



The problem with wickedness

In 2007 the APSC published a booklet *Tackling Wicked Problems*¹. It implied that wicked problems are somehow real things, but 'wicked problems' were *invented*. The words 'wicked problem' were assigned characteristics. The intention was to help people dealing with policy complexity, but like so much that is created for good, it can lead to bad.

The bad is that describing something as a 'wicked problem' can permit the abandonment of rational and professional problem solving. By giving the label 'wicked problem', it suddenly becomes OK to believe it is un-definable, untestable, and potentially irrational (these are arguably part of the defining characteristics of wicked problems).

There are 10 characteristics assigned to 'wicked problems'. Let us look at the first:

'There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem. It's not possible to write a well-defined statement of the problem, as can be done with an ordinary problem.'

Accepting this and moving on is like saying;

'I have a problem. I don't know what it is, but I accept that. I'm going to try to solve it anyway.'

If you can't accurately describe the problem, there is no way you should be trying to solve it. You are like Homer Simpson randomly pressing buttons on the reactor control panel.

The right approach is to attack the difficulty of a definition, so that it can be dealt with rationally. If you can't define the problem now, keep working on it until you can. Don't give up trying to understand it and instead leap into solution mode.

Defining problems requires expertise, and that is not necessarily available. For example, the APSC booklet lists 'obesity' as an example of a wicked problem. 'Obesity' is a condition, not a problem. Problems have a form and generally it is one of these:

- Something is occurring that you don't want to occur.
- Something is not occurring that you do want to occur.

Here are two situations:

- 1 0.03% of the population are obese.
- 2 13% of the population are obese.

Someone might say that 13% is too high. That is the beginning of a problem definition. It is the beginning of defining the 'something' in the form; Something is occurring that you don't want to occur.

Whatever it is that the organisation is concerned about which relates to obesity can be defined, and must be defined. That will include consideration of the objectives of the organisation, means, expectations and other factors.

¹ http://www.apsc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/6386/wickedproblems.pdf

