

Reflections on Wicked Problems in Organizations

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Reading about the “wicked problems” at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs prompted reflections on my own experiences dealing with “covert processes,” or hidden dynamics, in organizations.

The nature of wicked problems in organizations is that they are both pernicious and problematic to address. People may know there are ongoing difficulties and complain loudly about them—usually in hallway conversations—but solutions other than resolute pronouncements are scarce. Proposed solutions tend to ignore or not account for the depth or complexity of the factors, keeping the problematic conditions in place and consequently wicked. There is also a paucity of professional literature conceptualizing and especially suggesting ways to address wicked problems. Thus, the discussion of wicked problems at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides a great service and rare opportunity to look more closely at these phenomena.

In reading their account of events, I found myself trying to discern the “theory of change” to address wicked problems implicit in what the authors/consultants were describing. This is not explicitly explained, so my interpretation may be off base or have missed some important nuances. Based on my reading, the following seem to be important aspects of the theory of change implicit in the efforts to address wicked problems at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

- Wicked problems in organizations need to be addressed by a mix of insiders and outsiders.
- Wicked problems need to be explained or accounted for in depth and preferably in engaging and provocative ways.
- The patterns causing wicked problems can be openly described, diagramed, and confronted, leading people to rationally change their behaviors and actions.

- Solutions for wicked problems can be and must be developed by those participating in creating and maintaining them.

This also seems consistent with a running theme in the account about confrontation and/or dialectical change—for example, the early questions about playing (intervening) within the normal interaction rules or bending the rules, or delivering what is requested versus surprising the client with unrequested interventions. Furthermore, the initial thoughts about how to intervene were to set up a debate drawing on three outside experts to each represent a contrasting rationality. This was explicitly intended to “fuel a debate amongst the participants.” The theme of fueling a debate amongst the participants seemed to continue through the ultimate intervention wherein a report detailing the nature of the wicked problems, but not necessarily explicitly how to address them, was presented at a special meeting. It was also acknowledged that the report would not meet most people’s expectations, but that the chosen approach would more likely induce (force) people to engage in nonsuperficial ways and thereby confront taken-for-granted assumptions and approaches.

Based on my own work with covert processes, or hidden dynamics, in organizational change (Marshak, 2006), I found myself agreeing in parts with what I read but also wondering about some other aspects not mentioned. These may have occurred or been addressed in the actual case and simply not have been highlighted in the account. I raise them here not as a way to second guess the excellent case presentation but as a way to contribute some additional reflections on wicked problems.

In my own orientation, contributing factors to creating and sustaining wicked problems in organizations are the nonrational and hidden dimensions often involved. For example, a great deal of organizational life and change

theory is based on assumptions of rationality. That is, people will change if presented with a rational case for change or the proper facts and figures. This is almost always a necessary, but rarely sufficient, condition for change in organizations. Instead, other nonrational dimensions need to be accounted for, including internal politics; inspirations in the form of people's untapped values, hopes, and dreams; suppressed emotions and reactive feelings including fear, anger, and loss; implicit mindsets such as assumption sets, mind maps, and culture; and the psychodynamics associated with change, anxiety, and loss.

In the case discussion, rationally confronting the leadership with the mental maps associated with the Ministry's interconnected wicked problems appears to be the dominant intervention. Less clear is whether or to what degree the other nonrational, nonmindset aspects of the situation were accounted for or addressed. For example, in what ways might certain groups, professions, or roles within the Ministry benefit from a continuation of the wicked problems by advantaging their needs and interests or by lessening their workload or accountability? In other words, were the political dynamics associated with and contributing to the persistence of the wicked problems accounted for? In terms of inspirations, did the report tap into people's highest values, hopes, and dreams for what might be possible in the Ministry as an added source of energy to foster change, or did it rely primarily on a disconfirming analysis of the way things are? In the meeting presenting the report and the discussions throughout the organization following the meeting, were there ways to channel or allow expression of negative emotions such as anger and fear, or might these have been converted into rationalizations about why the report was flawed or no change was possible? In addition to addressing the mental maps of the wicked problems at the Ministry, were other potentially relevant tacit mindsets contributing to the context of the discussions also explicitly considered, for example, the potential trained incapacity of diplomats schooled in the arts of diplomacy to adopt different attitudes, skills, and tacit assumptions when dealing with internal organizational and administrative issues, or for high level members of the Ministry, which is part of the Dutch government, to operate nonpolitically? Finally, might psychodynamic responses such as "fight-flight," projection, denial, or compensation contribute to the persistence of wicked problems, and if so, how might these dynamics be accounted for or addressed? Again, all these considerations might have been addressed in some way in the actual case or within the mental maps of the wicked problems contained in the report, but not presented in the account.

The potential existence of covert factors that contribute to wicked problems also raises some considerations in intervention approaches. Again, drawing on my own work, there are a number of things to keep in mind when dealing with the covert aspects of wicked problems. A few examples will be mentioned here. These include the need to create a psychologically safe enough environment to allow expression of undiscussable or unwanted thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Given the statement in the case account that "the blood is still dripping from the walls from the last consultants that diagnosed the big picture years ago," it is questionable how open discussions could be without efforts to create some safety and trust. This is not explicitly mentioned in the case account but presumably occurred in some way to allow the types of discussions reported. Another aspect is the need to frame the issues in enabling ways such that participants feel that it is possible to address the situation and get results versus being overwhelmed by the scope, complexity, and intransigence of the issues and parties involved. If overwhelmed, the participants might psychologically regress, act dependent, or have a convenient rationalization for not addressing the "impossible" situation. Again, this is not discussed in the case account, although the approach described suggests that the authors/consultants might have taken a contrary path with the intent of confronting the system with the depth and complexity of the issues and thereby hope to motivate a more sustained and serious response.

Wicked problems do not necessarily lend themselves to unqualified success stories. We all benefit when we are invited in to see a detailed account of the issues, difficulties, and dilemmas involved. The word *wicked*, of course, also has meanings connoting "excellence" or "to be highly skilled." In those senses of the word, the authors/consultants of this case were quite generous in providing us with a very wicked account indeed.

Reference

- Marshak, R. J. (2006). *Covert processes at work: Managing the five hidden dimensions of organizational change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

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