Wicked Problems & Leadership

Keith Grint
The Problem with Change

Do different kinds of problems require different kinds of change?

1. Critical Problems: Commander

2. Tame Problems: Management

3. Wicked Problems: Leadership
Problems, Problems, Problems

Critical Problems: Commander

1. Portrayed as self-evident crisis; often at tactical level
2. General uncertainty – though not ostensibly by commander who provides ‘answer’
3. No time for discussion or dissent
4. Legitimates coercion as necessary in the circumstances for public good
5. Associated with Command
6. Encouraged through reward

Commander’s Role is to take the required decisive action – that is to:
provide the answer to the problem
Plato’s Philosopher-Kings:
Omnipotent and Omniscient Commanders

White Elephants:

1. Albino Elephant: Deity - Omniscient & Omnipotent
2. Expensive & Unnecessary & Foolhardy Expense
Problems, Problems, Problems


Problems as PUZZLES – there is a solution
Can be complicated but there is a unilinear solution to them – these are problems that management can (& has previously) solved

The problem of heart surgery is a Tame problem
It’s complicated but there is a process for solving it
& therefore it has a Managerial Solution/Answer

Launching a(nother) new product is a tame problem

Relocating is a tame problem

Heifetz: Technical leadership

Management’s role is to engage the appropriate process to solve the TAME problem
Management as a Science
F W Taylor’s engineering:
the application of science to achieve the one best solution
Wicked Problems have no simple solution because:

Either novel or recalcitrant
Complex rather than complicated (cannot be solved in isolation)
Sit outside single hierarchy and across systems – ‘solution’ creates another problem
They often have no stopping rule – thus no definition of success
Sometimes the solution precedes the problem analysis
May be intransigent problems that we have to learn to live with
Symptoms of deep divisions – contradictory certitudes
Have no right or wrong solutions but better or worse developments
Uncertainty & Ambiguity inevitable – cannot be deleted through correct analysis – Keat’s “Negative Capability”

Heifetz: Adaptive Leadership

Problems for leadership not management; require political collaboration not scientific processes - role is to ask the appropriate question & to engage collaboration
Wicked Problems tend to be beyond your experience

Hegel’s (1770-1831) Owl of Minerva – only spreads its wings at dusk

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55)

‘Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.’

Walter Benjamin’s (1892-1940) Angel of History: Faces the past but is ‘blown backwards into the future’.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

‘If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern which shines only on the waves behind us’

18/12/1831 Specimens of the Table Talk of by Coleridge
The problem of NIS improvements: Tame - efficiencies & budget cuts

The problem of NHS improvements: Wicked – from NIS to NHS –

e.g., 811,000 people in hospital in 2008 in UK through alcohol; cost - £2.7bn.

Professor Ian Gilmore, president of the Royal College of Physicians

Birmingham Total Place Final Report report (2010: 5)

96% of health spend on treating illness only 4% on keeping people well.
Peter Connelly (also known as "Baby P")

But what happens when an issue like this occurs?
+7.5% increase in referrals
2008/9 – 2009/10
Jan 2012: 903 apps to take children into care
Jan 2011: 698 apps to take children into care
2011: 9,300 extra children now in need of fostering

Peter Connelly (AKA "Baby P")

Extra Safeguarding Process

Ed Balls
Children’s Secretary

Sharon Shoesmith
Head Haringey children’s service
The highway from one merchant town to another shall be cleared so that no cover for malefactors should be allowed for a width of two hundred feet on either side; landlords who do not effect this clearance will be answerable for robberies committed in consequence of their default, and in case of murder they will be in the king’s mercy.

Given at Winchester, October 8, in the thirteenth year of the king’s reign.

—Statute of Winchester of 1285, Chapter V, King Edward I
Stierne sneryddes og gruses ikke i denne del af haven.

The paths in this part of the garden will not be cleared of snow and ice.

Slots- og Ejendomsstyrelsen
2003: FBU fire strike: reduced fires
USS Benfold 1997-1999
Guided missile destroyer

The Problem: the worst performing ship in the US Pacific Fleet
3C. BC Emperor Liu Bang held banquet on consolidation of China
Surrounded by nobles, military & political experts.
Guest asked Chen Cen (military expert) why Liu Bang was Emperor.
Chen Cen: ‘What determines the strength of a wheel?’
Guest: ‘The strength of the spokes’
Chen Cen: ‘2 sets of spokes of identical strength did not necessarily make wheels of identical strength. The strength was also affected by the spaces between the spokes, & determining the spaces was the true art of the wheelwright.’
Differentiating ‘Authority’ (legitimate power)

Command, Management, & Leadership

Command  Management  Leadership

Space  Tactical  Operational  Strategic

Time  Short Term  Medium Term  Long Term

Problem  Critical  Tame  Wicked
Differentiating Management, Leadership & Command

Command: just do it (it doesn’t matter what you think)

Management: déjà vu (I’ve seen this problem before; I know what process will solve it)

Leadership: vu jàdè (I’ve never seen this problem before; I need to get a collective view on what to do about this)
Problems & Power

Crisis

Coercive
Command

Etzioni’s forms of compliance

Tame

Calculative
Management

Wicked

Normative
Leadership
Increasing uncertainty about solution to problem

- **WICKED**
- **TAME**
- **CRITICAL**

**COMMAND:** Provide Answer

**MANAGEMENT:** Organize Process

**LEADERSHIP:** Ask Questions

- **COERCION/PHYSICAL**
  - Hard power
- **CALCULATIVE/RATIONAL**
- **NORMATIVE/EMOTIONAL**
  - Soft power

Increasing requirement for collaborative compliance/resolution
Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.

Laurence J. Peter