

The Wickedness Behind Most 21st-Century Leadership Failures

by Ted Cadsby

JUNE 06, 2011

It's not typically the wickedness of leaders (or of boards, for that matter) that gets companies into trouble. It's their failure to effectively manage the wickedness of the problems they face – problems that resist obvious solutions. Wicked problems are being tossed up by the exploding complexity of our modern world – complexity originating from the increasing interconnectedness of everything we do. Not only are there more of these problems, but the degree of their wickedness is increasing. The race is on between the complexity that is confronting organizations and their ability to respond to it. Leaders are behind and need to catch up.

The hallmark of a wicked problem is that it cannot be reduced to a single-cause explanation. Complexity arises from the interconnections between things – how parts within a system interact via intricate feedback mechanisms. The information signals we need to make sense of complex things are buried in a lot of noise, and we, unfortunately, are not adept at digging for cues. We have been conditioned by thousands of years of evolution, as well as our daily routines, to draw speedy conclusions by picking out simple, linear, cause-effect connections. This approach works well with straightforward problems like securing food, shelter and sex, or crossing a busy street. But we are now living in a world where multivariate and non-linear causal connections hide below the surface of our immediate perceptions, and diverge to different possible interpretations. When our standard intuitions meet modern-day complexity, a brain-world gap arises.

Closing this brain-world gap depends, in part, on exploiting the insights of complexity science. However, systems thinking, chaos theory, power laws, and the like are not enough. Wicked problems also demand multiple minds with distinct perspectives, interacting with one another in a dynamic, dialectical process. These kinds of high-quality conversations don't arise spontaneously – they need to be facilitated. Brilliant leadership is now about brilliant facilitation. And brilliant facilitation employs strategies based on three principal insights about complexity:

1. Complexity is different

If a problem is constructed of many interacting parts and admits to no obvious solution, it's probably wicked; the safe bet today is to assume complexity. Leaders beware: Complexity is deceptive – it entices untrained minds to force-fit simple mental models onto wicked problems, resulting in those problems being oversimplified and misunderstood.

2. Complexity cannot be rushed

As Chief Facilitation Officers, leaders must resist the temptation to hurry through the exploration of wicked problems, and just as importantly, resist the pull of management teams and boards to rush to consensus. Complexity does not yield to tight agendas and discussion deadlines. Our brains, constrained as they are by their size, structure, and energy requirements, need time to unbundle the information cues that make complexity intelligible. Leaders beware: Rushing complexity can lead to misguided decisions, resulting in nasty surprises in the form of unintended consequences.

3. Complexity does not accommodate certainty

Our minds abhor ambiguity; they will do anything to eliminate uncertainty. But when certainty is applied to complexity, the result is unwarranted confidence, because certainty closes the door to alternative perspectives. The brilliant facilitator doesn't accept the first satisfactory answer, but pushes the team to question every preliminary conclusion. The brilliant facilitator creates the kind of tension that generates high-quality problem solving and fosters a tolerance for ambiguity and discomfiting uncertainty. Leaders beware: Sometimes the best solutions emerge the next day, the next week, or some other time

when new information, or better yet, a new perspective, surfaces. Managing complexity is iterative and never final, which is why brilliant facilitators are not reluctant to revisit decisions.

Complex problems require complex thinking, which in turn require complex conversations. In a world of wicked problems, the effective facilitation of leaders equips organizations with better decisions and boards with better governance.

Ted Cadsby is a corporate director, Principal of TRC Consulting, former executive vice-president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, and author of two books on investing.

Ted Cadsby is a corporate director, consultant, and former executive vice president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. His newest book is Closing the Mind Gap: Making Smarter Decisions in a Hypercomplex World.

This article is about **DECISION MAKING**

 FOLLOWING

Related Topics: LEADERSHIP | MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

0 COMMENTS

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.