Different people seemed to focus on different ones best. Some liked reducing the pile of change endeavors, others embraced the notion of dealing with different parallel realities, investing in knowledge on change and management, or creating small learning communities. Improvements were suggested too:

- to include the role of middle management as a mediator between different (organizational) worlds
- to differentiate, especially in the policy dynamic in the report, between different policy arenas. E.g. quality and cohesion was deemed better in policies that are shaped in international arenas than in 'homegrown' policies
- to bring in more the role of outside parties with whom the Ministry interacts as the intended partners and beneficiaries of its policies thus countering too much of an internal focus. Suggested was that this would improve both the analysis and be an impetus for change

Next different follow-up initiatives started. We became aware of them mostly by accident. Many were pleasant surprises as they seemed in line with the action perspectives of the report, be it in a modest scope. They concerned opportunities to learn in small communities and opportunities the experiment in one's own work system:

- *Discussion within different organizational units*. This was generally done as a means to better understand the Ministry and to strategize about the units own agenda for the future. As far as we can tell these discussions were exploratory and not really confrontational in the sense of looking how the unit is itself part of the problems identified.

- *Experimentation on the job.* Quite a few people tried using some of the ideas in their own work. And often enough they would call us to informally talk over some ideas. This ranged from rethinking a working conference to strategizing about how knowledge management might take hold.
- *Organizing learning off the job.* For decades all diplomats followed 'het klasje' when they joined the Ministry, a half year intensive training program which can also be perceived as a valued rite of passage. Discussions about the report are now planned to be an integral part of this program. Also some people felt that the findings might differ between HQ and the missions in the 'field' leading to a request to co-prepare discussions to explore possible differences.

Other follow-up initiatives however appeared more at odds with the action perspectives. If anything, they were perpetuating the mechanism that sustained wicked problems in the first place:

- *Opinion games.* One organizational unit called us last minute to present our findings to its middle managers during a lunch break. Its two managers had contrasting agendas. One disliked the report: he found it defamatory in its description of wicked problems and causal mechanisms. He was also annoyed by the absence of concrete bulleted actions to be implemented. Why do we need 60 pages criticism without a list of things to do? In contrast, the other manager thought the report worthwhile as it might get the middle managers on the same page to manage their groups more effectively. They did agree that the report – now that it was hot - needed to be dealt with as soon as possible in a meeting with the middle managers. Their sense of urgency had contrasting intentions. The first manager wanted to discuss it in order to disqualify it. He wanted us to defend the piece. The second wanted to discuss it to get the middle managers to act on it and wanted us to use our powers of persuasion. In both scenarios the lunch meeting was not set for learning and would get the subject off the managers' own agenda as soon as possible: they would halt or delegate it. We were torn by this request, but decided to not participate. Changes were that there might actually be more discussion and learning without us present as proponents and opponents would have to talk amongst themselves. This indeed occurred two months later.
- *Negotiation games.* Several people were observed to use the report to substantiate their own views or block agenda's they were against, quite often views not related to the report's findings. As one diplomat shared with us: "If anything, the overall causal loop diagram of the report is complicated enough to make it obvious that simple solutions do not really do the trick to break bad habits. Itis even part of the reports first conclusion. Nevertheless in our managers' meeting last week one colleague concluded that the report made clear that it can all be solved by better incentives. While another countered that the report indeed came down to one thing, be it different: confronting people with their behavior. How can people misread the report so blatantly?" Other's would wave with the report to block certain initiatives as being counter to the report's findings, even though we could not trace any such arguments in the report itself. Sometimes we would find whole sections selectively cut and edited in new proposals that in themselves bore little or no resemblance to our action perspectives.

Having little control over the follow up of our research, such divergent use is probably to be expected. The lack of control is very much a function of the entrepreneurial character of the research: the interventions and ideas were pretty much a surprise to the main platform, the plvDG-council. Six months later though, it did spark a reflection on our part as to what working formats are suitable for follow-up as well as congruent with the report's suggested principles. On request, we made two pages available on this with some pointers. What the suggested formats had in common is that they all seek out settings that are less expert driven and more participatory, either though learning communities or work systems learning on the job. They range from small participatory research ideas to gaming and simulation to an informal network of experimenters. One suggested follow-up, making a report on concrete actions to implement the perspectives, was deliberately *not* included in this list even though it would surely be funded. We feel that writing concretely about the mechanisms of present practice is doable: people have the experience to recognize it. However writing concretely about actions and mechanisms to create new practice remains all too theoretical when the people involved don't have a change to try it out, co-develop it, experience it first hand. Thus implementation or further analysis requires ownership to do any good.

3. Reflection

What can be learned from this assignment? We would like to share some ideas and concepts that we applied or that, looking back, appear essential to us in dealing with the content complexity and process complexity of wicked problems. In our view, the problems' persistence is not so much a result of a lack of trying but more a result of much energy being spent day in day out to keep matters as they are. It appears to be the nature of things to change: they degrade, shift, grow, etcetera. It requires continuous small interventions to keep things stable, like staying upright on a surf board. We would like to explore this angle a little further and pose that fixation of wicked problems at the Ministry comes in many mutually reinforcing ways: from fixated ideas, to fixated actor composition, fixated way of interacting, fixated roles and fixated behavioral reflexes. Loosening things up, or defixating, could thus be perceived as the key to change.

Level defixation

Trying harder does not suffice for tackling wicked problems. This implies that the direction can not be 'more of the same' based on already existing opinions and notions of steering and change. This was our reason for not focusing on *what* the problems were but on *how* they were created. It also meant that we chose not to tell what needed to be done – in terms of tips, tricks or action plans – but explore what different principles behind them might be.

Such choices can be linked to the literature on levels of learning. Three levels are often distinguished (e.g. Wierdsema, 2002; Engeström, 1987). The first level focuses on behavioral routines that fit well defined problems and proven solutions. Change happens though action plans or procedures, which turn into new routines over time telling how things are supposed to be done. During the research, we were often confronted with such routines when we asked why things were done in a certain way and why they could not be done differently. People explained why it was "only natural" to do things this way, that it is 'how things work around here'. We were asked quite a few times to suggest a better routine: to come up with a bulleted action list that made concrete what steps people should take. The second level of learning focuses on new understandings that help create tailor made approaches for more fuzzy issues. Here change happens though new perspectives as springboards, though cognitive models and maps or though microcosms where new ideas can be experienced (Engeström, 1987). Much of the report's content can be regarded as being on this level. The third level is more expansive and focuses on methodology, on how one comes to new understanding. It fits most closely with poorly defined problems, unstable situations, lack of solutions. It requires a dialectic where cherished notions, like the organization's identity, can be turned upside down. One could say that we strived to create a process where this could happen, definitely in the research team and occasionally with the plvDG-council and during informal follow-ups. The higher the level of learning, the more energy it requires, the tougher the issues than can be tackled, and the more widely the principles can be applied.

Reality defixation

Multiple viewpoints are instrumental for higher levels of learning: it is not easy to have a true dialectic process by oneself or amongst like minded people. Different realities, contradictions, dilemmas and constructive conflicts are what fuels and allows for expansive learning. It brings the kind of richness that does justice to the complexities of social systems. (Of course only when need be: when problems are simple, single mindedness will do quite nicely.) We saw many dilemmas at the Ministry: for instance, between a desire for more control versus a dersire for more participation, between short term responsiveness and long term vision, between loyalty to the Ministry and a need for more personal initiative and authenticity, between proper procedures and dynamic flexibility. Many of these appear not particularly specific to the Ministry, but what all of them have in common is that prioritizing one side of the dilemma over the other creates imbalances that damages the organization. Conflicts arising from dilemmas in organizations might be essential to its vitality, but in this case we observed how the Ministry made it a custom to organize conflict away by splitting into different departments and compartments. Coupled with a temperament to avoid conflicts, this constitutes a mechanism reinforcing bureaucratization. As long as dynamics of conflict avoidance are prevalent, any transformational change is doomed (Hoebeke, 1994). The splitting in the Ministry regularly proceeds to the extent that on many subject one dominant view prevails throughout the organization. Alternative views are relegated to the fringes of the organization or beyond the organization's walls. In the report we characterized persistent one sidedness in all six causal loop diagrams, demonstrating, e.g., how change efforts are generally only top down policy or procedure oriented endeavors put forth at the expense of tackling motivation, learning or vitality (change/steering diagram); or how the evaluation and development of personnel is all geared towards becoming better at playing the political game and building one's reputation at the expense of specialist knowledge and result orientation (personnel diagram). Overall, we tried to put pluralism back at center stage as much as we could.

Actor defixation

A very powerful way to achieve multiple viewpoints is to include multiple voices: striving for diversity in the composition of groups that come together to learn about or address complex tasks. This can be regarded as the opposite of splitting: bringing people together within departments or across departments that have different ideas.

Another way is to invite third parties and people relegated to the fringes of the organization when challenging issues are tackled. However - as sketched when we discussed the first wicked problem (section 2.4.) - when policy issues are hot, consensus is hard enough to reach amongst the key players. This strenghtens the internal focus and the exclusion of other voices. In this assignment we purposefully created a research team of two different types of insiders, two external OD consultants and an outside researcher. At some expense to efficiency, this also did created heated discussions which helped us to scrap one-sided, but cherished, hypotheses and models more than once. We also achieved some diversity in interviewees, but this was not an option with our formal target group – the plvDG-council. As a result we often had to play devil's advocate, offering alternative viewpoints ourselves.

Game defixation

Dealing with different voices, different realities or even different levels of learning in an environment that likes to fix tensions and frictions rather than use them, requires a different way of interacting. The Ministry has a preference for certain types of interactions: the consultation/negotiation game, the hierarchical instructive game, the informal networking game. In terms of working with consultants, it generally chooses the expert advice or the project managers game. We could have chosen an approach to fit in, but this would not have been conducive to the interactive learning needed to deal with wicked problems. The preparation of the castle discussion illustrates that people in the Ministry can recognize this, but are naturally inclined to use their consensus reflex to mix and mash contrasting approaches in one and the same meeting. This however does not lead to a colorful mix of negotiation, rational planning, seduction, learning and whatever else, because each of these endevors require different interaction rules and roles (Caluwé and Vermaak, 2002). As one diplomat put it: "You might be a winner in a learning situation when you ask and offer help and share learning goals, but when you fight for the interest of your department such behavior only serves to weaken your negotiation position". In short: the political negotiation game easily pushes other interaction games underground.

The alternative games we most often put forward in the assignment were learning communities and experimentation on the job. Both are geared towards learning – albeit in a different way. Learning communities happen in networks based on shared expertise and activities geared towards development (Wenger, 1998). Experimentation on the job is best achieved in work systems: task dependant groups that span complete work processes (Hoebeke, 1994). However these games, have limited applicability too. Thus purposeful defixation of games requires distinguishing different ones and knowing how to switch between them. Here the distinction between game and play is helpful: in games we construct and deconstruct realities, whereas in play we shape and change interaction rules (Termeer, 1993). Play is what allows us to adjust and set the rules of games where we deal with the content. Playfulness is what helps people to have enough distance to the games they play to become aware of their intricacies. In the castle we tried to trigger a certain playfullness by bating people, telling anecdotes, lightly introducing good and bad news statements, etcetera. Play, as meant here, is not viewed as a means to an end, but rather as a crooked line to the end. It gets around obstacles, but the obstacles were put there by the player in the first place (Weick, 1969).

Action Defixation

New games are not mastered overnight. This requires time and patience. People need to be able to experiment in their own work situation, to see first-hand how things work when done differently, and share these experiences with their colleagues. This is in contrast with the impatience surrounding change initiatives in the Ministry. The impatience has multiple reasons. It is not only because of the popularity of the ‘planned change’ approach. It is also reinforced by e.g. the need for management to ‘sell’ new initiatives to colleagues and victims. They do this by inflating its qualities, which then puts great pressure on the team charged with implementation to spring into action and show some visible results soon. It reflects badly on the sponsors if the team does not succeed, so the sponsors keep the pressure on.

One way to counter this, is to work on a modest scale rather than at modest depth. In the report we advocated innovating at the fringes of the organization, in small enclaves conducive to innovation. For example, in a pilot at embassies, we found we could be rather effective this way. In such protected settings, it was possible to use different rules, roles, objectives, language and knowledge that were at odds with the dominant way of doing and seeing things at the Ministry. We are in that sense relieved no grand program has yet been initiated based on our report and will do our best to prevent that from happening in the future. Expansion is, however, possible by building on strengths. Picture the ink stain effect: people that participated in successful innovations that we have (seen) created at the Ministry, take their inspiration and experience with them when relocating and regularly start some similar initiative at their new posting.

Another way of countering a fateful jump into action, is to slow the process down rather than temper its intensity. One can distinguish phases preceding the start of an actual new practice. Prochaska (1992), for instance, names three preceding phases:

- pre-contemplation: no thought of changing, now or later. Others who care about us may repeatedly urge us to take action on our problem, but at this stage we are deaf to their pleas.
- contemplation: thinking about changing - about why one follows the bad habit, what its payoff is - bring both mind and emotions into play as one considers to commit to change.
- preparation: remove temptations, plan how action will be taken, arrange for support and understanding, arrange for substitutes for the missed habit or activity or substance and beware of substituting a new problem for the old.

In our case, we adopted the role of stopping people in their tracks at every opportunity to prevent them from springing into action mode without properly going through pre-contemplation, contemplation and preparation phases.

Put differently, we believe that revolutions take shape in small steps on a small scale, whereas evolutions can be done in great big strides with much easier solutions.

Closing remarks

We still wonder how successful the assignment will turn out to be. Did we sow seeds of renewal or will attention shift elsewhere soon? Was the most important intervention the discussion in the castle or leaking of the report through the grapevine? Will experiments inspired by the report outweigh possible damage of misuse by others? Only time will tell.

Insights in how to loosen up fixations do not do away with the need to deal with intervention paradoxes. Most organizations will not react favorably when you start attacking fixations left and right. It soon becomes a little much for the people involved. One can deepen the way people look at problems, but not too much otherwise the client is lost. The same holds true for the extent to which one introduces either multiple realities, new people, alternate games or limited scope and speed: when one overdoes it, the client is lost. There are always some fixations more cherished than others. It seems most effective to defixate those aspects where resistance is lowest (Termeer, 1993). Given that the fixations are interconnected anyhow, defixating one will affect the others. For instance when third parties are introduced, chances are that new ideas will seep in naturally, even when those same ideas previously would have met with much resistance. Handling wicked problems is thus a bit like the problems themselves: complex, dynamic and hard to pin down.

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