
Leadership in Wicked Times



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We face extraordinary problems calling for new leadership approaches.

This extraordinary year has brought to the fore an unprecedented number of *wicked* problems – like Covid-19 or systemic racism. Global warming, developing over decades, arguably is the biggest one. Unlike *tame* problems which have known solutions, wicked problems generate a fountain of unknowns, involve complex social dynamics that are difficult to comprehend, and are seemingly impossible to solve effectively.

Wicked problems have a terrifying side: Winners and losers are selected more by luck and wickedness. Like in the Covid pandemic, racism or poverty, outcomes depend on the hand you are dealt, not only by your own actions. Unfairness reigns supreme in the wicked world.

In our recent working paper, “Leading in Wicked Times: A Radical Shift to Inquiry, Humility, and Fairness”, we examine how certain leaders have confronted the 2020 wickedness. We argue that wicked problems provide an ultimate test of true *leadership*, as distinct from *management*, and that the leadership required to meet these challenges is very different from the traditional view on leadership. Both leadership and management

are important. The latter typically requires dealing with *known* issues and aims to maintain a certain order if not status quo. In contrast, leadership involves taking the initiative in resolving *novel* problems, which will change the status quo. We suggest that effective leadership in wicked contexts calls for a different set of virtues and practices than those traditionally associated with leadership. These include a good balance of both confidence and humility, decisiveness and fairness, empathy and courage.

We have remarkable examples of leaders dealing effectively with wicked problems: New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and New York Governor [Andrew Cuomo](#). These inclusive leaders understand the importance of collective commitment in the face of coronavirus, including a [national buy-in](#) for lockdowns or other measures to save lives. Ardern called upon Kiwis to unite and work together as ["our team of five million"](#) under lockdown. Cuomo similarly [called](#) for individualistic New Yorkers to care for their fellow neighbours.

The media and also academia have noted that most of the exemplary leaders are women. The authors of ["Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender 'Really' Matter?"](#) found that outcomes of Covid-19 are systematically better in countries led by women, and suggest that more proactive and better coordinated policy responses are the reason. This begs the question as to whether or not all – men or women – can reproduce this more collaborative and proactive leadership?

We use fair process leadership, our guide for decision making, to describe the specific leadership behaviours that leaders can enact to effectively deal with wicked problems. Importantly, we stress that this guide provides a leadership roadmap to address wicked problems, and that different behaviours are required at each of the five stages of the method, starting with framing the problem, exploring alternatives, then "taking" a decision, focusing on execution and, very importantly, evaluating progress and learning throughout the leadership journey.

The fair leadership process for taming wicked problems

Phase 1: Frame the problem

This phase is crucial for two obvious reasons: There is nothing worse than the excellent execution of the wrong answer or a great answer to the wrong

problem. Such mistakes will only fuel wickedness. The first job is to identify the problem that needs to be fixed. No need to invent fake enemies to motivate the troops. Effective leaders confront the core of the wicked problem right from the beginning. This channels energies in the right direction.

In this phase, **ask many questions**, prioritise asking over telling and engage very broadly. By asking questions, the leader shares *and* exercises leadership at the same time, dealing with the true problem while creating collective commitment. Start with questions like:

- What is the real nature of the problem we are facing?
- Where are we headed, in the medium and long run, if we do not act now?
- Who has faced this problem before and has answers?
- Who will be affected or needed in the solution?

Through the asking of questions, you display both humility and leadership competence. Rather than having underlings blindly agree with everything you say (which spreads the wickedness), have the courage to admit you cannot know everything. Recognise the need for collaboration from many sides, from experts to front-line fighters, as well as those you are responsible for, whose voices all need to be heard by you and your staff.

Phase 2: Explore “better” options

Wicked problems come with tremendous uncertainty. Jumping at the first solution isn't the best answer. Exploration and generation of several alternative options will lead to a deeper understanding of the problem and to more effective – and credible – solutions. Engage others in creatively searching for better options. It will also greatly increase the understanding of both the problem and its solution, which will be priceless in terms of execution.

Phase 3: Take a decision, explain it thoroughly and set the right expectations

Take a decision amongst the solutions generated by the working groups set in motion. This phrase connotes a stark contrast with the image of the hero leader who *makes the decision* all by himself (often dragging others down with him). Engage in debates with multiple voices, it will refine your narrative and sharpen your address. Recognise helpful suggestions and difficult

critiques. It is the thoroughness of the two previous phases that will provide the confidence needed at this stage. Temper your explanations with empathy and compassion, and the hard facts of rational analysis. Merkel's calm and controlled **communication** lifted her nation and gave German citizens both confidence and hope.

Phase 4: Execute the plan with commitment

Be clear that in the face of considerable uncertainty, the chosen decision must be given the best chance to succeed. The time for debate has passed: Continue to communicate the rationale and the expectations of successful execution with missionary zeal. If this solution isn't the right one, it won't be for lack of commitment. And be ready to concede that and move to the next phase. Nothing is more wicked than to persevere in the face of failure. Consider masks, for example. Countries that used them early and correctly have generally fared well in the pandemic. Other countries that got it wrong in the spring and pivoted, fared better. Others are still debating, or executing chaotically, and doing poorly. The disciplined execution of a well-prepared decision is key to progress and ultimate victory, if it is indeed followed by a thorough examination of results.

Phase 5: Evaluate the outcomes for progress and learning, adapt and restart the cycle

Wicked problems allow for many mistakes along the road to a solution. Progress reviews compare actual performance with the expectations announced at the time of decision. People wish to hear from you what went well and what did not. And what you learned and are doing about it. Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, evaluates the Covid response every three weeks. The ability to hold oneself responsible in front of people, particularly in defeat, is the hallmark of great leaders. Wicked leaders share their own wickedness and blame others.

Examples amongst and around us - and the value of the fair process leadership map

Because wicked problems are essentially unfair and complex, effective solutions have to come through some kind of fair process leadership. This simple yet powerful process helps us understand wicked problems and increases our chances of solving them, while generating trust as well as individual and collective commitment. Abraham Lincoln faced the United

States' most wicked problem: slavery and a civil war. He is a remarkable example of continuously seeding trust in people, and learning from experts and one's mistakes.

Today's wicked problems require a non-traditional set of leadership virtues: confidence and humility, decisiveness and fairness, and empathy and courage. Politicians who exemplify these elusive virtues are, amongst others, Ardern, Merkel and Whitmer. Their examples show all of us how to find our way to better solutions in wicked times. Fair process leadership will reveal a useful map to guide you to better times.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/leadership-wicked-times>

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