



Tackling Wicked Government Problems: A Practical Guide for Developing Enterprise Leaders

Edited by Jackson Nickerson and Ronald Sanders

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The term “wicked problems” is such an overused trope that it is in danger of losing resonance as an operational concept. However, readers turned off by yet another power point deep term used as a book title beware. If you skip this book by judging its title alone, you will miss a unique treatment of the persistent plague in both the interagency and intergovernmental arenas: the lack of capacity among public leaders to work together on the pressing problems of government that “are increasingly complex, cross jurisdictional, amorphous, and difficult to solve.” *Tackling Wicked Government Problems* addresses this perennial problem by offering a cutting-edge mixture of practitioner experiences and academic theory in its chapters.

Nickerson and Sanders argue that wicked problems in government require an enterprise solution. By enterprise, they mean the “resources and capabilities found in the constellation of public and private stations that must act in concert they are to successfully address cross cutting national and international challenges.” Wary of organizational changes that rely solely on structural changes, which in their view are insufficient, the editors argue for a new kind of leader and a new kind of approach to leadership development. Thus, their purpose in writing this book is to inform the reader of the reasons why government needs enterprise leadership, to provide different practitioner perspectives on the capabilities enterprise leaders need, and to present recommendations on how government agencies can develop enterprise leadership in government executives. They accomplish their purpose in three parts.

In part one, Nickerson and Sanders describe the contemporary challenge as an inadequacy in traditional leadership development strategies. Those strategies assume “leaders function in an intra-organizational context, that is, they are embedded in a formal organizational structure with a defined mission, limit of authority, and accountability.” Therefore, the traditional literature considers actors that are external to the formal and informal structures of traditional organization constructs as extra-organizational—important but largely outside the leader’s sphere of influence. Yet, their surveys from practitioners such as Michael Connell, from the intelligence community, Pat Tamburrino, from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Admiral Thad Allen, director of the federal response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, provide examples of government leaders establishing that very type of external influence that the traditional literature ignores. These are examples of leaders solving problems without any formal chain of command authority over most of the actors involved in solving their problems. These examples demonstrate a contradiction to classic organization theory, which holds that authority must match accountability and show that that axiom is unlikely to hold in current environments. Each of the

practitioners listed above offer a chapter that gives their perspective of what Nickerson and Sanders call enterprise leadership and describe their approach to building synergy with external actors to solve complex problems in several different contexts.

In the second part of *Tackling Wicked Problems*, the editors explain how enterprise leadership relates to the latest “dislocated leadership” theories such as informal leadership and network leadership.¹ These theories involve various forms of inter-organizational and cross-jurisdictional collaborative action, and stress the application of normative reasons for sharing power such as ethical and pragmatic considerations.² In this sense, disparate organizations work together not only to collectively solve tough problems that they cannot solve independently, but also to achieve individual organizational objectives.

Part two makes its greatest contribution to the leadership literature by asking what makes for an effective enterprise leader and providing a concise theoretical description of its qualities and necessary competencies. First, enterprise leaders need to identify and understand the missions, structures, budgets, and bureaucratic processes of all relevant actors. Second, they need to understand the depth and breadth of information, knowledge, and motivation of all of the actors in the context of their problem setting. This allows them to compose a network that can comprehensively and collectively see and understand wicked problems and solve them. Third, when enterprise leaders engage those relevant network actors to develop solutions they require the interpersonal skills to form a unified, cohesive team without any formal authority. The skills required to implement these competencies consist of the ability to establish a common language and communication channels, build and maintain trust and reputation among collaborating actors and entities, balance dependencies so that one organization is not significantly more at risk than other organizations, and the ability to determine mutual incentives that will stimulate the necessary collaborative action.

Part three provides examples of government organizations exercising enterprise leader development and the editors’ conclusions. In this section the authors expose themselves to the first criticism. In offering the example of DoD’s U.S. Army Command and General Staff College interagency fellowship program to illustrate what the authors consider a successful program of developing enterprise leaders, they fall short of demonstrating their point empirically due to potential sample bias. They base their assessment of the program on Government Accountability Office (GAO) surveys of participants in the fellowship whereby 86 percent report that the program effectively helped them develop skills to lead in interagency environments. While this finding may be within the theoretical expectations of those researching enterprise leaders, it may also suffer from sample bias because the GAO estimated effectiveness of the participants’ skill development based on self-reporting. Reports from external observers might provide better measurements of program effectiveness for developing interagency skills.

The editors conclude their book with four recommendations they believe are critical in developing enterprise leaders. These recommendations consist of establishing enterprise leadership as an Office of Personnel Management executive core qualification; requiring interagency assignments as a prerequisite for promotion to the Senior Executive Service (SES); strengthening SES candidate development by making it mandatory; and requiring formal leadership education as part of executive development. The editors cite DoD and its joint professional military education system as an example of how other federal agencies might be able to accomplish this. However, this analogy opens the book to a second critique. DoD has the ability and flexibility to conduct professional education by maintaining a “Trainees, Transient, Holdees, and Students” personnel

account where approximately 11 percent of the force is assigned while attending leader development and the rest of the force continues with daily operations. Budgetary or legislative constraints may prevent other agencies from following DoD's example. Removing those obstacles first may allow other government agencies to implement Nickerson and Sanders' recommendations.

Despite these critiques, *Tackling Wicked Government Problems* offers a fresh look at an old problem through the lens of enterprise leadership. As chapter six in their book highlights, "effective collaboration requires a holistic approach... simply introducing a collaborative technology, tweaking incentives, or advocating control programs to promote collaboration is often insufficient." By offering a collection of both practitioner and academic perspectives, Nickerson and Sanders provide succinct, action oriented, and pragmatic focus for viewing the problem of interagency collaboration differently and for developing leaders and strategies to solve wicked problems. **IAJ**

Notes

1 For explanations of these theories see Montgomery Van Wart, *Leadership in Public Organizations: An Introduction* (M.E. Sharpe, 2012).

2 Peter M. Jackson and Lynn Stainsby, "The Public Manager in 2010: Managing Public Sector Networked Organizations," *Public Money & Management* 20, no. 1 (2000), pp. 11–16; Donald F. Kettl, "Managing Boundaries in American Administration: The Collaboration Imperative," *Public Administration Review* 66, no. s1 (2006), pp. 10–19.