

Wicked Problems

Overview

A **wicked problem** is a complex, multifaceted issue that is difficult or impossible to solve completely.

The term was introduced by **Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973)** to describe problems in social planning that are ill-defined, interconnected, and resistant to simple solutions.

Characteristics of Wicked Problems

1. No Definitive Problem Statement

- Wicked problems are hard to define clearly.
- The way you frame the problem shapes the possible solutions.

2. No Stopping Rule

- There's no clear point where the problem is "solved."
- Solutions are often ongoing and require constant adaptation.

3. Solutions Are Not True or False, but Better or Worse

- There is no single "right answer."
- Solutions are judged subjectively by stakeholders.

4. No Immediate or Ultimate Test of a Solution

- Effects of solutions may take time to emerge.
- Some consequences may be unintended or irreversible.

5. Every Solution Is a "One-Shot Operation"

- Implementing a solution permanently changes the situation.
- You can't thoroughly test solutions before trying them in real life.

6. Unique Nature

- Each wicked problem is unique and has no exact precedent.

7. Interconnected with Other Problems

- Tackling one aspect can create new issues or affect others.

Examples of Wicked Problems

- Climate change
- Poverty and inequality
- Public health crises
- Affordable housing
- Global security and migration
- Organisational culture change





Wicked Problems

Approaches to Address Wicked Problems

- Systems Thinking: Look at the bigger picture, map relationships.
- Collaboration: Engage diverse stakeholders to gain multiple perspectives.
- Experimentation: Test small interventions and adapt them based on feedback.
- Iteration: Accept that solutions are ongoing processes, not end points.
- Flexibility: Be willing to reframe the problem as you gain more knowledge and understanding of the root causes.

Key Takeaways

- Wicked problems cannot be “solved” in the traditional sense.
- Focus on managing, adapting, and improving the situation rather than seeking a final answer.
- Successful leaders strike a balance between analysis, action, and collaboration when addressing wicked problems.

