



Wisconsin Counties Association
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& Exhibit Hall **2022**

10:30 - 11:30 AM

Strategies for Solving
“Wicked” Problems

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Strategies for Addressing Wicked Problems in a Wicked World

Government can handle most public problems

1. Problems that require technical, expert-driven solutions

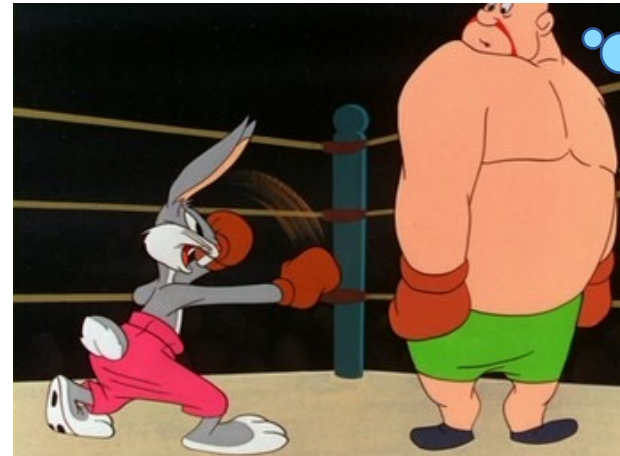
- ✓ Talented staff
- ✓ Resources
- ✓ Infrastructure (internal & external)



Long live technology!

2. Problems that can be addressed through advocacy

- ✓ Council/Board debate
- ✓ Partisan politics
- ✓ Interest/Advocacy groups
- ✓ Activists



Prepare for pain?

Characteristics of a Wicked Problem

1. No definitive formulation
2. No “stopping rule” or completion signal
3. Solutions are not true/false, only good or bad
4. Multiple potential solutions or approaches
5. No way to test solutions
6. “Every trial counts”
7. Problems are essentially unique
8. Can be described as symptom of other problems
9. How problem is named and framed determines its possible solutions
10. Planners have no “right” to be wrong. (i.e., they are responsible for consequences)

Adapted from Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." Policy sciences, 4(2), 155-169.



Examples of Classic Wicked Problems



- ◆ Land and water use
- ◆ Climate change
- ◆ Social climate and diversity issues
- ◆ Long-term energy strategy
- ◆ Public safety issues
- ◆ Mass incarceration
- ◆ Alcohol/drug misuse and addiction
- ◆ Mental health challenges
- ◆ Health equity

Characteristics of a Wicked World



1. Politicization of everyday issues
2. False dichotomies reign supreme
3. Extreme viewpoints take up the oxygen
4. Moderate middle (silent majority) is voiceless
5. More wicked problems more frequently (increasing tempo)
6. Resources and capacity not keeping up
7. Time-sensitive - immediate solutions demanded
8. Severe consequences (and zero forgiveness) for mistakes or perceived failure
9. Lack of understanding and acceptance of evidence
10. Over-privileging of “alternative” facts
11. Traditional and social media magnify trends

“New” Wicked Problems in a Wicked World



- ◆ Free and Fair Elections

More Social Problems

- ◆ School lesson content



- ◆ Equity, diversity and inclusion

Fewer Resources

- ◆ Board-Staff relations

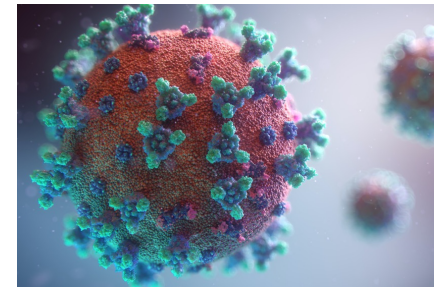


- ◆ Public health



Everyone has a Megaphone

- ◆ COVID policy



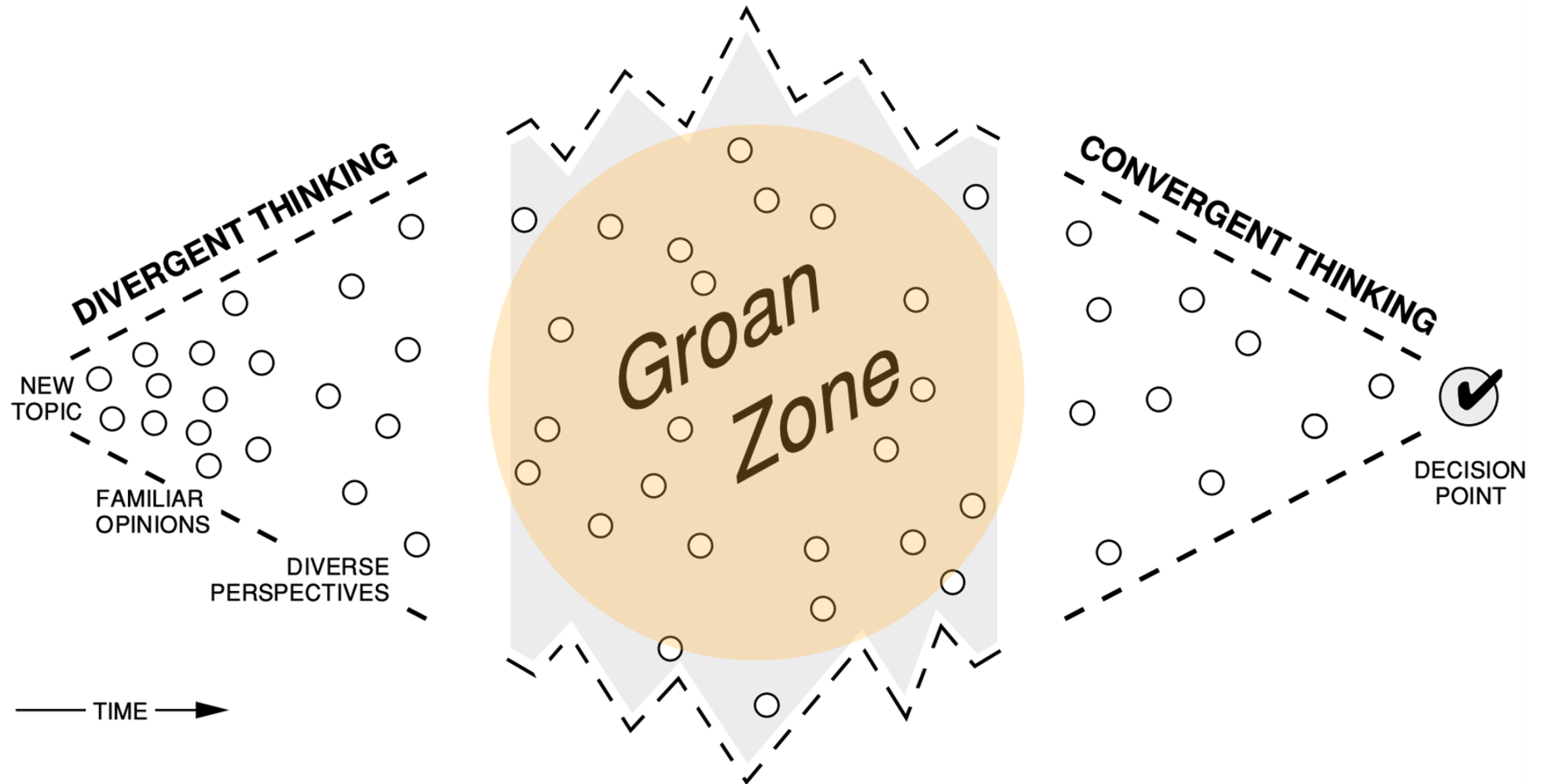
When, how, and with whom do we engage?



Deliberative Engagement

- ◆ Rooted in democratic tradition
- ◆ Recognizes that underlying values matter
- ◆ Focuses on mutual understanding
- ◆ Encourages authentic engagement across perspectives
- ◆ Fosters relationships which lead to negotiation, creativity, and compromise
- ◆ Relational > Transactional = Ongoing collaboration
- ◆ Emphasis on seeking common ground
- ◆ Builds community capacity for engagement
- ◆ Improves the quality of public discourse

Sam Kaner's Dynamics of Group Decision-Making



Stages of Decision-Making

Stage 1: Divergent Thinking

Barriers to Overcome

- Squelch dissent
- Not enough voices in the room
- Many voices, same choir
- Issues are artificially narrowed
- Public engagement too late to be meaningful
- Good v. Evil narrative
- False Consensus

Engagement Strategy

- Board/Council meetings
- Public hearings
- Citizen comment mechanisms
- Surveys
- Traditional media engagement
- Social media
- Key: early engagement

Stages of Decision-Making

Stage 2: Working through the Groan Zone

Barriers to Overcome

- **Mistrust**
- **Time pressure**
- **Lack of participation**
- **Disruptors**

Engagement Strategy

- **Effective issue framing**
- **Small group engagement**
- **Process design**
- **Deliberative dialogue**
- **Excellent facilitation**

Stages of Decision-Making: Convergent Thinking

Stage 3: Convergent Thinking

Barriers to Overcome

- **Grappling with complexity**
- **Narrowing choices**
- **Paralysis by analysis**

Engagement Strategy

- **Collaborative planning**
- **Encourage innovation**
- **Effective prioritization**
- **Negotiation**
- **Commitment to follow through**
- **Align resources**

What Can Local Government Do?

Build Deliberative Engagement Capacity

1. Recognize of the limits of expert and adversarial models of problem-solving
2. Increase the deliberative nature of internal governance processes
3. Work to make official county public engagement processes more deliberative and interactive
4. Help build deliberative capacity within the broader community

Public Engagement Planning Tool

| Planning Step | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Step 1: Issue Assessment | Questions for Consideration <ul style="list-style-type: none">What is the issue as we understand it now?How is it being framed, and by whom?Who is this issue likely to impact in our community, and how?How complex is this issue?<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Are there multiple conflicting values involved?b. Is the problem systemic?Are there competing solutions to the problem?What major technological issues and challenges are associated with this issue?How likely is it that technical solutions alone can resolve this issue?What technical and other information do stakeholders need in order to address this issue effectively? <p>Key Question: Given the nature of the issue, is it appropriate for significant public engagement?</p> |

Thinking Like a Lawyer: Key Skills

- Honesty
- Anticipate position of others
- Research all background
- Have command of the facts

Thinking Like a Lawyer: Communication

- How to best communicate a bad situation
- Elements of a communication to interested parties
- What information to release in a public setting
- Exercising control over the message
- Thinking of all potential consequences or response to communication

Thinking Like a Lawyer: Finding a Solution

- Meeting the other parties' needs
- Know the limits of your supporters
- Be prepared for all types of responses
- Know your legal limitations

Takeaways

- ◆ **Wicked Problems are increasing in frequency**
- ◆ **Traditional approaches to problem solving are not adequate**
- ◆ **Local government cannot act alone**
- ◆ **Need to set stage for resolution**
- ◆ **Communication to the public and to decision-makers**
- ◆ **Deliberative engagement processes can work**
- ◆ **Need to consider all consequences**
- ◆ **Local government can build capacity and catalyze**

Questions



Thank You!

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