



## 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.



