

Chapter 3

Wicked Messes: The Ultimate Challenge to Reality



The first two chapters have presented major challenges to what we commonly take as Reality and what we need to know and do if we are to stand any hope whatsoever in managing it. This chapter shows that it's even more complex than we have dared imagine in our wildest dreams.

3.1 Russell L. Ackoff: Messes

The late great, distinguished Social Systems thinker par excellence, and one of Mitroff's major mentors, Russell L. Ackoff, appropriated the word "Mess" to stand for a whole system of problems that were so interconnected such that one couldn't take any single problem out of the Mess and attempt to analyze and manage on its own without doing irreparable damage both to the fundamental nature of the problem and the larger Mess of which it was an integral part. The point is that the interconnections between the problems that constitute a Mess are not only one of its key defining properties, but are as important as the problems themselves.

The result is that the notion of "single, independent problems" is more a bygone and outdated figure of speech than it is a characteristic feature of Reality. In short, all of the problems of modern societies are fundamentally parts of Messes. Indeed, they cannot be handled apart from them.

To take one of the most disturbing examples, Homelessness cannot even be defined, let alone managed, independently of a host of thorny problems: Income Inequality, Drug Addiction, Urban Crime, Mental Illness, the Unaffordability and Unavailability of Proper Housing, Onerous Eviction Procedures, the Extreme Divisions between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to providing Financial Relief for the unemployed, etc. Homelessness is thereby not a single, self-standing, and well-contained, and thereby well-defined, problem, but a host of complex,

deeply intertwined problems and issues. That's precisely what makes it and all of the other problems of modern societies "Messy."

If Homelessness weren't bad enough, the Global Pandemic brought on by the Coronavirus is even worse. Consider the constellation of factors that are part and parcel of the Pandemic. First and foremost is the glaring inability of an authoritarian government that is supposedly in control of every facet of Chinese life, to curb the practice of selling the infected meat of animals that thereby made it highly likely that a deadly virus would easily jump from animals to humans. At the same time, the government also failed miserably to acknowledge the existence of the Virus and thus to act swiftly to contain and treat it. (In fairness, the Chinese government has done a far better job in managing the resultant crisis than the USA¹) As a result, underlying racial and ethnic prejudices that are always near the surface and have never been fully eradicated were easily inflamed. President Trump characteristically called it the "Chinese Virus," and even worse, "Kung Flu."

And of course, we have created a worldwide financial system that is easily disrupted. Further, the US Economy is largely service-based so that it's especially at risk if large numbers of people stop going out to shop, eat, attend theatres and public gatherings, etc. In addition, the US Public Health System has been seriously hampered by a President who is woefully ignorant of Science, and who has repeatedly lied so that when he needed to be believed when a major crisis struck, he had no credibility whatsoever. Add to this a long, drawn-out, nasty contest between the Democrats as to whom is best positioned to replace a President who is not only completely unfit for the job, but exhibits daily mounting signs of serious mental disturbance.² All of which has only added to the growing uncertainty and accompanying anxiety. In addition, the elderly and other Vulnerable Populations who are most at risk have added to uncontrolled feelings of despair and fear. So too has the unparalleled closures of schools and universities.

Once again, contrary to the President's oft-repeated claims that the Pandemic was totally unanticipated and therefore nothing could have been done prior to it, a key member of the transition team from President Obama to Trump reported that high up on the list of potential crises was a Global Pandemic.

In Systems terms, the Coronavirus is not only a Mess, but as we shall see shortly, even worse, it's a Wicked Mess.

Because of their complexity, Ackoff argued that Messes did not have "solutions" in the classic meaning of the term. They were never "solved" per se. Above all, they didn't have solutions that were "solutions" for all times and places, let alone for all affected and interested parties, i.e., Stakeholders.

The best one could do is to "cope" with Messes. Thus, coping strategies were key. Since the intense interactions between the problems that make up a Mess is one of their major properties, one of the key elements in coping with a Mess is

¹ Murkherjee, *Op. Cit.*

² Brandy Lee, Ed., *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, St. Martins Press, New York, 2017.

identifying as best one can as many of the important interactions between them as possible, especially the most troubling and unanticipated, thereby doing one's best to get out in front of them. The Coronavirus shows as much as any how the family of Public Health Crises is inextricably linked to Financial Crises, and every other type. Thus, the Coronavirus has not only affected the health of China's citizens, but it damaged China's reputation as a responsible member of the world community. As such it's a major PR, and even more an Ethical, crisis for the country as a whole.

The inescapable conclusion is that CM is a major component of every Mess. Indeed, since each crisis is capable of setting off every other kind of crisis, the various types are themselves part of a Mess, The Crisis Mess. But it's even more complex. Since Defense Mechanisms are an integral part of CM, all of the Psychodynamic forces and theories we discussed in Chap. 1 are part of every Mess as well. Since Psychology is a key component of everything that humans do, it's thereby an integral part of every Mess. In short, a Mess not only contains the key problems and issues that compose it, but everything pertaining to the human condition. In this way, every Mess contains all of the Stakeholders and their associated history and past involvement with a Mess. In sum, the fundamental nature of Reality has altered fundamentally.

3.2 Horst Rittel: Wicked Problems

There's another complication that makes dealing with Messes even more difficult and problematic.

The late, distinguished UC Berkeley Architectural planner, Horst Rittel, introduced the notion of Wicked Problems. Wicked Problems are the complete opposite of Tame Problems, problems 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-defined, indeed overly so, such that following the accepted rules of Algebra, everyone is expected to get the single, right answer " $X = 5$." In this way, exercises are the province of independent, well-structured, i.e., "exact," disciplines.

In sharp contrast, Wicked Problems have none of the supposedly desirable properties of Tame Problems, i.e., exercises. Thus, no single discipline or profession has the final say in formulating, let alone attacking successfully, Wicked Problems such as Homelessness or the Coronavirus. Homelessness and the Virus demand experts in Public Health, Community Finance and Resources, City Planning, Mental Health, Drug Addiction, Community Groups, and a host of others that can work well together. In short, Wicked Problems demand the intense and long-lasting cooperation of Secure Adults.

3.3 Concluding Remarks

We cannot emphasize enough that Messes do not have “solutions per se.” We cope with them as best we can. And, coping means that we only have broad Heuristics or approximate rules of thumb for managing Wicked Messes. For instance, a prime Heuristic is always be on the lookout for important connections such as the Coronavirus and the World Economy. Given their importance, we say more later about the Heuristics that are known to date.

To help ferret out important connections that no single discipline acting by itself can identify, we need “new experts” such as those who are equally well versed in both Economics and Infectious Diseases, thus calling once again, for Interdisciplinary, indeed Transdisciplinary, cooperation in the formation of new fields that can deal effectively with the Messes we face.

For those who were raised primarily on a steady diet of exercises, Wicked Messes pose an incredible challenge. They demand nothing less that we think and act as Secure Adults so that we can bear incredible amounts of uncertainty.

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