Creating shared commitment in the political context

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Overview

- Wicked Problems
- Opportunity Driven Problem Solving
- Social Complexity
- Taming the Problem
- Tackling the Problem
- Dialogue
- Shared Understanding
History

- “Wicked problems” introduced by Horst Rittel
- 10 defining characteristics
  - E.g. “1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem”
  - ‘Wicked’ = malignant, vicious, tricky, aggressive
  - ‘Tame’ = benign, stable, straightforward, docile
“Wicked” reflects Rittel’s concern with ethics.

“[It is unethical] for the planner to treat a wicked problem as though it were a tame one, or to tame a wicked problem prematurely, or to refuse to recognize the inherent wickedness of social problems.” (Rittel & Webber, *Dilemmas*, p. 161)
Definition of Wicked Problems

1. Each potential solution illuminates new aspects of the wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong.
4. Every wicked problem is essentially unique and novel.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation".
6. Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions.
Progress is viewed as a linear process ...

- Gather data about the problem
- Analyze the data
- Formulate a solution
- Implement it
... but reality is *non-linear*.

How We Humans Actually Approach Novel Problems

• Design process is non-linear, *Opportunity-Driven*

• Early attempts at solutions
  • Experiments
  • Prototypes
  • Hunches

• Late efforts to understand the real problem
Non-linear cognition means jumping around between issues

What is the problem? ...
What are the objectives? ...
What does ‘X’ mean? ...
What are the facts? ...
What should we do? ...
How should we do X? ...

Problem

Solution

Time
Key Characteristic of “Wicked” Problems


Every proposed solution ... … exposes new aspects of the problem.
You have to “do” to “plan”.

The red line fails on wicked problems!
Social Complexity:
A multiplier of problem wickedness
Approaching a wicked problem: Evasion tactics

“It’s not really a problem.”

(Denial)
Approaching a wicked problem: Evasion tactics

“It’s not my job.”
“It’s not in our charter.”
(Avoidance)
Approaching a wicked problem: Evasion tactics

“We understand the problem, and we've already solved it!”

(Engineering)
Freeze the problem definition

- Get agreement on the problem statement, then block any further discussion about the problem
- Drawback: Blocks learning
- Drawback: Frustrates innovation
Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

- Narrow the options
  - Start all meetings with a list of solutions that are “off the table”
  - *Drawback: Likely to eliminate robust solutions*
Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

- Exclude difficult stakeholders
  - Keep tight control on the meeting invitation process (for the sake of "progress")
  - Drawback: Don’t be surprised if the final solution gets blocked or sabotaged
Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

- Refocus on a smaller tame problem
  - Pick a sub-problem that you’re confident you can solve
  - Drawback: Early success, followed by ugly unintended consequences
  - Drawback: The problem becomes more wicked
Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

- Outsource the problem-solving process
  - Hire consultants who are experts on the problem
  - Drawback: Don’t expect much buy-in … except from the consultants!
  - Drawback: Beware Rittel’s “symmetry of ignorance”
Tackling Wicked Problems

A Public Policy Perspective

Contemporary Government Challenges

Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

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How to approach a wicked problem?

Three strategies (Roberts):

- **Authoritative**: Power is given to individual or small group
- **Competitive**: Stakeholders compete for power and resources
- **Collaborative**: Alliance among stakeholders for win-win solutions
Three strategies for wicked problems

- **Authoritative:** Power is given to individual or small group
  - Examples: an executive, a court
  - Pro: Efficient, Timely
  - Con:Brittle solutions that can ignore key issues
Three strategies for wicked problems

- **Competitive:** Stakeholders compete for power and resources
  - Example: When states compete for foreign and local investment
  - **Pro:** Innovation
  - **Pro:** Flexibility
  - **Con:** Conflict and stalemates
  - **Con:** Win-lose. Does not create shared commitment among stakeholders
Three strategies for wicked problems

- **Collaborative:** Alliance among stakeholders for win-win solutions
  
  - "Make those people who are being affected into participants of the planning process" (Rittel)

  Example: Partnerships, joint ventures

  **Pro:** More comprehensive solutions
  **Pro:** Higher stakeholder commitment
  **Con:** Increased transaction costs
  **Con:** Slow, unpredictable, time consuming
Shared Understanding
The Holy Grail of Collaboration

Shared understanding is the bridge

Fragmentation and conflict

Collaboration and unity

www.balsabridge.com
Shared Understanding

Shared understanding ... of what?
- Purpose and objectives
- Who the stakeholders are
- What the problem is
- What the options are
- Constraints on the solution
- Deliberation and decision process
Shared Understanding

- Shared understanding is *not* ...
  - agreement
  - consensus
  - group think
Shared Understanding

- What is shared is the range of perspectives among the stakeholders
  - Stakeholders understand what the others need
  - Each perspective is held as valid (if not “correct”)
- We agree to disagree
How to Create Shared Understanding

Dialogue

Listening  Transparency
The Physics of Shared Understanding

- Shared display creates shared understanding

http://bama.ua.edu
Summary

- Wicked problems (novelty)
- Learning is non-linear
  - Opportunity Driven Problem Solving
- Sequential approaches fail
- Taming the problem (ultimately) fails
- Shared understanding is essential
  - Precursor to shared commitment
- Collaboration and dialogue are necessary but slow
Summary

Wanted: A way to conduct dialogue (i.e. meetings) that...
- Is more efficient (avoids repetition, grand-standing, hand waving, etc.)
- Supports listening
- Tracks multiple perspectives
- Allows multiple issues to be explored in parallel
DIALOGUE MAPPING