Tackling Wicked Problems Through Deliberative Engagement

BY MARTIN CARCASSON

A revolution is beginning to occur in public engagement, fueled by the growing distrust and cynicism in our communities, the increasing limitations of more traditional communication models and problem-solving processes that are no longer up to the task, and the growing realization that we can do much better. Currently, there are two dominant models of public problem-solving: One focuses on expertise, the other on advocacy.

Communities often have significant resources for expert problem-solving, including municipal staff, as well as ample capacity for adversarial politics, such as the trappings of partisan party politics, interest groups (which can now spring up overnight due to social media), and influential activists. Such experts and activists are critical resources for community problem-solving, but they are not sufficient, particularly for the growing class of problems that practitioners have labeled "wicked problems."

In important ways, over-reliance on experts and advocates can often make tackling these problems even more difficult, fueling a negative feedback loop of the polarization, cynicism, and apathy that have unfortunately come to define our political culture.

The Age of Wicked Problems

Wicked problems have no technical solutions, primarily because they involve competing underlying values and paradoxes that require either tough choices between opposing goods or innovative ideas that can transcend the inherent tensions. Addressing them well also often requires adaptive change—changes in behavior or culture from a broad range of potential actors—that neither expert nor adversarial processes tend to support.

Wicked problems cannot be solved through research, particularly research that attempts to divide them into manageable, disciplinary parts. Research certainly can provide more clarity about the tough choices that need to be made but cannot make those choices self-evident. Adversarial tactics, especially those that rely on strategic communication framed around narrow key values and "good-versus-evil" or "us-versus-them" frameworks, often create mutual misunderstanding and undue polarization and tend to make wicked problems even more diabolical, primarily because they often avoid the reality of tough choices and rely on magic bullets or affixing blame for the problem on opposing devil figures. Such tactics are simplistic and counterproductive to community problem-solving.

Wicked problems actually cannot be "solved" in the sense that a solution can be implemented that would serve in the long term to overcome the tensions. The inherent tensions between key American values such as individual responsibility, equality, justice, safety, and freedom for current and future generations cannot be resolved—only negotiated in better or worse ways. Likewise, the tensions between economic, environmental, and social goods will always be uneasy. Every complex issue has its own set of underlying competing values. Taken one at a time, each value is generally broadly supported, but the issue is not whether people hold particular individual values or not (is anyone really "anti-freedom" or "anti-safety"?), it is how they rank the values and address the tensions among them. Unfortunately, public discourse hardly ever

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focuses on the tensions, which are the real issue. Instead, we tend to hear disconnected voices narrowly espousing the different values talking past each other.

Addressing wicked problems calls for a third type of public problem-solving: deliberative engagement. Deliberative engagement begins with the recognition of the underlying values inherent to public problems and focuses on developing mutual understanding and genuine interaction across perspectives, which then provides a base to support the constant adjustment, negotiation, and creativity required to tackle wicked problems. This constant process of adjustment represents the essence of a 21st-century democracy. Such a perspective envisions democracy as an ongoing collaborative process of constant communication and negotiation focused on solving common problems, rather than an adversarial zero-sum exercise between stable, competing interests, or a technocratic world of experts searching for the best solutions. It offers a much more effective model to address wicked problems and handle the complexities of diverse democracies, but it requires rather extensive community capacity as well as a cultural shift away from an over-reliance on either expert or adversarial processes. Said differently, such a vision requires high-quality communication about difficult issues, and the current quality of our public communication and civic engagement often falls woefully short. The bottom line is that due to the prevalence of wicked problems, the quality of our local communities will be directly related to the quality of our public discourse, and we know of much better ways to handle public discourse.

Working Through "The Groan Zone"

Consider, for example, the work of Sam Kaner and his associates, who developed the "diamond of participatory decision-making" in their *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. They argued that ideally a difficult decision-making process must go through three stages, each with its own barrier to overcome and strategy for engagement.

The first stage calls for divergent thinking. Too often, processes squelch dissent or do not allow enough voices in the room, and decisions are therefore weakened as false consensus can develop. Or publics are engaged too late, so the issue is already artificially narrowed. To defend against that, municipalities need processes that can help ensure sufficient divergent thinking from the beginning. The good news is that there are currently plenty of community resources to support this stage. Whether it is citizen comment during city council meetings, public hearings, emails to lawmakers, local newspapers, or the growing number of blogs, the free speech tradition in the United States tends to naturally allow for broad divergent thinking. Whether decision-makers fairly consider all the voices may be a different story, but the main point here is that currently most communities handle this stage adequately.

The problem is that if you successfully allow sufficient divergent thinking, you face the problem of having many voices and perspectives in play, which can be difficult to handle. Kaner aptly labeled this "The Groan Zone." The second stage—working through the groan zone—requires a very different form of communication than the first. People need to interact and listen to each other. They need to develop an understanding of the issue as a wicked problem. They need to ask good questions and be provided with good information that frames the issue productively. Most importantly, they need to engage the tensions and struggle with the best way to address them.

Without sufficient interaction and understanding among broad perspectives, the pitfall of false polarization can occur. Public discourse becomes a loud cacophony of voices with everyone shouting, but no one listening. Unfortunately, the dominant public engagement processes communities often rely on tend to work pretty well for divergent thinking but very poorly for working through. How much listening or productive interaction occurs during citizen comment? At public hearings? Open houses? Online? How many genuine conversations are sparked where real learning occurs?

Working through tends to require smaller groups, ideally arranged in a circle, working with a facilitator and through material specifically prepared to nurture deliberative engagement. It also tends to require engagement earlier in the process, so participants can be a part of framing the problem itself and discovering potential treatments, rather than simply

supporting or opposing a specific solution. Such engagement requires more preparation and a broad range of skill sets, such as issue framing, convening, process design, and facilitation. It also requires that organizers give up some control of the message, symbolizing what the International Association of Public Participation has termed the move from PR (public relations) to P2 (public participation).

A third obstacle can arise on the backend of the groan zone. The third stage—convergent thinking—requires people to prioritize, work toward a decision, and move to action. Once understanding begins to develop during the working-through stage, participants let go of their simplistic "good versus evil" frames and recognize the inherent complexity of the issue. Such learning also has the effect of making decision-making more difficult. Groups can now fall into paralysis by analysis. One advantage of simplistic frames is that they motivate behavior and keep people engaged. Without such a frame, the move to action is much more difficult, but we cannot simply talk forever. This third stage thus requires a set of engagement processes that can help communities react to the tensions by prioritizing, innovating, and sparking collaborative action. Recall that wicked problems often require adaptive changes from a broader range of actors. Ideally, the convergent stage includes many of those actors and opens up discussion to creative means that cut across individual, public, private, and nonprofit lines.

Application to Municipal Governance

Due to the reality of wicked problems, communities need to build capacity for deliberative engagement to assist with all three stages. Municipal government is obviously a key player in such capacity, but due to the nature of wicked problems, the conversation must also range beyond them. Policy changes and city budget allocations are only a couple of options in a vast range of potential actions to address wicked problems; therefore, conversations need to be framed much more broadly than "What should city government do?" Municipalities should consider three ways to build deliberative capacity: increase the deliberative nature of internal city processes; work to make official city public engagement processes more deliberative and interactive; and help build capacity within the broader community.

The first shift would impact both council deliberations and how municipal staff researches, infusing both with a recognition of wicked problems, a recognition of the limits of expert and adversarial models, and the need for robust deliberation. Many cities and towns may already do this well. Indeed, some councils may see themselves as the entity that must "work through" the groan zone and make the tough decisions, not the public. From this perspective, the fact that most public engagement focuses only on the divergent opinion stage—gathering input from multiple sources—is not problematic because the council itself serves as the deliberating body. For many, expecting the public to do the working through seems unrealistic. In general, this perspective has merit. It is the basis for representative government and can work on certain issues when the public trusts the council. Due to the wickedness of problems, however, issues arise at all three stages when we leave most of the work to representative bodies, regardless of how well they may deliberate themselves. In the first stage, not enough divergent opinion may be considered by the council if concerted efforts are not made to seek out voices and respect dispersed expertise. At the second stage, if they do not bring the public along during the working-through process, council decisions may not be understood or considered legitimate, especially with polarizing issues. Most importantly, if too much of the heavy lifting is left to experts or the council, the third stage—convergent thinking—is woefully limited. The adaptive changes and broad range of actions so critical to addressing wicked problems require shared responsibility and ownership by the public. Those cannot be dictated to them by the council. If citizens simply provide their opinions on the front end and then hear the final decision on the back end, without going through the groan zone themselves, problems will ensue.

The second shift involves ranging beyond the traditional forms of public engagement that tend to focus on one-way exchanges of information (see below). Public engagement of wicked problems needs to involve a broader range of stakeholders interacting with each other, not just given a chance to express their individual opinions. Most traditional forms of engagement primarily attract the usual suspects or those with already entrenched opinions, leaving the vast majority in the middle disengaged.

Citizens rarely approach the microphone at council or board meetings or write letters to the editor to explain that they have sympathy for various approaches to the issue and are still trying to work through the implications and negotiate the tensions. Instead, the voices that are heard are those with a clear—but often simplistic and at times scripted by others—view of the matter. Again, alternative voices simply talk past each other without significant interaction or mutual understanding. The challenge to municipalities now will be to build a culture of engagement in their communities so that they can attract broader audiences, not just the advocates for particular positions. The good news is that deliberative engagement has been shown to create a positive feedback loop, increasing trust, decreasing cynicism, and making it more likely that people will return. Involving citizens earlier in the process to help define the issue and imagine potential responses also engages them as problem-solvers and innovators—roles many will relish—rather than simply as supporters or complainers. People are yearning for genuine, meaningful engagement, something that traditional forms of engagement rarely deliver.

The third way to build capacity ranges beyond municipal government. Just shifting official public engagement processes to a more deliberative model is not enough. Addressing wicked problems requires a broad range of treatments, adaptive changes, and collaborations across public, private, and nonprofit lines. Municipal government can therefore serve as a catalyst or a convener of these broader processes, but often they will need to give up some control and simply be part of a broader conversation. Fortunately, there has been a growing movement that cities and towns can tap into to build their capacity in deliberative engagement at all three of these levels.

The Deliberative Democracy Movement

The deliberative democracy movement is a conglomeration of academics, practitioners, civic entrepreneurs, and national and international organizations dedicated to developing the capacity to support deliberative practice and infuse our communities with genuine opportunities to tackle wicked problems "work through" tough issues, form more nuanced public judgments, and support more inclusive civic action and public policies. These individuals and organizations are essentially resources for "passionate impartiality." They are passionate about democracy, about solving problems, and about improving their communities, but nonetheless take a more impartial, process-oriented, and supportive stance on how that may be accomplished. They are focused on improving the conversation and bringing people together, rather than advocating for particular points of view.

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (www.ncdd.org) serves as an umbrella organization for this sort of work, while organizations like Public Agenda, the Kettering Foundation, Everyday Democracy, the International Association of Public Participation, and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium all readily provide useful resources (see author's note at the end of article). Numerous trainings are available. The National League of Cities, the Institute for Local Government, and the Alliance for Innovation also have produced material specifically targeted for municipal use. For a list of key deliberative engagement resources for municipalities, visit https://web.libarts.colostate.edu/cpd/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/01/deliberative-resources-for-municipalities.pdf .

In local communities, there are a number of places where deliberative capacity is being built. Organizations like the United Way, community foundations, and public libraries are often great resources for passionate impartiality. More and more nonprofit firms, such as Civic Results in Denver, provide these services. Lastly, there is a growing number of centers and institutes tied to this work at colleges and universities across the country, such as the Institute for the Common Good at Regis University, and the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University https://www.nifi.org/en/network-partners.

Reference

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