

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



Utah History Fair, Utah State University

History

- “Wicked problems” introduced by Horst Rittel
 - “On the Planning Crisis: Systems Analysis of the ‘First and Second Generations”, 1972
 - “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning”, 1973 (with M. Webber)
- 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

History

"Wicked" reflects Rittel's concern with **ethics**.

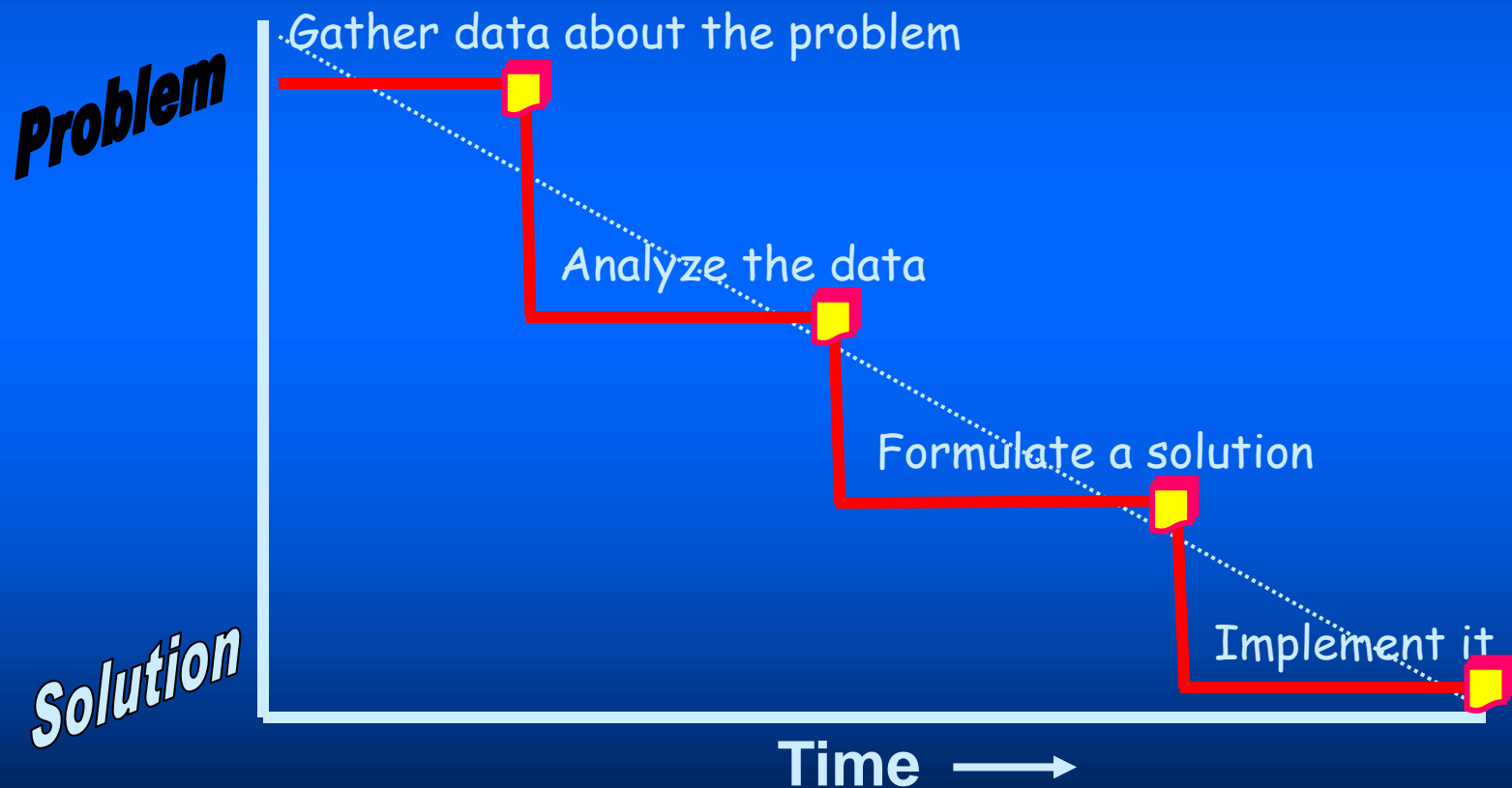
"[It is unethical] for the planner to treat a wicked problem as though it were a tame one, or to tame a wicked problem prematurely, or to refuse to recognize the inherent wickedness of social problems." (Rittel & Webber, *Dilemmas*, p. 161)

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 ...



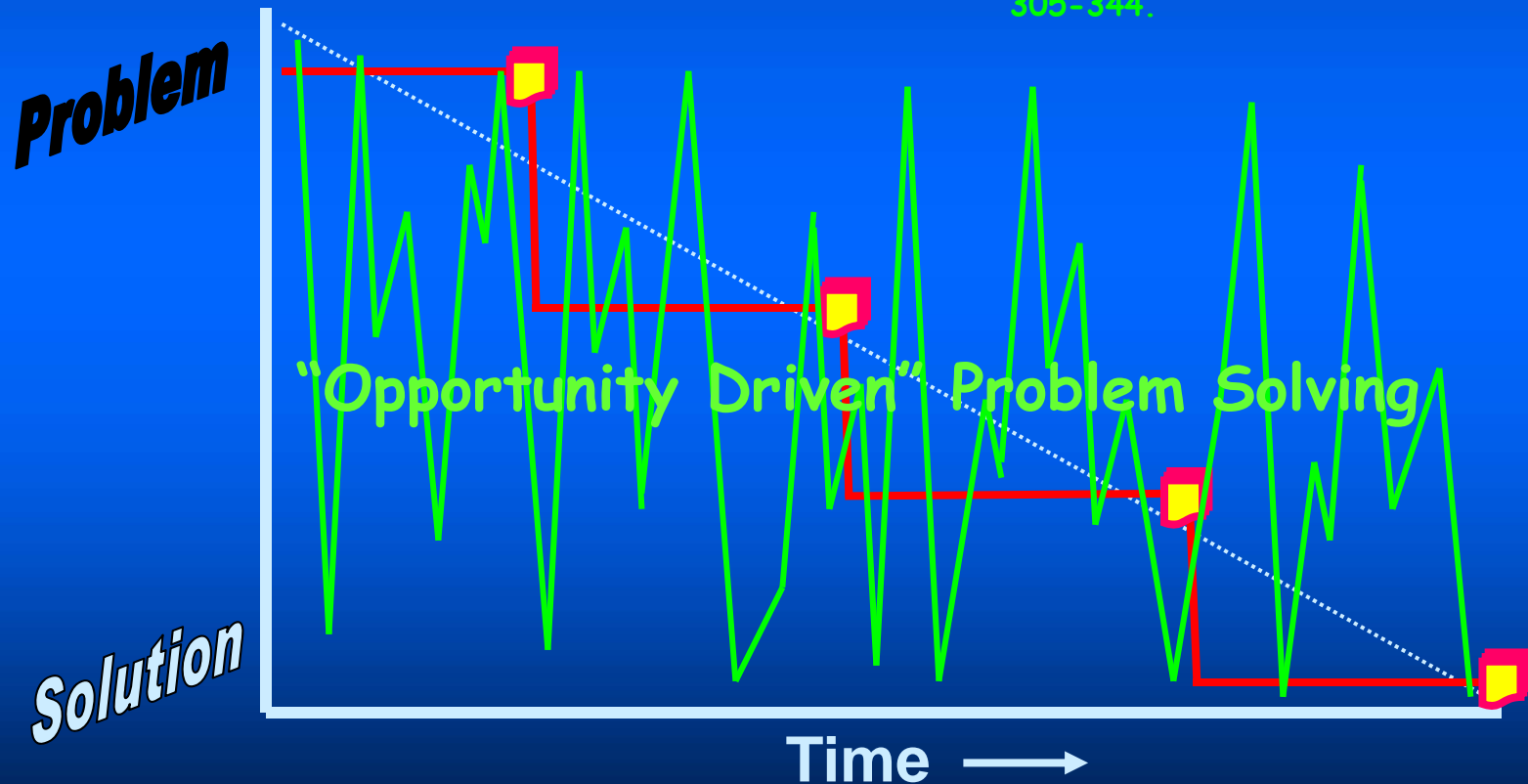
"EVOLUTION"

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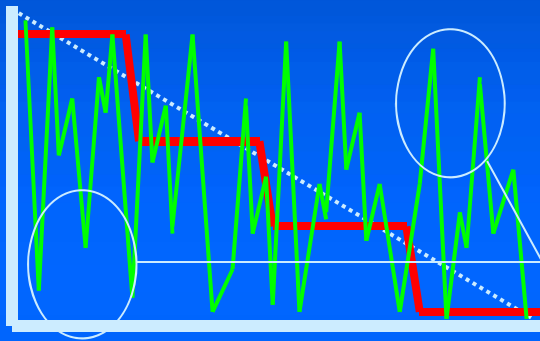


... but reality is *non-linear*.

Guindon, R. (1990) "Designing the Design Process: Exploiting Opportunistic Thoughts", *Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 5, pp. 305-344.

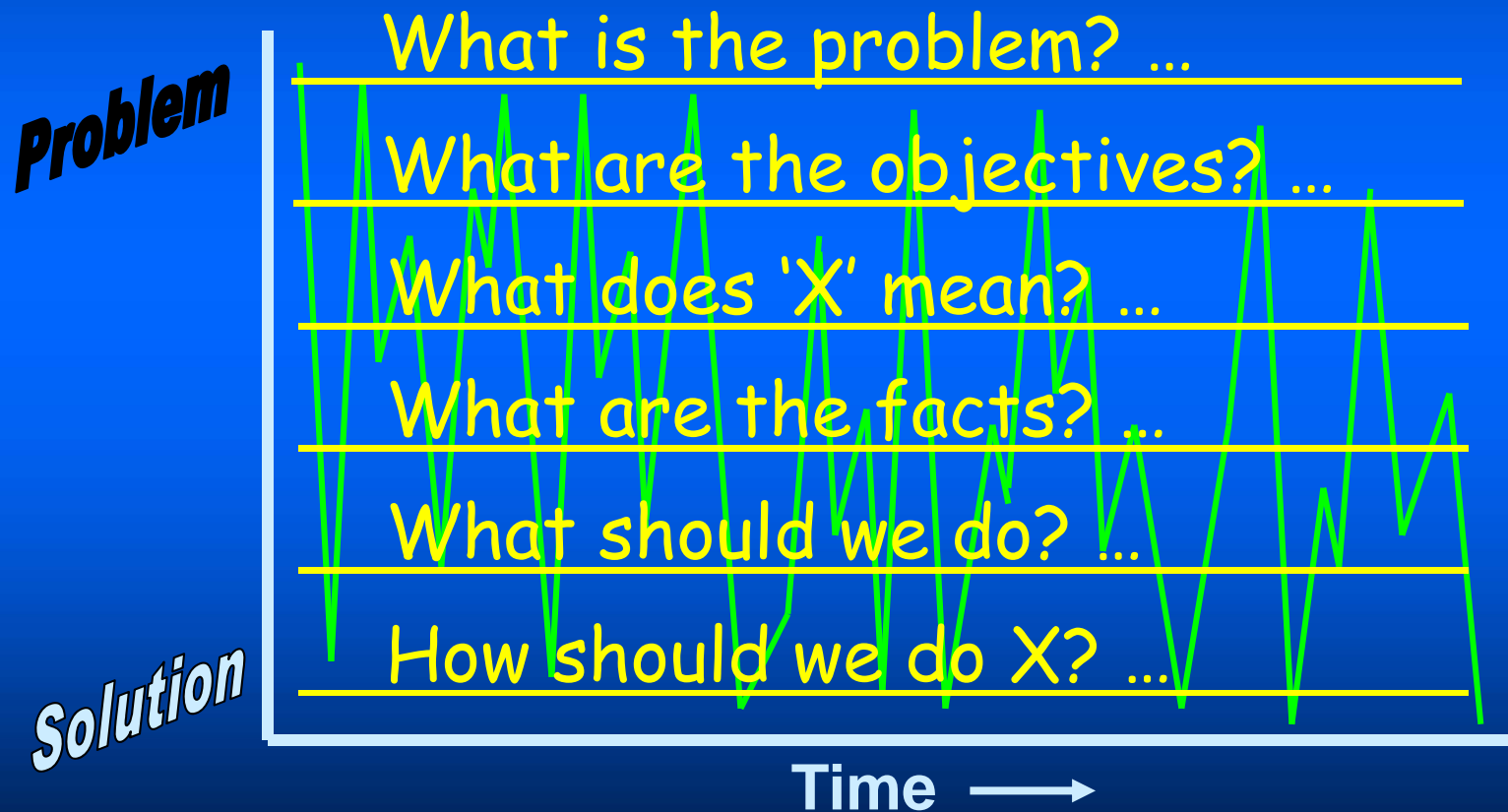


How We Humans Actually Approach Novel Problems



- Design process is non-linear, 'Opportunity-Driven'
- Early attempts at solutions
 - Experiments
 - Prototypes
 - Hunches
- Late efforts to understand the real problem

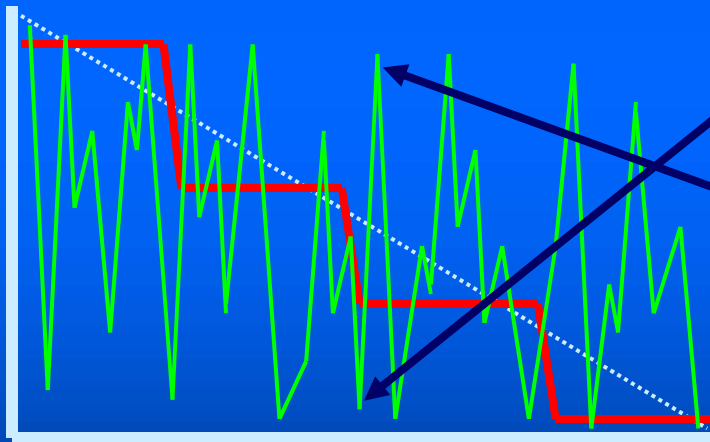
Non-linear cognition means jumping around between issues



Key Characteristic of "Wicked" Problems

Versus "Tame Problems"

Conklin, J. (2006) "Wicked Problems and Social Complexity", white paper, Chapter 1 of *Dialogue Mapping* book



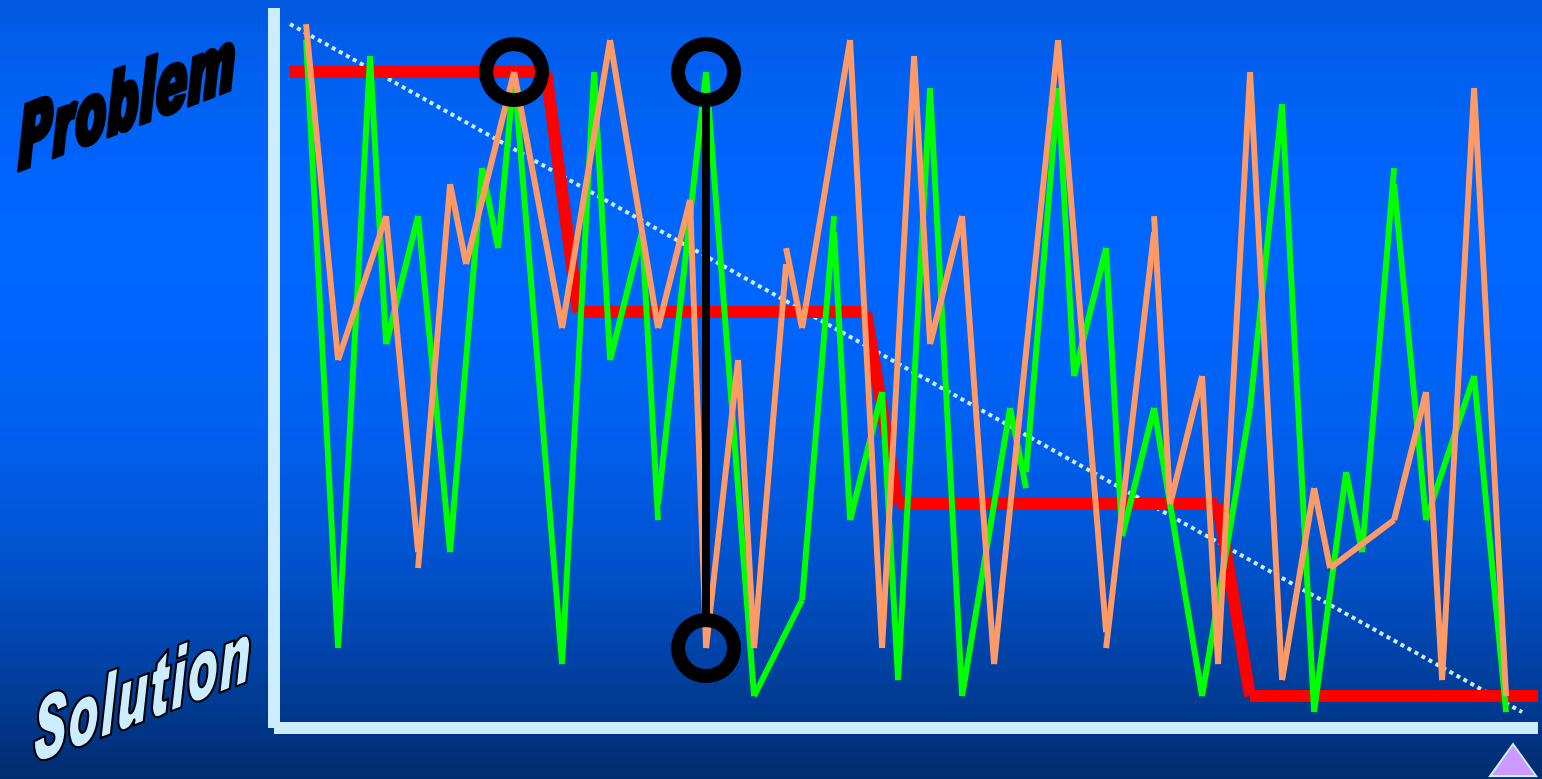
Every proposed solution ...
... exposes new aspects
of the problem.

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)



By KappaJota

Approaching a wicked problem: Evasion tactics

"We understand the problem, and we've
already solved it!"
(Engineering)



Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

- 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*

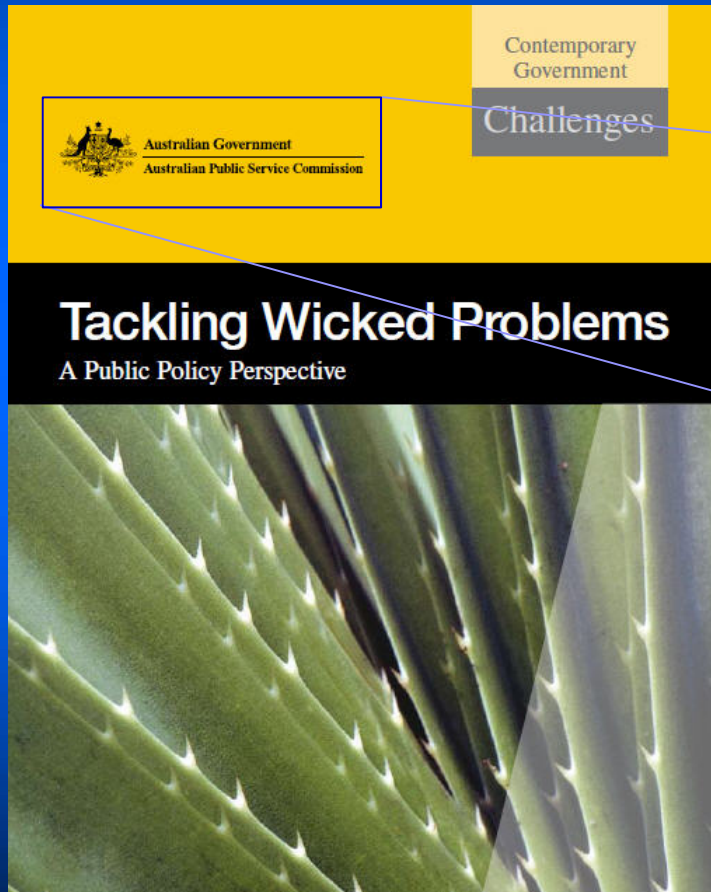
Approaching a wicked problem: Taming tactics

■ 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



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



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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



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Shared Understanding

The Holy Grail of Collaboration

Shared understanding is the bridge

Fragmentation
and conflict



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Collaboration
and unity

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



www.danaellyn.com

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

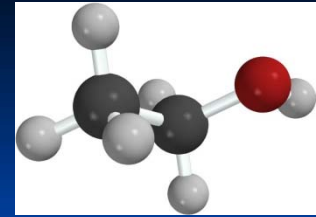
How to Create Shared Understanding

Dialogue

Listening

Transparency

The Physics of Shared Understanding



<http://bama.ua.edu>

- Shared display creates shared understanding



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

