

CLIMATE CHANGE

A Wicked Problem (Part II)

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Last month, in Part I, we introduced the idea that climate change is a wicked problem. In part II, we elaborate on this idea, and offer some insights on how to manage that problem.

Many of us, in one way or another, are in the business of solving problems. In essence, this involves moving situations from “what is” to “what ought to be.” The conventional approach to problem solving is very logical and linear. We gather and analyze data so that we can first understand the problem, and then we identify and implement interventions to solve it.

For some problems, this approach is easy enough to follow and works well. For example, suppose the problem is that you are on one side of the river (what is) and need to be on the other (what ought to be). There are several crossing options – a bridge, a boat, a suspended rope, a swim – all could be solutions. There might be some other options that could work, but only a few. One option, evidently, would be best. Once you are on the other side, your problem is solved.

For other, more complex problems, though, this approach doesn’t work. These problems are “wicked,” and cli-

mate change is one of them.

The Lowdown on Wicked Problems

In the late 1960s, Horst Rittel (an urban planner at University of California, Berkeley) gave a presentation on intractable planning problems. He presented a list of properties of complex problems that make them difficult to deal with. Someone in the audience spoke up – “those are wicked problems!”¹ The name stuck.

The following properties are characteristic of wicked problems:

1. The problem is ill structured – there is no single and firm definition of the problem, or of what constitutes a solution. Different stakeholders will view the problem and judge solutions differently.
2. Every wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways – the choice of explanation, in turn, determines the nature of the problem’s resolution.
3. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.

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¹ See “wicked problem” in Wikipedia and Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973), “Dilemmas in a general theory of planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4, 155-169.

Our inclination is to treat wicked problems to be much simpler than they are, and fail to recognize the full scope of the problem. Sometimes, we see only a big mess ... We must instead recognize and accept the wickedness for what it is.

4. There is no "stopping rule" that indicates when a solution is found. The problem-solving process typically ends when we find a solution that is "good enough," not when we find the "correct" solution.
5. There is no exhaustive set of given alternative solutions.
6. Solutions are neither "true" nor "false." We can't think in terms of a true or false plan. Instead, solutions are typically judged as "better" or "worse," or "good enough," or "satisfactory."
7. There are so many factors that shape a problem that every wicked problem is essentially unique. No two problems are exactly alike, so solutions will always need to be customized.

These properties, to a greater or lesser extent, are characteristic to all social and environmental policy problems. We have seen them all before. And, we have learned that we can't solve them by following the traditional approach to problem solving – first to understand, and then to solve.

And the Survey Says ...

In 2006, we interviewed more than 20 municipal councillors and staff from across Canada about the issues and challenges that municipalities face in trying to respond effectively to climate change. Interviewees indicated the problem is one of too little awareness and understanding, of a lack of acceptance that climate change is serious and urgent, and of culture (i.e. of wanting to do things the way they've always been done, rather than in new ways). They

identified the need for clear direction on how to adapt. One interviewee indicated that the solution lies in the HR departments – they need to hire people with different skills and expertise. Others pointed out that climate change cuts across many areas, and line departments struggle to deal with these kinds of issues. They identified the need for different systems of governance.

More than 20 people, all engaged, informed and well-meaning, offered their perspectives on the problem. Their combined perspective didn't provide a clear articulation of the problem (point 1, above). They offered different explanations for the problem, all pointing to different interventions (i.e. public education and outreach; new hiring practices; new governance systems; etc.). Undoubtedly, they could have elaborated on potential interventions, for there is no shortage of them (point 5). Whatever "solutions" they eventually arrive at, we will only be

able to describe them as "good enough" or "bad," or something similar. We can't really speak of a "correct" or "true" climate change plan (point 6). It's no stretch to see that each of the other criteria are met.

Indeed, climate change is a wicked problem. And, because of that, it can't be solved using traditional problem-solving methods.

Climate Change Management 1-2-3

So what do we do? The first step in coping with wickedness is to *recognize it for what it is*. Our inclination is to treat wicked problems to be much simpler than they are, and fail to recognize the full scope of the problem. Sometimes, we see only a big mess – *there are so many divergent views, it is too much to make sense of, the path forward isn't clear*, etc. – and feel paralyzed.

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We must instead recognize and accept the wickedness for what it is – a recurring and systemic feature of these kinds of issues – and build our capacity to deal with it.

Next, *get started!* Our traditional approach of first understanding the problem and then solving it doesn't work. Simply identifying the problem – i.e. distinguishing “what is” and “what ought to be” – can be a major challenge, let alone charting a clear course to get there. The other option is to jump right in. Start working towards solutions.

Maintain a learning orientation. Just as the problem context will always change, so too will your understanding of the problem and of potential solutions. Continue to learn about the different dimensions of the problem, the processes and tools for identifying workable interventions, and for what might constitute an agreeable solution. Learn about the players involved, your partners, and how to harness each of your respective strengths in pursuit of shared interests. As you do, you will understand the problem better and better, and inch closer and closer to a “good enough” solution.

Have dialogue. Climate change has a huge array of implications that will draw interest from a great many stakeholders. They will have a diversity of

interests, and come from a variety of backgrounds, cultures and organizations. In this environment, solving the problem is fundamentally a social process. It isn't so much about having the “right answer” as it is about having something that all stakeholders can agree to (even if only for a short while). Dialogue is a vehicle for building a shared understanding about the problem situation, a shared commitment to a problem-solving process, and buy-in to an eventual solution.

The answers to the climate change challenge aren't in any one of the environment departments or the engineering departments or the planning departments, or any one other place. They can only be discovered, through the collective efforts of all those that are part of the solution – including local government departments, partners in public health, universities, non-governmental organizations and the community-at-large.

The climate change challenge will put local government leadership to the test. Local government leaders can respond by building the bridges with all those that have a role to play, by building a shared understanding of the challenge and a shared commitment to a response – and by working collaboratively to reach solutions that work. *AAW*



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