Leadership as a Wicked Problem

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a decade ago, John C. Camillus, writing in the venerable Harvard Business Review, declared, via the article's title, "Strategy as a Wicked Problem" (2008). His premise, honed from study of corporate strategies, was that companies were increasingly employing multiple methods to quantify reams of data now available and from the data, models were emerging to formulate strategy. However, Camillus asserted, these models, regardless of sophistication, would be soon of little use. His argument rested on the concept of Wicked Problems, attributed to Rittel and Webber (1973). Recently this term and has re-emerged as a framework, and some might even say warning, in business, government, education, healthcare and politics when organizations are beset by situations that cannot be solved by previous solutions or conventional wisdom.

Succinctly, a 'wicked problem,' has no concrete solution. Nor does it have a replicable solution. Any solution attempted often begets yet another problem and, the original wicked problem, or its offspring, are either right or wrong depending upon the affected constituency (Camillus, 2008; Kolko, 2012; Rittel & Webber, 1973). (See Box 1).

Albert Einstein, who certainly addressed a wicked problem that clearly led to a myriad of wickeder problems, is reported to have said: We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Grint (2010) explained that we each hold on to our own beliefs as the only true belief even though we know at another level others do not see the problem or its solution as we do. Human nature prefers, as it is so much less messy, to deal in either 'tame' problems. Grint (2010) adds that in the case of wicked problems, the problem often becomes even more wicked as people 'delay decision-

Box 1.

1. Wicked problems have no definitive formulation. Individuals in Appalachia and Malawi define poverty differently.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping point. Arriving at a so-called solution simply starts another set of problems.
3. Solutions to wicked problems can be only good or bad, not true or false. Attempting to eradicate corruption may be good for some and certainly bad for others.
4. There is no rubric or guide to use for tackling a wicked problem, although history may provide a guide. However, unintended consequences are a constant consequence of attempting to solve a wicked problem.
5. There is always more than one explanation for a wicked problem as there are multi-stakeholders contributing to or considering the gravity of a wicked problem.
6. Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem. Increasing opportunity for education for girls and women can upset social structures within countries or communities.
7. There is no scientific, strategic approach to a wicked problem. There are hypotheses for segments of the problem but, because of the multiple viewpoints, no defined goal.
8. Any significant change process requires involvement of as many stakeholders as possible so as to insure the different definitions of the problem are understood as well as possible.
9. Every wicked problem is unique.
10. The people who attempt to solve the problem are held liable for their attempt.

Composite definitions from Camillus (2008) and Kolko (2012). Based on the original definitions of and Webber (1973).

making while you engage in yet more consultation and collaboration" (p. 307). Camillus (2008) is more direct. He quotes Mary Poppendieck, that all the easy problems have been solved (p. 9).

This chapter applies the concept of Wicked Problems to the teaching of leadership. Piggybacking on Camillus (2008) and others, it argues that current attitudes and approaches to the teaching of and research in leadership need to be revised in order to prepare leaders for our highly complex and wicked problem-beset world. Traditionally, leadership, by its connotation of authority, is supposed to solve and control problems. Yet, wicked problems are not controllable nor can they be solved by fiat. If, as Camillus (2008) contends, strategists are 'ill-equipped' to face wicked problems, this author argues the equal contention is that teaching of leadership as primarily a command and control function may no longer be an effective or even plausible leadership strategy.

The chapter does not, nor is it intended to, malign or refute the myriad of thinking on leadership from the teachings of authors well known and respected in this field. Neither does it delve into the research of leadership. Rather, it looks at leadership through the context of wicked problems. The chapter's primary goal is to offer the idea that educators, strategist, politicians, and those in businesses large and small, no longer consider leadership as embodied in an individual or a singular hierarchical construct. The chapter suggests that we redefine leadership as a dynamic process.

The chapter begins with the definition of wicked problems, outlines several examples of wicked problem situations across industries, continues with a limited review of leadership syllabi and texts and ends with suggestions on reframing and recasting the study of leadership juxtaposed with the Rittel and Webber (1973) definition.

WICKED PROBLEMS

It is necessary to step back a moment to examine the original Rittel and Webber (1973) concept. The authors begin by outlining what the role of the professional once was: "solving an assortment of problems that appeared to be definable, understandable and consensual" (p. 156). From their perspective of public planning, they saw, as far back as 1973, that problems were increasingly unable to be defined. They continue:

As distinguished from problems in the natural sciences, which are definable and separable and may have solutions that are findable, the problems of governmental planning--and especially those of social or policy planning--are ill defined; and they rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution. (Not "solution." Social problems are never solved. At best they are only re-solved--over and over again.") (p. 160)

The focus is on the sentence most central to this chapter- social problems are never solved. Many problems today, over 40 years since the original article appeared, are also never solved or, as Camillus (2008) portends, in the formulation of strategy. If strategy is difficult to formulate and quantify, we may have entered a world of unsolvable wicked problems. Extrapolating further, it stands that leadership, inherently tied to strategy, can no longer be seen as a person or hierarchy able to solve a problem.

Leadership and Wicked Problems

As evidenced by the literature, wicked problems cross multiple industries and structures: this section outlines several.

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