



Developing positive solutions to wicked problems – a new challenge for leaders

Resolving performance problems has always been a key role of leaders throughout organisations.

When organisational stress emanating from the economic environment increases, problem solving becomes even more critical. A new challenge for leaders is to recognise that there are different types of problem and that they demand different approaches, if they are to be successfully resolved.

Tame, critical and wicked problems

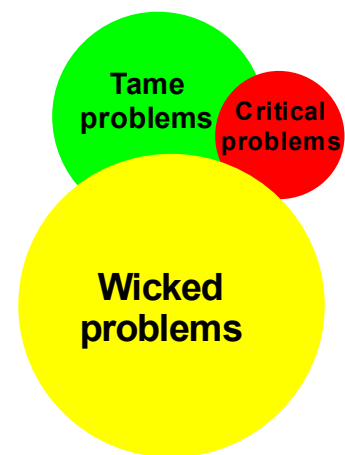
Tame problems are where the causes of the problem are known. Experience is a good guide to tackling these problems. This leads to the application of known processes through conventional plans and projects. A typical tame problem would be a quality standard drifting outside control limits. The underlying approach is one of management – sharing information and other resources, delegating responsibility and working through familiar structures – just doing the same things better.

Critical problems require a different approach. Because these problems threaten the very survival of the organisation in the short term, decisive action is called for, and people are required to follow the call for action in a highly disciplined way. In the absence of time to do a detailed, objective analysis, solutions may be adopted that are assumed to be valid. But a partially successful response is better than standing by idly as the organisation expires. A not-uncommon critical problem is a company running out of funds to support its continuing existence. Here, a leader takes charge, often using an authoritarian command and control style.

Wicked problems are different again. They involve complex, messy and often intractable challenges. There are no known solutions, partly because the causes are themselves complex, ambiguous and often interconnected – multiple causes and causal chains abound. Because there are no, single linear causes, there no single, big solutions. The first decisive step in tackling wicked problems is for leaders to recognise them for what they are, and avoid applying management or command actions. The leader's key role is to ask challenging questions, including 'what ifs'. The goal is to find patterns in the data describing the problem; use the collective intelligence built up through connections and relationships throughout the organisation; use constructive dissent to flush out new insights; and build comfort for people to explore the unknown and test innovative solutions.

Typical wicked problems involve challenges such as achieving needed sales while complying with regulations; reducing crime; losses of too many good people; the 'sick organisation syndrome'; disruptive changes in markets or technologies.

Sound easy? Perhaps not – many wicked problems may, in any case, be beyond total resolution. But there is a new way to tackle wicked problems that has a good track record of success.



Two tracks are better than one

Every wicked problem is an opportunity to gain a double advantage. As well as resolving the wicked problem, what is needed is the development of a more resilient organisation. This is one that constantly adapts to a changing environment, either by reacting to current problems or by anticipating future problems. This will mean an enhanced capacity for tackling future wicked problems.

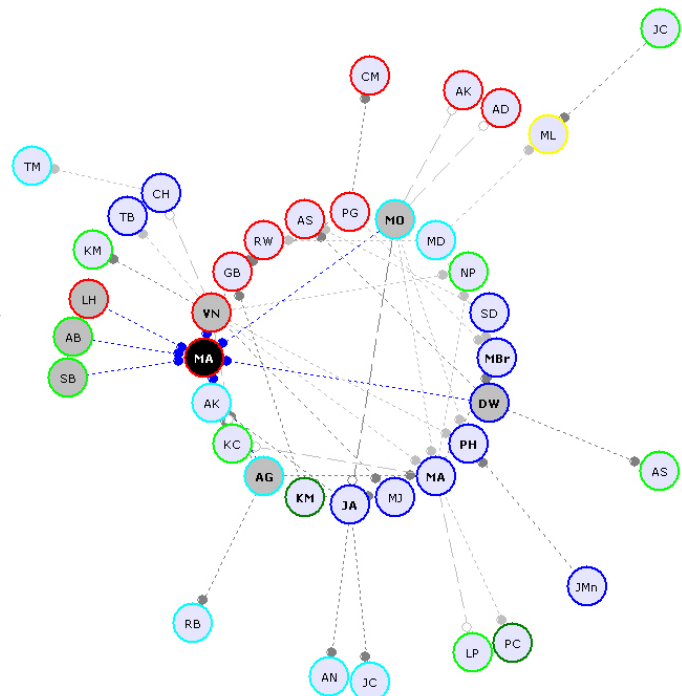
INL and its associates have researched organisational resilience for two decades – and have developed the methodologies required to assess an organisation's current state and to achieve dramatic improvements. The key inputs that determine organisational resilience are concerned with practices and processes, especially those that involve the management of people. The release of latent energy, and the capacity to resolve wicked problems are both high when people:

- Have better information to guide their decision making
- Can engage in multiple, collaborative interactions with colleagues.
- Are better networked with colleagues inside and outside the organisation.
- Feel safe to develop and try innovative, new ideas with colleagues.
- Can learn and develop through doing rather than just taking in information.

All INL assignments target the resolution of a priority wicked problem. All have a second track that is implicit in the design of the intervention. This is to stimulate changes in organisational practices and processes that will enable the organisation to develop its capacity for resolving future wicked problems.

INL methodology

Specialist INL practitioners work through influence networks. Key influencers who are change positive are identified and their networks developed. These people are high on connectedness, betweenness and reciprocity, and have a good balance of internal and external connections. They may have a moderate degree of centrality, but they may also be dispersed throughout the organisation. Part of their contribution is to draw in others with specialist knowledge and skills to add to the problem resolution mix.



Information defining the nature of the challenges is generated, using Magus Networker. The data are displayed graphically to facilitate interpretation, analysis for cause and translation into action. Developmental action is emergent, but always driving towards the achievement of strategic direction. The vast majority of action is designed and implemented by the people involved in, or connected with, the wicked problem that is the target of the intervention. But there will always be a minority of management actions needed to develop higher levels of organisation resilience. Increasing organisational resilience means that every intervention has its own exit strategy.

The whole process is cost-effective and creates high levels of engagement and involvement.