

The Wicked World of Choice

W.T.F. – Twitter acronym – Managerial Reality



It was an MBA class that on hearing my description of the world from which I had fled, and from which they were taking an educational break, came up with the somewhat modified language of the caption of the lecture slide above.

The world that we inhabit, and in which we have to make our choices of beginnings, ends & means is one that I term wicked. Though much is said about how much more difficult the world is getting for leaders/managers little has changed in its fundamental character since ancient times. It could be argued that things are getting faster, more global and more interconnected – but remember - 'everything is relative'! Methinks we have it easier than the Ancient Greeks.

Let us take a look at what we could term possible **dimensions of wickedness**.

Outside of the abstract world of mathematics the situations/circumstances with which we contend are indeterminate – we cannot pin down exactly 'what' is going on, and even if we feel we can, 'why it is going on' is the next question – and then of course the potentially infinite string of 'why behind the why' questions can follow. This layered indeterminacy is further compounded by the impossibility of objectivity. The circumstances do not simply reveal themselves to us – we are guided by our prejudices in our foci of attention and modes of interpretation of the fog we face – we don't talk about what we can 'see' – we 'see' what we can talk about! The harder we stare into the fog the more likely we are to see what we feel we 'should' see.

Our circumstances are not simply uncertain, they are equivocal – we are confused not ignorant – there can never be enough information – more information is simply more fog, even if it is of a different type/more transparent. No sculpting of fog will engineer the concrete foundations for our choices that we might so much desire.

All situations are indeterminate but not all to the same degree - they have different **degrees of equivocality**. Some situations are seemingly of low equivocality – confuse us less – they are what we term **‘strong’ situations** – they send us ‘strong’ signals about W.T.F. is going on & why – we see bright yellow lights in the fog! Circumstances of high equivocality we label **‘weak situations’** – they send us weak signals about W.T.F. is going on & why – maybe, but only maybe, there are no lights at all!!!

Because *‘there is no such thing as a view from nowhere’* and *‘no end to the chain of causal questioning’* there can be no zero on the scale of situational equivocality – it could be said that **all situations are weak, but some situations are weaker than others**. All of our **‘beginnings’** are precarious – some are just less precarious.

The second dimension of wickedness that we will discuss is **‘equifinality’**. This relates to our **choices of means/methods**. The term is borrowed from engineering – there are multiple means of arriving at the same goal/end - a boat, a bridge, stilts and jumping are all ways to cross river – as means they are equifinal. There are multiple methods of achieving our goals and we have to choose between them. In some circumstances we have many alternative methods available/imaginable, in some seemingly few - there are differing degrees of equifinality. Again, there is no zero on this scale as there is always more than one option - as we can always simply abandon our goal and stay on our current side of the river and enjoy the view!

The next dimension that we must touch upon is that of **‘reversibility’**. When we have made a choice and pursued a goal/taken action/deployed a means, it is clear that we can reverse the effect it has had to a greater or lesser extent. The effect of some actions is less reversible than that of other actions – and some impacts of a certain action more reversible than that of others. Boeing might be able to ground the 737-800[**MAX**], fix the fault and return the aircraft to service, but can the firm ever restore its reputation with consumers and investors?

Again in this dimension of reversibility there is no zero, as there is no way to ‘turn back time’, or ‘expunge history’. Once one has acted in the world, the world has changed from that moment and forever, so there is no going back to your ‘beginning’ even if you had a time machine!

We now turn to the last two dimensions of wickedness – interconnectedness and interdependency. As for the other dimensions situations they can be seen as having different degrees, and there is no zero on their scale.

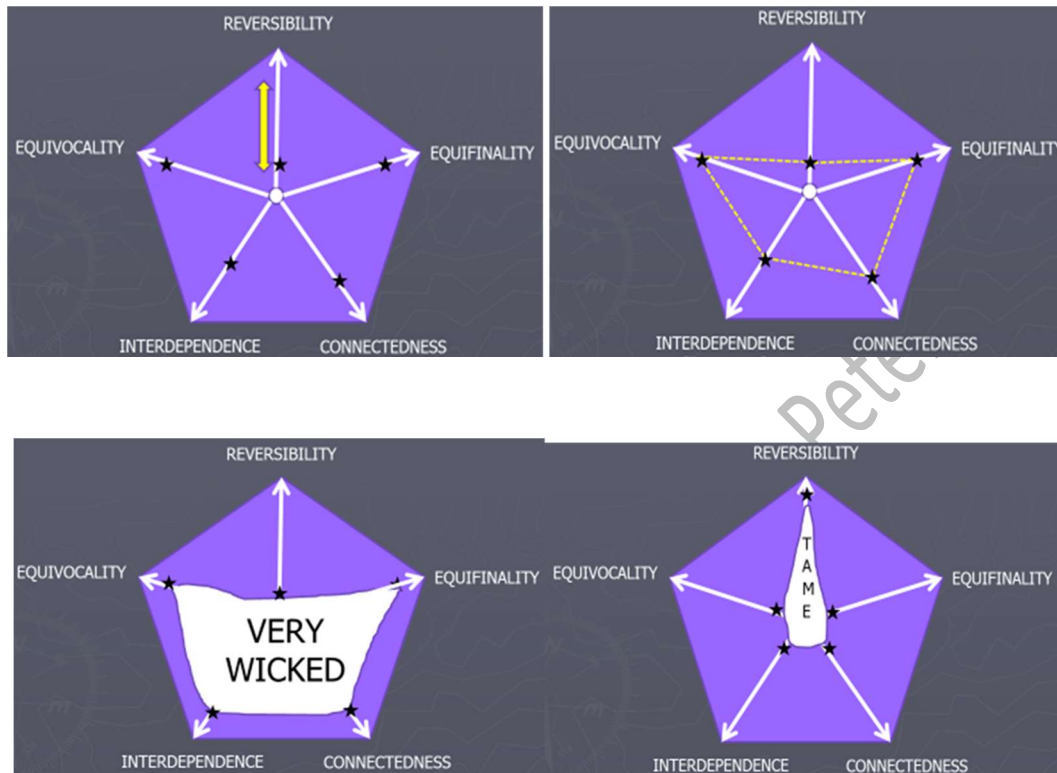
Interdependence simply indicates the degree to which choosing to do one thing precludes the choosing of the other. I, for sure, cannot whistle and chew gum at the same time but walking and chewing gum simultaneously is something even I can manage. Much as though I wish it were possible you also cannot spend the same money twice on different things, so all possible choices are interdependent through that ‘resource availability’ even if through no other.

Interconnectedness is the degree to which choices are connected to each other through their effects – however indirectly. Choice connectedness often never reveals itself to us until it’s ‘too late’. In a shanty house – maybe one should choose to move nothing – no one quite knows how it is all held together – there is rarely that choice available in the wicked world! One never knows the effects that one’s effects might have!

Again, there is no zero in this dimension, if for no other reason, that when we pay attention to more than one thing they are connected through our choice of attention and/or inattention. In the early

20th Century it might have mattered little to our business policy in the UK what a firm chose to do in Brazil, but now?

We now have five dimensions through which we can characterise the circumstance of choice that faces us – we can represent it as a form of multi-dimensional decisional space represented by a star chart – with different choices having different shapes thereon.



There is, however, one more dimension to this circumstance of wicked choice to which we have not as yet paid any attention and that is the choice of ends/what goals we should have – what we should be trying to achieve. There is, of course, an infinite number of goals/combinations of goals that we can pursue, and from this panoply we must choose.

Within this wicked world of choice there rests a final wickedness to which we will briefly turn our attention. In business we do not want to choose between efficiency & effectiveness or, for instance, between market share & profitability or cost & sustainability. We do not want 'either-or' – we want 'both-and'. The means for successfully achieving one important end, often has the reverse effect on the achievement of an equally important goal- specialisation drives efficiency but at the price of more difficult coordination.

The world of choice we face is equivocal, equifinal, irreversible, interdependent, inter-connected, future choosing and riddled with paradox.

There is no science of choice that can assist us in this wicked world – it is good judgement that we need, and for that we need Practical Wisdom – that elusive nexus of dispositions & capabilities that a Mindful manager seeks.

Dr Peter Lenney – January 2020