Problems and leadership

Much of the writing about leadership and management assumes that good leadership or effective management involves applying the right approach to a given problem. How we define a problem determines our response to it.

Some problems are relatively straightforward to describe and understand, others are much more multifaceted and complex.

Rittell and Webber[1] distinguish between:

- **tame** problems and
- **wicked** problems

While they may be complicated, tame problems have boundaries and can be solved. The solution usually requires the application of good management processes. Building a house, organising the provision of social services to people in their own homes, timetabling, producing a brochure and organising an open day are all tame problems. Tame problems are likely to have occurred before.

Tame problems generally require a management response. The leader's role is to motivate and energise her or his staff and colleagues to get on and deal with the problem in the agreed manner.

Wicked problems are not just complicated, they are complex and the problem may never be solved. Any solution may well generate other problems and there is no right or wrong answer, only better or worse options. The stakeholders involved may have different views about the problem and how it should be approached. Social exclusion is an example of a wicked problem.

Dealing with wicked problems requires leadership, which helps others to explore the issue through asking appropriate questions, and seeks to build consensus among stakeholders.

Grint[2] suggests that there is a third type of problem faced by those in leadership roles: **critical problems**. Critical problems are usually described as a crisis. Speed is of the essence and there is no time for exploration and discussion. Neither a leadership nor a management response is appropriate here. What is required is a solution. Grint describes this as a command role, where the leader determines the solution and imposes it. Major train crashes and terrorist attacks are examples of critical problems. A financial collappse, accompanied by a demand for immediate action to rectify the situation, may also be seen as a crisis.

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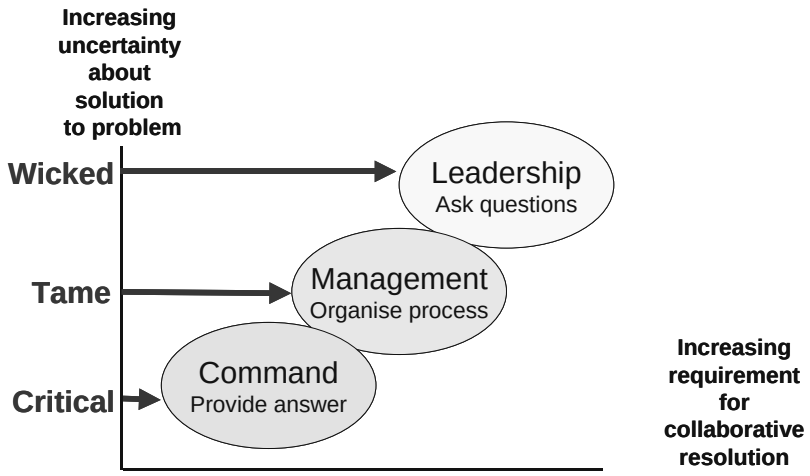
[1] Rittell, H & Webber, M (1973) '*Dilemmas in a general theory of planning',* Policy Sciences Vol 4

[2] Grint, K (2005) 'Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of 'leadership', *Human Relations*, Vol 58 (11)

The different types of problems and the appropriate responses to them are shown in the diagram below.



The way we define the problem determines the appropriate response. However, most problems can be defined in a number of different ways and most of us have a preferred approach to leadership and management. The result is a tendency to define the problem in a way that fits our preferred approach. We then set about persuading others to see the problem in the same way.

The situation is further complicated by how others view the problem. If your managers or funders define the problem as tame, they will expect a management response from you. Your staff, on the other hand may see the problem as critical and expect you to provide a solution. You may see it as a wicked problem and want to ask questions, explore how best to tackle it and build agreement among the various stakeholders.

Balancing these different requirements is a challenge. To do so, you will need to understand why others may be defining the problem in a different way. This, in turn may lead you to refine your own definition.

Reflection

Think about the three different types of problem, and the three types of response.

Consider your government's responses to the Covid19 Pandemic.

Is the pandemic a wicked problem, a tame problem or a crisis? (Or a mix?)

Has the nature of the problem changed over time? Has the most suitable response changed over time?

How has the government (or both Governments – In the UK and Wales) responded – by leading, managing or commanding? (Or a mix?)

Is there any evidence of what Grint describes as a tendency to frame the problem in ways that suit the chosen style of leadership? For example amplifying the sense of crisis in order to justify a command response?

Which responses do you think have been effective and which have not?

Read the extract below from a Times article ("Scientists Shouldn't have the final Word on Covid19 Plans" 1st October 2020) on scientists' responses to the Covid19 pandemic. What sort of leadership responses are being proposed? Do the ideas correspond to your analysis of the best ways to respond to the pandemic?

Argument is central to solving scientific problems. But if those problems aren't properly defined, and if key evidence is lacking, then scientists are no better than anyone else at coming up with a solution. The problem of Covid-19 is a case in point.

Both the virus and the ways of tackling it cause harm and need to be balanced: for example, how much should young people's education be compromised to protect older people from infection? This is a "wicked problem" with no winners in which we are trying to trade jobs, freedoms and health against each other without knowing the rate of exchange.

While scientists can ensure that any strategies are underpinned by the best evidence and research, they should have no greater say in them than economists, ethicists, historians and the wider public. The question of whether New Zealand's approach is "better" than Sweden's is as much a social as a scientific one.

Scientists do not want to dominate the debate; we are researchers and teachers. The epidemiological modellers I am working with on the pandemic want to ensure that the public and politicians have access to the best possible data to help them make decisions. We do not want to make those decisions ourselves and we don't have the executive power to do anything.

The challenge is that time is short. We haven't had the opportunity for a public debate on what approach the country wants to take. But we need to have that debate now. Science will then be able to find technical solutions to the problem once it has been defined and a way forward agreed by every interested party.

The science of public health has risen to great prominence in the past nine months, so that when a scientist gives an opinion now, it is given unusual prominence. Just as in society at large, there are some scientists who think the cure is worse than the disease. Just as in society at large, there are some scientists who think we should do all in our power to prevent a large epidemic.

Some parts of the media have presented these contrasting views as an exasperating "row". But they are not different views of the science; they are just different proposed strategies.

There are, of course, some real scientific differences, such as the extent and role of immunity or the ability to protect more vulnerable people, but these are

secondary to the bigger problem of the overall approach to be taken. This can be informed by science but not determined by it.

Bringing it back to youth work leadership

Think about your role as a youth work leader. Do you have an approach to leadership with which you are most comfortable or is dominant (leader/manager/commander)?

Can you think of examples where you have framed a problem in a way that reflects your dominant style? (e.g. to gain the attention of key stakeholders you might emphasise an increase in drug misuse or violent crime as a crisis which demands a command response. Or you might choose to focus on small achievable processes and actions which can resolve it as a management problem. Or you might invite elected members and others to join you in exploring the nature of the whole problem – as a wicked issue – before deciding on any action.)

What can you do to give yourself the space to frame problems without bias, so that you can adopt the most effective leadership approach?