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More than Coping: Thriving in a World of Wicked Problems

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Abstract

This essay asks whether it is possible to find ways of thriving in a world full of wicked problems—the most significant of which may be the sustainability crisis. Ensuring a healthful and adequate food supply comprised of nature-made foods rather than processed goods, demands collaborative actions, new leadership skills and the evolution of global action networks (GANs).

Keywords: wicked problems, sustainability, global action networks, leadership

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Lately, I have been taken by the idea of wicked problems, I suppose in part because so many of the problems confronting businesses, humanity, society, and the planet seem wicked—and increasingly so. Problems, of course, are never simple, but the nature and complexity of problems we face today have grown more complicated as globalization, issues of sustainability and technology provide ever-more connections among problems that once seemed local. As anyone reading this *Special Issue* knows, wicked problems are intractable, hard to define and seldom resolve in ways that satisfy everyone.

Multiple stakeholders holding differing viewpoints, combined with multiple authorities create a scenario where no one is able to simply dictate solutions—despite a possible desire to do so. By their nature, then, wicked problems must receive input from a cross-section of stakeholders and authorities, but a resolution will require that leadership be dispersed among the multiple groups tackling the issue (Churchman 1967; Horst & Webber 1973). Because there are so many ways to define both the problems and the solutions, whatever resolutions develop will most likely leave some parties unsatisfied (Grint 2005; Marshak 2009; van Bueren, Klijn & Koppenjan 2003).

As difficult as it seems, the best path to addressing wicked problems is that collaborative, dialogic, and inherently democratic process which brings the relevant actors together in dialogue. Yet, too often the mechanisms which currently exist to cope with societal/ecological problems of this “wicked” nature are rigid hierarchical systems, run by both bureaucratic and authoritative entities having multiple interests powered by money rather than public interest.

Still, wicked problems beset all businesses, NGOs, and governmental agencies operating in the food and agricultural sectors. Somehow they are managed—for good or for ill. Sustainability, is one such wicked problem that all sectors face, and few know how to handle. Sustainability is about stasis—maintaining things as they are, while we all know that life and systems are dynamic and constantly in a state of flux—they get better or they get worse. The problem with sustainability is that status quo is not working, nor will it provide—business, humanity, or society—a future we wish to achieve. As John Ehrenfeld points out in “Sustainability by Design” (Ehrenfeld 2008), becoming less unsustainable will not actually result in sustainable behaviors and patterns. Switching from “doing less harm” to “doing good” requires a shift of mind, what Peter Senge (Senge 1990; Senge 2006) termed a *metanoia*. Recognizing the revolutionary nature of what humanity is being ‘called’ to do today is to save itself from its current path of ecological destruction and unsustainability (Lovelock 2006; McKibben 2010; Senge 2008).

But sustainability is only the tip of the “wicked” iceberg. To highlight the nature of wicked problems affecting the food and agricultural industry, consider this incident which occurred in the US. In November of 2011, the US Congress determined that pizza, when covered in tomato sauce, could be considered a vegetable (well, ok, tomato sauce is now widely considered to be a vegetable, but technically tomatoes are actually fruit). Recalling President Ronald Reagan’s thwarted attempt to define ketchup as a vegetable in the early 1980s, the US Congress voted in 2011 to undo the proposed healthier food standards for school lunches (which might have limited

foods such as salt, french fries, and pizza in favor of more fresh fruits and vegetables). The sauce on pizza allows it to remain in national school lunch programs and gain credit as a vegetable.¹ Why does the “pizza as a vegetable” issue (taken as a metaphor rather than literally), exemplify the types of wicked problems that I believe are typical today? Well, for one thing, the issues are far from simple—and far from clearly defined. These issues coalesce into significant problems found in the American diet, the obesity epidemic, family lifestyles, school budgets and the right to choose what to eat, as well as the sophisticated marketing practices that “sell” unhealthy products to the unwitting public; the industrialized food-growing-production-and distribution systems; and to a political system in the US that increasingly aligns political interests with industry interests because of corporate contributions to political campaigns. Perhaps solutions for public health interests can be found through redefining “health” issues and applying it to the health of students, schools and their budgets, and the businesses whose interests might be harmed by a reclassification—and by bringing all the relevant stakeholders and policy makers into a room (and process) where all ideas could be vetted and new thinking evolved.

Food production and consumption in the US today has resulted in chronic under-nutrition combined with obesity in some populations who eat a lot of highly processed and high calorie foods low in nutritional value. This reality was dramatically and forcefully illustrated in the documentary “Supersize Me”, which focused on the harmful effects of highly salted, heavily processed and high calorie foods on health. Relatedly, the way food is processed and consumption patterns combined with sedentary lifestyles has contributed to a growing obesity problem (a third of all US adults and children are overweight or obese and 17% of children were considered obese in 2011). There is more. Industrial processing of agricultural foods leads to over-fertilization and overuse of pesticides for monoculture crops grown in huge tracts, particularly: corn, soybeans, and wheat. Michael Pollan in his book “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” documents the extent to which corn, high fructose corn syrup and other corn by-products now permeate our food chain (Pollan 2007). These “modern” agricultural practices tend to result in food products with diminished nutritional value, as well as mono-crops that are vulnerable to pesticide-resistant bugs or diseases.

Further, processing of food results in “food products,” that is, highly processed foodlike substances filled with chemicals, with even less nutrition than depleted soils produce rather than what Pollan calls “real food” or unadulterated nature-grown foods (Pollan 2007). Processing combines food with stabilizers, salts, fats, and other exotic additives (if you doubt this statement, just read the ingredient list on most packaged foods and notice how few are actually recognizable food ingredients) to make the product look and taste appealing, even though the end product may have little in common with its real food ancestor. To add to the complexity, sophisticated marketing practices create an environment in which these “convenience” foods are valued above healthier less processed options, and unhealthy food choices are widely marketed to adults and children alike. In part this happens because these highly processed foods provide more calories at less cost than healthier options, e.g., real fruit and vegetables. A wicked problem indeed!

¹ E.g., MSNBC report, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45306416/ns/health-diet_and_nutrition/#.TsqmQ3KwXXm, 11/15/2011; Jason Linkins, Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/16/pizza-vegetable-school-lunches-lobbyists_n_1098029.html, 11/16/2011; Allison Aubrey, Pizza as a Vegetable? It Depends on the Sauce, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2011/11/15/142360146/pizza-as-a-vegetable-it-depends-on-the-sauce>, 11/15/2011.

But what was most striking about the metaphorical “pizza sauce as a vegetable” decision are the political machinations working behind the scenes which suggest how wicked the problem actually is. Health and nutrition advocates argued for healthier foods, which tend to provide fewer calories at a higher cost, a problem in an era of strained local school district budgets. Lobbyists for the salt and food industry argued, essentially, to keep regulations around tomato sauce, salt content, and potatoes from shifting toward options deemed to be healthier because of their investment in the current system.² Conservatives argued that “choice” was somehow being restricted (as if there actually were “choices” in school lunches) and that the new standards would create overly burdensome regulation. In the end, tomato sauce remained classified as a vegetable (along with other salty and high fat foods) for school lunches. Still, it is in the nature of wicked problems not to be resolved to everyone’s liking—though in this case the common good seems to have been thwarted, too.

Although multi-stakeholder interactions can help provide insights into some of the causes and potential resolutions to the wicked problems, the nature of wicked problems, even problems that on the surface seem simple, make them inherently difficult. Grappling with wicked problems necessitates collaborative rather than unilateral approaches (Horst & Webber 1973; Marshak 2009; van Bueren et al. 2003); and they are more complex which makes it harder to reach agreed outcomes.

Waddell has documented the growth of what are called global action networks (GANs) as one type of mechanism for contending with problems. They inherently go beyond the scope of any single institution or entity to focus on issues that are inherently wicked in nature (Waddell 2009; Waddell 2007). GANs, according to Waddell, are global and multi-level (local, regional, global), entrepreneurial action learners, public good producers, diversity-embracing inter-organizational networks that act as systemic change agents—mostly voluntarily (Waddell 2009). GANs, like other parts of what I have elsewhere called the emerging global infrastructure on corporate responsibility (Waddock 2008), represent voluntary collaborative approaches to deal with issues related to the public good that exist on a global scale—all of which are wicked problems. Examples include global reporting on sustainability and social issues (e.g., the Global Reporting Initiative), global principles and standards (e.g., the UN Global Compact), or, more relevant to this *Special Issue*, sustainable food production (e.g., the Sustainable Food Laboratory). We could add multi-stakeholder dialogues of various sorts—and even the spate of protests which occurred during the Occupy Wall Street and other protest movement that have swept the world in recent years. In the Occupy movement, the collaborative, multi-stakeholder structure lacked a central authority or leadership and seemed to offer alternatives to the current rigid systems of decision-making, particularly when the problems being addressed crossed national and institutional boundaries, as wicked problems often do.

The type of leadership needed to manage wicked problems is very different from the heroic or authoritarian forms of leadership that typically come to mind. The very nature of wicked

² Daily Mail Reporter, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2062056/Pizza-vegetable--covered-tomato-paste.html?ITO=1490>, 11/19/2011; International Business Times, <http://au.ibtimes.com/articles/252925/20111121/congress-pushes-classify-pizza-vegetable-au-ibtimes.htm>, 11/21/2011.

problems means that no single individual or organization has the necessary authority to unilaterally impose a solution—and that is why multi-stakeholder alliances and coalitions (and various forms of engagement) are needed. As illustrated in the pizza example, the outcomes are not always to everyone's liking. The way in which the public good or public interest gets defined when dealing with a wicked problem is a necessary product of inputs from multiple stakeholders—some of whom are likely to have more power, more money or more influence than others. Democratically-based initiatives can better absorb a wide range of inputs and consolidate them through some sort of process where unilateral approaches are more likely to achieve outcomes that more stakeholders can buy into.³

Working on wicked problems demands an orientation toward not only the individual or corporate good, but also and more importantly toward the common good. To think about the common good in the same context as the pizza example, entrenched interests with much to gain from the status quo exist and provide an added level of complexity that creates demands for new types of leadership skills. Among the skills in businesses and other institutions that engage in dealing with wicked problems, be they in food and agriculture or in other aspects of society, are an ability to “leave one's power hat at the door,” and enter into a true dialogue about what the common good is. Finding the common good in fraught situations involves losing one's own ego and putting aside one's own interests—and that is hard to do in most business and industry contexts absent of regulatory initiatives that demand that such moves be made. Most incentives in business today, for example, orient leaders toward short term rather than long-term gains and thinking.

Dealing effectively with wicked problems also demands that participants in a resolution process take a long- rather than short-term time perspective. They also need a capacity to reframe issues and problems, often by moving up from a specific definition of the problem to a higher level of abstraction, where it is more likely to find common ground (i.e. the common good or public interest) than at lower definitional levels. Einstein famously stated, “You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. You must learn to see the world anew.” The kinds of questions that need to be asked in dealing with wicked problems, even ones that initially appear as simple as the pizza question, include: Whose interests are at stake here? Whose views need to be included in the conversation? How can we negotiate the obvious and not-so-obvious power interests and find alignments that exist underneath the surface of this issue? Where and how can we find common ground in a situation where different opinions abound? Conversations and experiences that shift minds and create new insights, what the Buddhists call “third way thinking,” are needed to create the *metanoia*. It is increasingly apparent that this *metanoia* or mindset change is needed to shift our world from our current unsustainable path where the common good seems to get lost in moneyed interests, toward a path that honors and values all the earth's creatures while listening to the voices of all in an equitable way. It is my hope that the papers in this *Special Issue* can help open our eyes to new ways of thinking about some of these issues and move us along this path.

³ Think for example of future search or mind mapping strategies, or some of the methods for gaining consensus used in total quality management, as methodological examples

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