

Wicked Problems

Many of the problems that will characterize the twenty-first century—climate change, growing threats to public health such as obesity and rising cancer rates, effects of the global economic crisis—will contain an inextricable mix of social, economic, and environmental systems. Efforts to solve these problems will involve identifying a range of interconnected elements and examining how they are related. Even after the problems have been identified, solutions will affect other parts of related systems in unanticipated ways. Contradictory, shifting, complex, and ever-expanding circumstances for such problems often exceed current knowledge, particularly because different stakeholders have different sets of knowledge, standards, needs, and desires. These are wicked problems: “We use the term ‘wicked’ in a meaning akin to that of ‘malignant’ (in contrast to ‘benign’) or ‘vicious’ (like a circle) or ‘tricky’ (like a leprechaun) or ‘aggressive’ (like a lion, in contrast to the docility of a lamb).”

This pamphlet is premised on the idea that how a problem is defined simultaneously defines solutions to that problem—some solutions will seem feasible and desirable, while others are left unconsidered. For example, defining a wicked problem such as rising obesity in North America as an issue of consumer choice will result in different points of intervention than if it is defined as a problem stemming from industrial food systems and poverty. Thus, the process of defining a wicked problem and deciding where to draw boundaries concerning what is and is not part of the issue has effects on the world outside of the planning room. Because of these effects, being in a position to define problems is a form of power. This pamphlet is meant as a tool to become reflexive about both the wickedness of problems and the ethics of defining wicked problems. It is not a rulebook, but a set of thoughtful guidelines and a launching point for further thought for those dealing with wicked problems. It was written by consensus by twenty-two students and one professor over the course of a semester-long Environmental Communication class at New York University.

“By now we are all beginning to realize that one of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies). In turn, and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be.” In the facing below, “problems” refer to the difference between what is and what ought to be.

Best Practices of Defining Wicked Problems

1) When defining a problem, know that you will constantly have to redefine it, because any actions you take will modify the status of the problem, new knowledge will alter your understanding of the problem, and external factors will constantly interact with and influence the problem.

2) Ask: “Should I define this problem?” taking into account questions of personal, institutional and historical authority, privilege, and resources. Ask this question regularly throughout the process.

3 a) Gather information about the problem until your knowledge* plateaus and no new information* is found (saturation). Be sure to include depth (expertise) and context (breadth).

*Knowledge refers to processed information. Information refers to raw data.

3 b) Apply or think of solutions or types of solutions only after the step above has been addressed.

4 a) Include stakeholders so they can participate and advocate for their views and stakes.

4 b) Such as: Create a transparent, receptive, and accessible forum for stakeholders to participate that is well matched to stakeholders needs.

5) Recognize that problem identification is comprised of the points of view of multiple people involved and that subsequent analysis and definition will be inherently normative.†

† Where normative means a statement based on morals, ethics, and includes an “ought” or “should.”

6) Construct a metric of performance in advance to measure how effectively you have met your goal§ (rather than merely the objective),§ understanding that this measure may change over time.

§ Goals are long-term visions or values.

Objectives are time-limited actions or decisions that move a group closer to its broader goal.

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Writing by Consensus

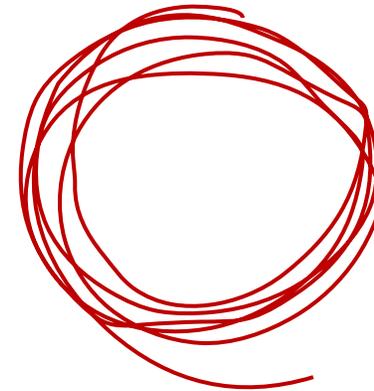
After an open discussion of what we wanted to write about, individuals could propose a sentence or paragraph. We then discussed any issues we had with the sentence, such as particular word choices and their implications, or what kind of work the sentence did. Finally, we used hand signals to indicate that we were happy with the sentence, unhappy with it, or had a smaller issue with it. If any one person indicated either of the last two situations, we returned to the discussion phase and started over. This does not mean that everyone agreed to the same degree on every part of this pamphlet, but that we all agreed that we could move forward with the writing at every point. We used the first or last 15 minutes of many classes to write this document, and spent an entire class period consensing on its final form.



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