A Response to "'Defixation' as Intervention Perspective

Understanding Wicked Problems at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs"

Christopher G. Worley
Center for Effective Organizations, USC

Authors Stoppelenburg and Vermaak describe an engagement with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs where a set of messy problems relating to reform movements in government and the way the organization "steers" itself are the focus of an intervention. The case describes how a group of consultants worked with a group of organization members to address a wicked mess—a problem having a large effect on an organization's functioning that persists despite repeated attempts to address it. The authors do us a great service by presenting a case with a messy problem and reflecting on the questions, "How is this to be solved?" and "What is the right and proper role of the consultant vis-à-vis messy problems?" I can honestly say that the case study and the authors' explanations both incensed me and intrigued me. Let us start with intrigue.

Organizations Are Rewarded for Stability and Reproducibility but Pressured to Change

Modern organizations are in a real bind. On one hand, the population ecology literature clearly points to the pervasiveness and utility of inertia (Aldrich, 1999; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Once an organization establishes itself and can reproduce successes well enough to ensure survivability, there is a strong bias toward maintenance of the status quo. Goals, activities, processes, systems, and structures all work to support a particular strategic orientation. On the other hand, each system is also under unique influences and pressures to change and do so somewhat independently. When multiple systems evolving on their own trajectory must integrate with the other systems and do so, it often is because of tacit social arrangements to "get things done." Attempts to upset this reproducible, if kludgy, arrangement are met with all manner of defensive routines. One can only imagine how those forces intensify within a government setting.

In that context, getting an organization to address a problem it would probably avoid, even though it holds the promise of improving financial and social efficiency, is a process worth studying. As practitioners or researchers, how many times have we—through a collaborative diagnostic process—identified "the" key issue and helped our clients see it as pivotal only to have them throw up their hands or have the larger organization engage in some kind of defensive routine that prevents the issue from being addressed? I empathize with the authors' desire to address the ministry's problems.

These organization behaviors are not some normal sort of "resistance" but a much deeper pathology that exists in most (all?) organizations. It is part of the deep cultural assumptions that Schein (1992) describes that reconcile contradictory behaviors and values alongside the strategic issues of brand, reputation, and image in the marketplace (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Such organizational identity issues tell us a lot about the organization itself, about what kinds of changes will and will not work, and the kind of inertia we as consultants and managers and leaders as clients are up against. It is no wonder that large-scale, planned change attempts have such a poor track record.

The case describes the consultants' choices along the way, but I think it is red herring to debate or critique whether the intervention—the report's length, the diagrams, and the meeting at the castle—was right or good or whether it was too complex or too simple. Consultants and clients make these choices within a context, a contract, and the idiosyncrasies of a present situation. As they describe it, it all makes good sense, but it distracts us from the issue. The larger observation and issue that I would like to see the authors reflect on is the

choices they made in working primarily with the plvDG-council and not the larger system.

It is clear from similar cases that there is little chance of successfully addressing wicked messes without the commitment of senior management. But, it is also probably true that addressing messy problems will require a systemic intervention. By definition, messy problems have multiple drivers and a history of attempts to address them. Typically, these are of the "one off" variety where the intervention involves only one facet of the problem. In this case, the authors are silent on the extent to which other branches of government, the citizenry, organization members, or other stakeholders were involved. It may be that there is little in the way of positive progress in the case because only senior managers were included in the "steering" inquiry. Addressing wicked, messy problems probably requires a much broader approach—a "get the whole system in the room" kind of intervention (Weisbord, 1987).

In sum, thinking about how to address or solve messy, wicked problems deserves research attention, and the authors make an important contribution to our thinking. As applied social and behavioral scientists, we should be working to understand these phenomena.

Researchers and Practitioners Involved in Change Must Define Their Boundaries Carefully

But, we also need to move to what incensed me about this article, and this is a much more delicate issue. I will state honestly that there were times while thinking about this case and my response that I was judgmental about the way things were handled, and that is not a fair stance. I am reminded that whenever I point the finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at me. With that in mind, as an article reflecting on practice, I wanted to hear more about the relationship between the consultants and the system.

To be fair, the authors were up front in saying that they were driving this change, and that is what I think we should talk about. The project "was initiated by the research team itself and designed to challenge rather than to meet expectations." If this was a conscious choice by both parties, then some of the valence on this issue is muted, but there is no evidence of such an agreement in this case. That is, the initial boundaries of most engagements are defined by a contract or agreement, whether explicit and formal or verbal and informal. In this case, the contracting process is complicated by history and potentially by culture. The consultants appear to have a positive reputation for successful change efforts in the embassies and there may be some shared understandings that are not apparent to the reader or worth mentioning by the authors. There *is* explicit language that the consultants worked for months on the project without a contract. Without knowing either the content of the contract (what was the expected delivery) or the psychological components of the contract (how the process was to unfold), it is easy to be judgmental, so that is a clear "missing" for me.

The authors did state, as the case unfolded, their desire to transfer ownership of the problem and intervention to the plvDG-council—but I fear this was more window dressing than substantive intent. It is like the manager who asks for input from subordinates even though he or she has already made the decision. As presented, the consultants/authors took a suggestion from a brainstorming session with VBTB project manager "C" and turned it into *their* agenda.

The authors lament that wicked problems "get ignored by consultants who are generally neither requested to address them nor appreciated for trying to do so. Thus we *condemn* ourselves as practitioners to do less relevant work" (italics added). As consultants, we are not victims—we have choice and if we believe there is no joy in working *with* an organization, then we should probably retreat into the comfort of our offices and analyze secondary data. However, if we decide to engage with organizations and help them, a clinical relationship brings with it an obligation to separate our own volition and intent from the client's. Who or what gives us the right to pressure an organization to address wicked problems it doesn't want to? Because we know better? Because of our research interests? In short, we must be clear about whose needs are being worked. Absent the contract details, my fear is that the consultants believed their contract was to force the organization to look at the issue of steering. This raises the question of whether the ends—which do not appear all that fantastic—justify the means.

Finally, the authors ask, "To what extent are we responsible for future consequences or needed continuity of our interventions?" These are not new questions, and practitioners of organization development have worried about them for decades. Beer and Eisenstat (1996) describe the trials and tribulations of a long-term effort to improve an organization's change capability and, importantly, their reflections on their part in the not-entirely-successful effort. Schein (1998) encourages us

to "always try to be helpful." That doesn't mean wimping out and colluding with senior managers to exercise their influence and power over the less powerful (Cummings, 1999), nor does it mean forcing our solutions onto the client system. Confronting the client with data, options, alternatives, and consequences is a responsibility, speaking truth to power is almost always an obligation, but choice for the intervention and accountability for the outcomes rest with the client system . . . always.

This is not some clever ethical sleight of hand to avoid being responsible; it is a value basis for empowering systems, inviting them to be accountable for their own choices, and helping them to learn. It is also not easy. Telling someone what to do is easy; creating the trust and space in a relationship for a manager/client to say, "I'm going to try something different that I think will improve performance, but I'm scared and I will need the help of those around me," is hard. We can see this dynamic in the case when the consultants moved from trying to create debates (and having meetings cancelled or postponed) to doing some research on why things work the way they do. Instead of telling them how to solve the problem, they moved to a stance of "laying bare" how the organization worked. It opened up the possibility for the clients to solve their own problems. Diagnosing is understanding and intervening. We don't *condemn* ourselves to irrelevancy when we facilitate awareness, choice, and internal commitment (Argyris, 1973).

So, we are left with a conundrum . . . which is the intrigue. . . . Will organizations change without a kick in the teeth from the environment or from the consultant? I do not remember who I heard this from or where I read it (so my apologies), but I was struck by the phrase, "The environment will teach you if you let it." Wicked problems are the result of internal and external forces operating on multiple systems at different speeds and an inability to orchestrate the alignments over time. Inside this Gordian knot, consultants practicing organization development must increase the flow of information and use it to coordinate and orchestrate change in all the relevant systems over and over again. When systems build the capability to do this themselves, they are adaptable and agile. When organizations seek help, the researchers and consultants who agree to work with them must be sure of their own values. They must craft processes and deliverables in such a way that the organization develops its own ability to change or accepts responsibility for keeping things the way they are.

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Christopher G. Worley (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is a Research Scientist at USC's Center for Effective Organizations in the Marshall School of Business. He is also an Associate Professor of Management and former Director of the MSOD program at Pepperdine University. Dr. Worley is coauthor of Built to Change, Integrated Strategic Change and Organization Development and Change, the leading textbook on organization development. He is a member of NTL, the Academy of Management, and the ODNetwork. His recent consulting clients include Microsoft, American Healthways, The Hartford, and BP. He lives in San Juan Capistrano with his wife and three children.