

— 5 —

## THE ART OF NOTICING OUR FAILURE TO NOTICE

HOW TO COPE WITH 'WICKED' CORPORATE PROBLEMS

BY ANNA SNEL

**People in any corporate setting are confronted with complex situations every day.**

**What distinguishes these complex situations from more 'simple' problems?**

**They are hard to define. Various stakeholders are involved and all have different interests. There are no predefined sets of tools or theories we can apply. They can be symptomatic of even more complex problems. And they have consequences you can't foresee. In short: they are 'messy' and 'wicked.'**

Wicked problems are difficult to solve. Usually these issues have been around for a long time. They have become entangled with different habits, assumptions, patterns, routines and rituals within the organization. We often notice their symptoms and try to fix these. But this is like taking an aspirin when someone is hitting you on the head with a hammer. The aspirin may work temporarily but in the long run it's more effective to deal with the guy with the hammer. Standard checklists and methodologies don't work for these messy problems, so let's try to approach them in different way.

### EMPATHY

We are so used to sitting at our desks reading long, often boring, policy and strategy reports and checking excruciatingly detailed Excel sheets, that we may have forgotten that there exists a reality underneath all this data. To understand wickedness we have to get in touch with the experience of the people with the problems. It's remarkable how skilled we have become in avoiding true contact with people nowadays. Yes, it's safe and comfortable to sit behind a computer screen, but wickedness lies not in the binary world of ones and zeroes, it lies in that messy reality outside. Computers and data don't cause wicked problems, people do. By what they think, what they have become used to, their assumptions, habits, patterns of behavior, routines and rituals.

To find out about these things you will need to get out of your office and find people to speak to, to observe, to join or imitate, to see what it's like to walk a mile in their shoes. Only by submerging ourselves in their reality do we stand a chance of finding out what is going on. We need empathy and an anthropological approach because these people are the experts of their own situation, not us. We need to get to know them in order—at the very least—to be able to ask the right questions.

### LEAVING OUR COMFORT ZONE

The next obstacle is the departure from our mental comfort zone. Often we think we know what's going on, and no longer question our own opinions. Being unaware of other perspectives is risky, denying other perspectives is dangerous. Wicked problems have usually been around for a long time and the fact that they still exist means that our traditional ways of dealing with them haven't worked. So we have to explore other ideas for solving them, outside of our perspectives, our professions, our disciplines. We have to invent new ways to reframe the problem and invent out-of-the-ordinary insights and ideas that—hopefully—will work better than our old ideas.



## FEEDBACK

Of course crazy ideas are not everything. In the end we have to do something to improve the situation. But in times of change and transience, there is a chance that by the time we start to implement our ideas the world has changed again and no longer fits our ideas. Our habits of jumping to conclusions and solutions and acting as fast as possible on them don't work in a transient world. We have to find ways to make our ideas tangible so we can communicate them and find out what people think. Will they work in their reality? Why or why not? How can we improve them? What new problems will emerge if we implement them? Questions and answers that were clear yesterday may already be outdated today. It's only by getting feedback that we may find out. Our ideas need iterative testing and we must learn from the feedback we get.

## ENGAGING OTHERS

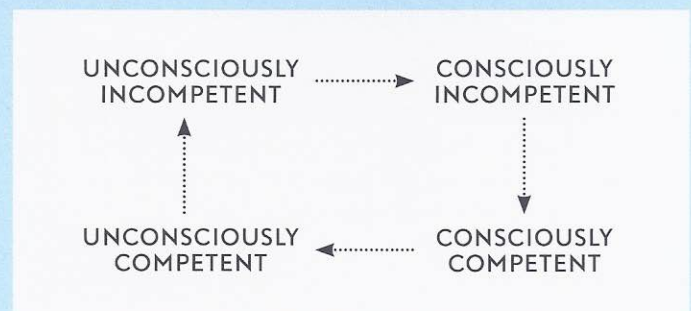
Even when we have really empathized with the problem owners, have looked outside our comfort zone, gathered feedback on our plans and integrated this in our own ideas, we still need to engage others. People are swamped with information daily and our message has to compete for their attention. We cannot solve the wicked problems on our own so we need other people to understand what the problem is and what has to be done. Instead of sending a one-size-fits-all message to an audience which we presume will absorb it uncritically, we need to communicate it in a way that makes them feel engaged, to embed the message in their personal experience. And of course our actions will have impacted the situation so we need to re-empathize and re-explore. The process is cyclical.

## LEARNING PROCESS

This development requires a learning process that enables people to let go of their traditional checklists and straightforward methodologies. A learning process that shows where we get stranded with our habits, assumptions, patterns, routines and rituals, resulting in wicked problems. One view on such a learning process is Robinson's (1974). In the beginning we are Unconsciously Incompetent. There may be thousands of problems in the world around us but as long as we don't notice them, we're fine and dandy.

A simple example: you don't speak Italian but you don't know any Italians so who cares? Things change when you become aware that you have a problem, that there is some gap between what you want and how things are and that at this moment you don't know how to close that gap. You may have taken a job at an Italian company where all your colleagues are Italian. Now you become Conscious of your Incompetence. If you want to do something about this feeling of incompetence, you have to learn new knowledge and skills and become Consciously Competent. In this simple example you would sign up for an Italian language course and perhaps even go to Italy for a while to learn about their culture and habits. By applying your new competence, this may become routinized, automatic, tacit, and you become Unconsciously Competent. Your Italian is fluent and you can speak with your colleagues without having to think about it anymore. You even act like them without noticing it: you speak in a more melodious way, gesticulating to reinforce your words.

FIGURE 1



## UNCONSCIOUSLY COMPETENT

It is during this last step, from being Consciously Competent to being Unconsciously Competent that we again recognize the workings of assumptions, patterns, routines and rituals. Things have disappeared from our direct awareness, faded into the background. Now we just act without need for conscious attention. However, problems emerge when something changes in our environment, which makes our hard-earned competence inconsistent with the new situation. Let's say your Italian company has merged with a German company and gradually your Italian co-workers

**'It's people who create wicked problems.  
They can't be solved behind  
a computer screen.'**



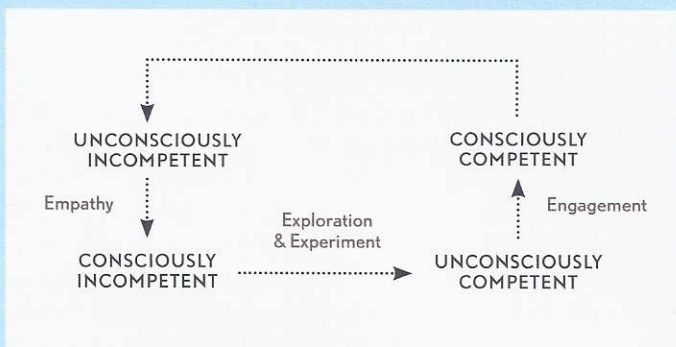
are replaced by Germans. You become Unconsciously Incompetent again. You continue to speak Italian all day long but in time your new German colleagues will wonder what the heck is wrong with you. As long as you fail to notice the effect of having routinized and ritualized your actions you may fail to notice the inconsistency between your actions and your environment. In the words of R.D. Laing, in such situations we fail to notice that we fail to notice.

## REFRAMING

Wicked problems may have this double failure to notice at their core. Our habits and rituals have taken us hostage. They have ceased to be helpful in the process of saving us the immense effort of noticing everything and anything and instead locked us up in a conservative mode of 'this is how we do things around here', while the 'here' may have changed into something completely different.

However, rituals can also help us to get out of our rut and to tackle wicked problems. On the topic of empathy, a nice example is the creatual 'Ring of Tones', during which everyone was required to hand over their phone, which was then hung in a giant chandelier and hoisted into the air. This is a great way to have people experience their own attachment to (or dare I say dependence on?) their mobile phone. By experiencing feelings of reluctance to hand over their phone, they may learn to empathize with people who have communication problems or who lack technology.

FIGURE 2



The often metaphorical nature of rituals can help to reframe issues and explore different avenues for tackling them. Take for example the 'Hatching Happiness' creatual, during which people were asked to sprinkle some happiness serum on a living cocoon. Each person received a picture of their butterfly when it hatched. In a fast-paced, hurrying world in which results are expected now rather than later, this metaphor helps us to look at things in a different way. Some valuable things just cannot be speeded up. They take time and perhaps it is precisely the waiting involved that makes them valuable. Metaphors like these can bring different and insightful ideas.

Experiments can take the shape of a ritual by inviting different stakeholders to try out and play around with a prototype. But rituals can also take the shape of tangible feedback collectors. People write their thoughts on a strip of paper, dip them into a liquid which makes the ink dissolve, giving the liquid a deeper color as more strips are dipped into it (see the Pink Milk creatual). By choosing appropriate labels for the different bottles of liquid one can see at a glance what people think about the prototype they have been invited to test.

Finally, rituals can be used to engage people. Rituals communicate. They communicate to those who participate in the ritual that they have something in common, at least during the ritual but possibly even after it ends. This social bonding aspect makes many rituals very valuable for engaging people. However this may also lead to those wicked problems (see figure), as we fail to notice that our ways of seeing, thinking and acting no longer fit with our reality. And here perhaps lies the greatest value of rituals: by iteratively keeping us in a state of empathy with those for whom we work, in a state of exploration of new ways of seeing and thinking, in a state of experimentation and learning from feedback on our ideas and a state of engaging the people around us, we remain aware of changes. We continue to notice when we fail to notice.

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denying other perspectives is dangerous.'**