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*Tame, Messy and Wicked
Risk Leadership*

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PREFACE

Successful problem solving requires finding the right solution to the right problem. We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem.

Russell Ackoff (1974)

This book will introduce the reader to the concepts of tame, messes, wickedness and wicked problems in order to develop better solutions for risk and project management.

TAME PROBLEMS

Tame problems have straightforward, simple, linear causal relationships and can be solved by analytical methods, sometimes called the cascade or waterfall method (see Figure P.1). Here the four stage process of gathering data, analysing that data, developing a solution and implementing that solution will reap benefits as they converge by nature towards a single solution. They also respond well to process techniques such as PRINCE2™, lean and six sigma. Risk and project management guides such as Project Management Institute (PMI) and Association of Project Management (APM) bodies of knowledge, Project Risk Analysis and Management (PRAM) and Risk Analysis and Management for Projects (RAMP) process guides and the Office of Government Commerce's (OGC) Management of Risk (MoR) are written to deal specifically with this problem type.

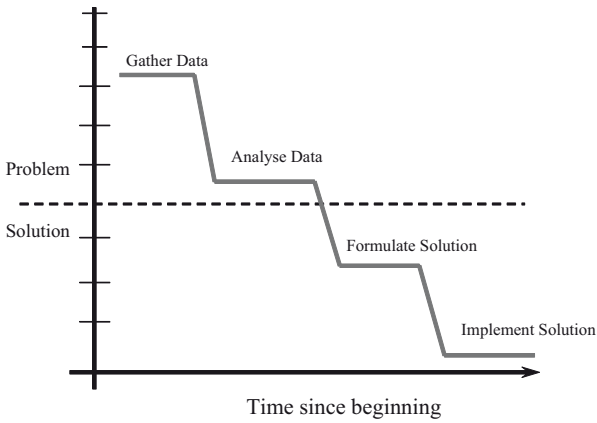


Figure P.1 Solving tame problems

MESSES (ACKOFF 1970¹)

Messes have high levels of *system* complexity and are clusters of interrelated or interdependent problems. The main characteristic of which is that they cannot be solved in isolation, but need to be considered holistically. Here the solutions lie in the realm of systems thinking.² Project management has introduced the concepts of programme and portfolio management to attempt to deal with this type of complexity and address the issues with interdependencies. Messes respond well to the application of techniques such as Dynamic Systems Development Method (DSDMTM) and Rapid Prototyping (RP).

1 Ackoff, R.L. (1970) *A Concept of Corporate Planning*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

2 Checkland, P. (1981) *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*, Chichester: Wiley.

WICKED PROBLEMS (RITTEL AND WEBBER 1973)³

Using strategies for dealing with messes is fine as long as most of us share an overriding social theory or overriding social ethic – if we don't we face 'wickedness'. Wicked problems are termed as 'divergent' as opposed to 'convergent' problems. Wicked problems are characterized by high levels of *behavioural* complexity. High behavioural complexity is characterized by deep conflicts in our assumptions, opinions, beliefs and perspectives. Under conditions of high behavioural complexity it is difficult to get people to agree on what should be done because they see the world differently and because they have different preferences and goals. Each problem we encounter is essentially unique with no real definitive statement of the problem and is framed in vague ambiguity. They tend to have grand titles, such as: the climate change problem, the banking problem, the food supply problem, etc. All of which means that, dependent on your position and proximity to the problem, your view of the problem and the concluding solution will be very different. None of the present risk or project management literature and techniques helps us to resolve these issues.

WICKED MESSES⁴

What confuses real decision-making is that behavioural and dynamic complexity coexist and interact in what we call wicked messes. Dynamic complexity requires high level conceptual and systems thinking skills; behavioural complexity requires high levels of relationship and facilitative skills. The fact that problems cannot be solved in isolation from one another makes it even more difficult to deal with people's differing assumptions and values; people who think

3 Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973) *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, Policy Sciences, Vol. 4, Elsevier. Scientific Publishing Company, Inc.: Amsterdam, pp 155–169.

4 Roth G.L. and Senge P.M. (1996) From Theory to Practice: Research Territory, Processes and Structure at an Organizational Learning Centre, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9(1), pp. 92–106.

differently must learn about and create a common reality, one which none of them initially understands adequately. The main thrust to the resolution of these types of problems is stakeholder participation and ‘satisficing’.⁵ This is because wicked problem resolving produces no single optimum solution, but has a spread of alternative satisfactory or acceptable scenarios.

5 Simon, H.A. (1956) Dynamic Programming under Uncertainty with a Quadratic Criterion Function, *Econometrica*, 24, pp. 19–33.