

Wicked Messes: The New Reality

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Complex messy, systems rarely spring forth all at once. As a general rule, their messiness and complexity become apparent in stages.

Complex messy, systems are typically preceded by a series of crises, big and small, if they are even recognized as such. Only when the crises have become so big such that they can no longer be denied for what they are, do they finally command the serious attention they deserved all along. Even then, they are not always recognized for what they truly are, Wicked Messes. In large part, this is due to the fact that the phenomenon itself is not widely known. Thus, before one can possibly hope to cope with them, we need to understand them as best we can. Indeed, this understanding more urgent than ever.

The late, great Social Systems Thinker par excellence, Russell L. Ackoff appropriated the word “Mess” to stand for “a whole system of problems that were constantly changing in response to one another such that one couldn’t take any of the so-called individual problems out of the Mess and attempt to study them on their own without doing irreparable damage both to the ‘fundamental nature’ of the problems and the entire Mess of which they were integral parts.” In brief, the interactions between problems is the key, essential property of every Mess. As a result, Messes are either treated in as complex wholes, or they cannot be treated at all. The notion of “self-standing, individual problems” is not only a completely outdated concept, but it’s extremely harmful to our ability to cope with a world of inordinately complex problems that grows more complex by the minute.

There’s another important factor that makes dealing with Messes even more difficult and troublesome.

The late, distinguished UC Berkeley Architectural planner, Horst Rittel, introduced the notion of Wicked Problems. Wicked Problems are the complete opposite of Tame Problems, those that can not only be well- defined, but have single, stable solutions. The classic examples are Exercises. Thus, “ $X+6 = 11$; find X ” is an Exercise. First of all, it’s completely well-specified, indeed overly so, such that following the accepted rules of algebra, everyone is expected to get the single, right answer “ $X = 5$ ”. Exercises are thereby the province of independent, well-structured, i.e. so-called “exact disciplines”. Such “problems,” if they can even be called that, exist more in theory than they do in actuality.

In sharp contrast, Wicked Problems have none of the supposedly desirable properties of Tame Problems. No single discipline or profession has the final say in formulating, let alone in attacking them, successfully. Wicked Problems such as Homelessness demand a wide range of experts in Public Health, Community Finance and Resources, City Planning, Mental Health, Drug Addiction, Community Groups, and a host of others, all of which need to work well together.

In short, not only are dealing with Wicked Problems, but even more, we’re dealing with Wicked Messes.

The primary question is, “Do Wicked Messes have a general structure or is each unique?” The answer is, “Both/And!” Wicked Messes have both a general structure and each has particular components that are unique.

With regard to their general structure, all Wicked Messes have elements and problems that in one way or another are related to all of the known professions and institutions that make up complex societies: the Economy, Government, Law, Medicine, Public Health, Public Safety, Schools, and so forth. Wicked Messes differ with regard to which elements are primary and thereby cause those which are secondary.

In every sense of the term, the Coronavirus is sadly one of the one of the most prominent examples of a Wicked Mess. The Doctors in Wuhan China who first discovered the Virus, but in abject fear of losing their jobs were warned not to pass “Bad News” onto their superiors in Beijing, is one of the primary factors in the entire calamity. By not reporting news of the Virus as soon as possible, valuable time was lost in alerting the world, and thus doing everything possible in combatting it. The key point is that the Culture of an organization--in this case a society--plays a major role in every Wicked Mess. Will the messengers of Bad News be “killed” or “rewarded?” The members of every organization and society quickly learn the unspoken “rules of the game” in order to “fit in”, or they’re ejected so fast such that they don’t know what’s hit them.

As the Virus spread worldwide, the growing numbers of deaths was a clear sign that we were faced with a major crisis that was not going away soon. Big Pharma responded by developing vaccines in record times. Organizations and Institutions of every kind are thereby key elements of every Wicked Mess.

Governments are also involved, most often from the very start. In the case of the Virus, a President who called the whole thing a “hoax” for which he blamed Democrats was no help in addressing the crisis. Saying that it was no worse than the flu and would thus vanish on its own only made it worse.

The extreme polarization between the two major parties was a significant factor in that it directly affected the wearing of protective masks and social distancing. It was a key determinant with regard to whether one was in favor of vaccinations versus those who were fiercely opposed to them. In this way, Ideological Commitments are a key ingredient of every Wicked Mess. If one needed proof, it was confirmed by the fact that vaccination rates in Red States lagged seriously behind Blue States, thereby putting Herd Immunity in serious jeopardy. Even worse, all new cases of the Virus were linked almost entirely to those who hadn’t been vaccinated.

Because of the rampant nature of the Virus, and therefore to keep it from spreading, people were urged to stay in and shelter at home. Most complied. But as a result, Economic activity ground to a halt as people were afraid to leave the safety of their homes. Education also took a big hit as it was no longer safe for children to attend classes in person. Young children were especially affected as schooling is a key factor in their development.

Because of the confinement, Spousal Abuse rose as a result. Violent crimes did as well.

One of the biggest unforeseen consequences of sheltering in place was that for the first time many saw directly on TV the killings of unarmed people of Color, most notably George Floyd. They were thus able to see Systemic Racism firsthand. Thus, while it certainly did not cause Systemic Racism, the Pandemic illuminated it. In addition, people of color were more likely to succumb to the Virus.

Because of the combined impact of all of the events--whether they were directly caused by the Virus or happened to occur at the same time--the Collective Mental Health of the Nation was seriously affected. Many experienced uncontrolled bouts of Anxiety and outright Depression.

The January 6th uprising in the Nation’s Capitol only added to the general consternation.

Social Media also played a major role. The dissemination of Dis and Misinformation about every aspect of the Pandemic had deleterious effects. Unfortunately, it’s expected to do so in the future.

One of the direct effects of the Virus is the fact that many Hospitals were not able to handle the overflow of people who contracted it. In particular, ICUs, Intensive Care Units, were overwhelmed. Even though Epidemiologists have been warning for years of the serious possibilities of major Pandemics, no one was still prepared. The key question is whether we'll be better prepared for future ones that are literally certain to occur.

In sum, the main features of the Pandemic which are common to all Wicked Messes are the Economy, Entertainment Industry, Hospitals, Schools, Social Media, Transportation and the Travel Industry. The impacts on the Collective Mental Health of the Nation and the World as a whole are especially disturbing.

The unique aspects have to do with what's happening in society at the time such as the murder of George Floyd, and the world in general. Nonetheless, Social Disturbances of some kind are to be expected. Even though one may not know exactly what they'll be, how and when they'll occur, they are virtually certain.

One of the most distinctive features of Wicked Messes is that they are governed by highly intense emotional and personal factors. They are not merely the result of impersonal forces alone. Thus, every Wicked Mess contains the deep fears and anxieties of all those who are parts of and are affected by it. This is especially true of the most Vulnerable Populations. It brings to the surface spoken and unspoken hopes and dreams.

The History of every Wicked Mess is a key ingredient, especially previous attempts to grapple with it, successful and otherwise.

In sum, Wicked Messes share many of the same general features. They differ mainly in terms of which factors are the precipitating and primary causes. Thus, in terms of Wicked Messes, while they are definitively related, Economic versus Mental Health Crises differ only by which one of them comes first, if they do not occur simultaneously, or near enough.

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