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Strategies for Addressing Wicked Problems in a Wicked World

Institutions can handle most public problems
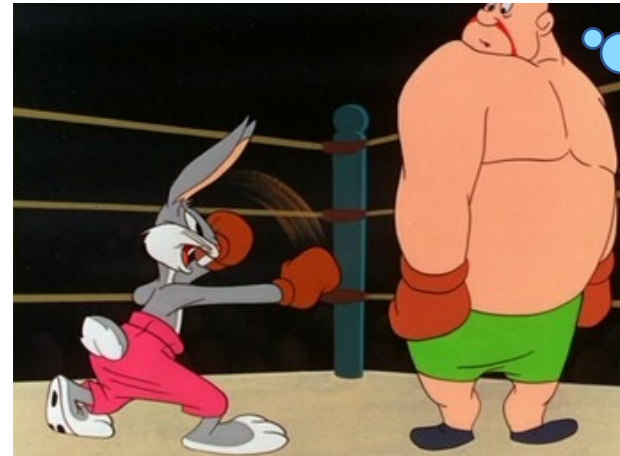
1. **Problems that require technical, expert-driven solutions**
   - ✓ **Talented staff**
   - ✓ **Resources**
   - ✓ **Legal recourse**

Long live technology!

2. **Problems that can be addressed through advocacy**
   - ✓ **Board deliberation**
   - ✓ **Partisan politics**
   - ✓ **Interest/Advocacy groups**
   - ✓ **Activists**

Prepare for pain?

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

Characteristics of a Wicked Problem

1. No definitive formulation

2. No "stopping rule" or completion signal

3. Solutions are not true/false

4. Multiple potential solutions or approaches

5. No way to pre-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 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.

Wicked Problems

"New" Wicked Problems in a Wicked World

◆ **Equity, diversity and inclusion**

More Social Problems

◆ **Public safety**

◆ **Free and Fair Elections**

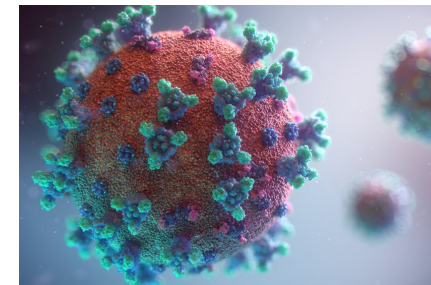**Fewer Resources**

◆ **Youth mental health**

◆ **Clean water**

Everyone has a Megaphone

◆ **COVID policy**

When, how, and with whom do we engage?

Principles of Engagement

- Active listening is a necessary condition
- Transparency in process and communication
- Practice inclusive engagement
- Honesty in positions and beliefs
- Stand behind our beliefs
- Exercise discretion in what we say and how we say it
- Correct missteps quickly to retain credibility
- Lead by example

Sam Kaner's Dynamics of Group Decision-Making
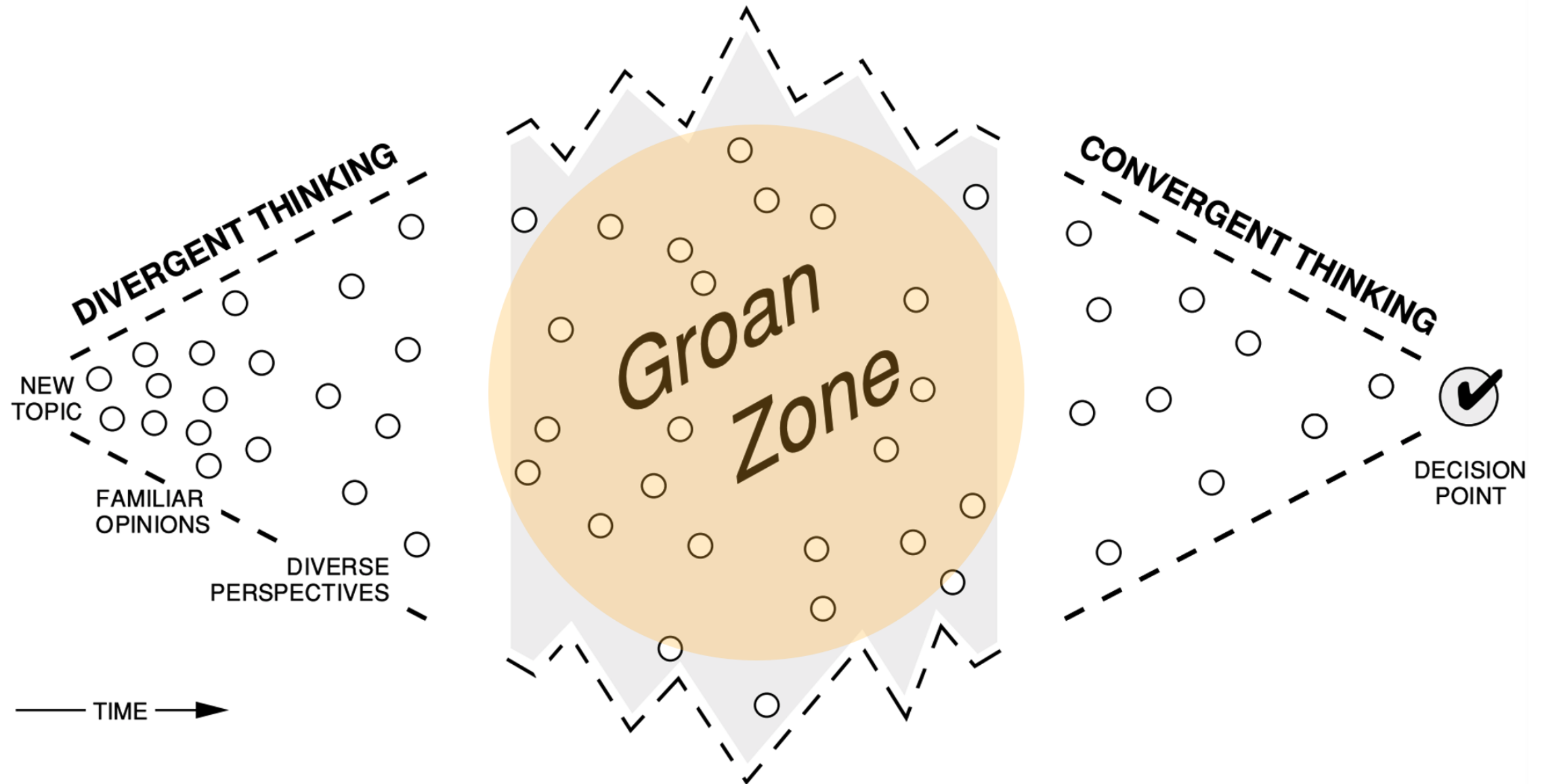
Stages of Decision-Making

Stage 1: Divergent Thinking

Barriers to Overcome

- High emotion
- Tendency to minimize dissent
- Not enough voices in the room
- Many voices, same choir
- Issues are artificially narrowed
- No engagement plan
- Good v. Evil narrative
- False Consensus

Engagement Strategy

- Board/Council meetings
- Citizen comment mechanisms
- Surveys
- Traditional media engagement
- Social media
- Early engagement
- Process transparency
- Determine engagement goal

TOOLS: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Engagement

Increasing level of stakeholder engagement →

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Stages of Decision-Making

Stage 2: Working through the Groan Zone

Barriers to Overcome

- Mistrust
- Time pressure
- Lack of participation
- Disruptors
- High emotion

Engagement Strategy

- Effective issue framing
- Process design
- Transparency
- Small group engagement
- Meaningful dialogue
- Excellent facilitation

Stages of Decision-Making

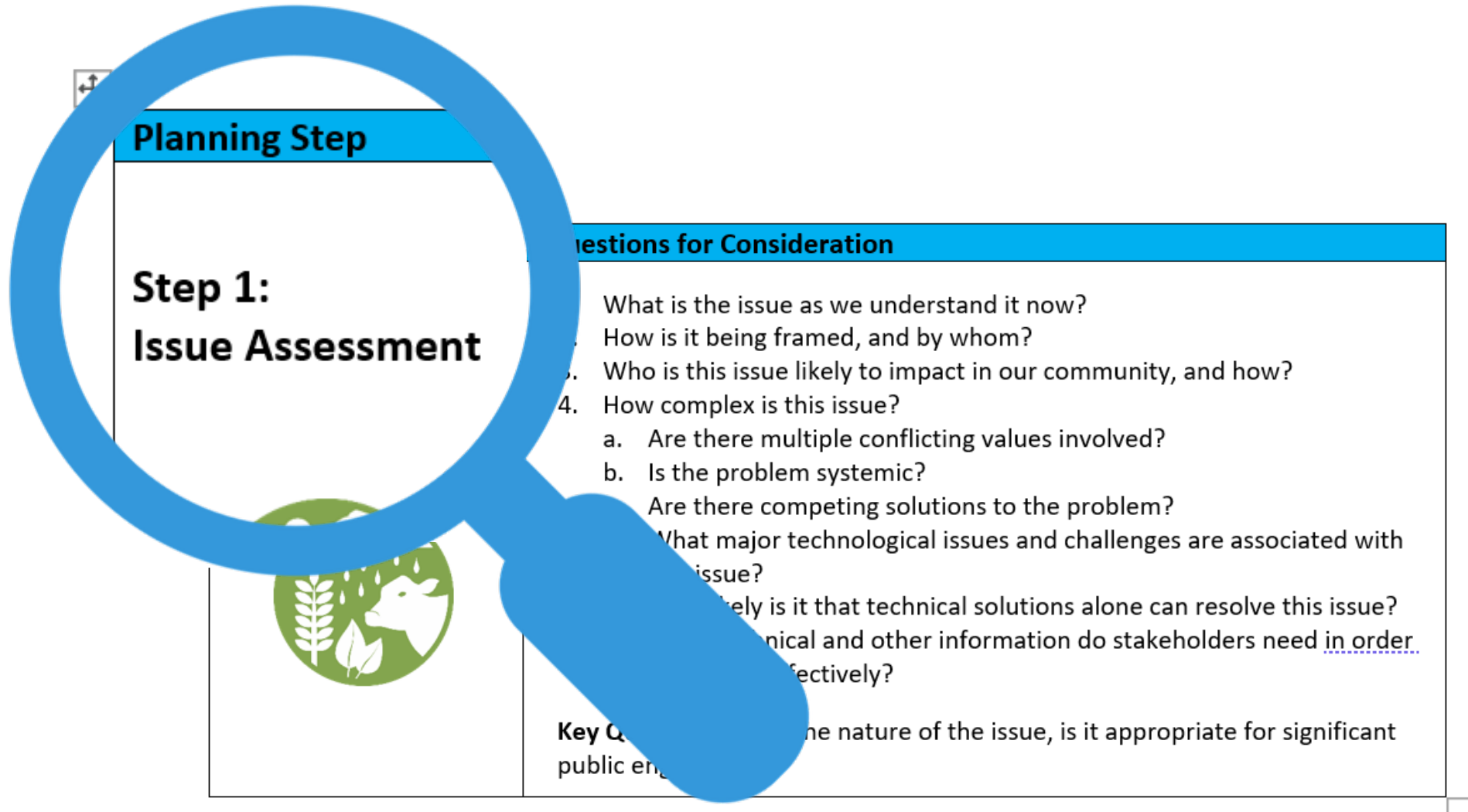## Stage 3: Convergent Thinking

Barriers to Overcome

- Grappling with complexity
- Narrowing choices
- Paralysis by analysis
- Late stage opposition

Engagement Strategy

- Enlist allies
- Effective negotiation
- Clear messaging
- Align resources
- Commitment to follow through

TOOLS: Public Engagement Planning Map

Planning Step

Step 1: Issue Assessment

Questions for Consideration

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?

4. How complex is this issue?

    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?

    [lik]ely is it that technical solutions alone can resolve this issue?

    [tech]nical and other information do stakeholders need in order [to act eff]ectively?

Key Q[uestion:] [Given t]he nature of the issue, is it appropriate for significant public en[gagement?]

Revisit Principles of Engagement

- Active listening is a necessary condition
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- Lead by example

SCENARIO 1

- Families want their to children participate in athletic event.

- Children signed up for team do not qualify due to regulations regarding eligibility.

- Children have played on the team with other teammates in the past without dispute or challenge.

- Allowing children to participate on the team would be contrary to rules that must be followed by other teams involved in the tournament.

- The tournament is a one weekend event.

SCENARIO 2

- Group wants to reconfigure school buildings to improve efficiency and educational programming

- Administration believes that restructuring will provide better educational programming for all students.

- Governing body believes that reconfiguring buildings is necessary but unsure of best decision.

- Some members of the community oppose restructuring and expenditure of tax monies for restructuring.

- Some members of the public believe that administration is refusing to consider suggestions from the public.

Questions

Thank You!

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