Book review - “Tame, Messy and Wicked Risk Leadership”, by David Hancock, Gower, Surrey 2010

Reviewed by Harold Ainsworth, September 2012

The title of the book intrigued me since as a Consultant and Educator I regularly deal with risk management in the project, program and portfolio context. The title did not disappoint and the book although a short 92 pages, is interesting to read and challenging. If you like me believe that much of what you read or see in the press or on television, or come across elsewhere, is far too simplistic solutions for today’s complex society then you will also appreciate this quote from the book.

“Because of the complex world in which we live, many of today’s societal, sociological and political problems have the attributes of both wickedness and messes”.

But first we best explain some of the terms:

- **“Tame problems** have straightforward, simple linear causal relationships that can be solved by analytical methods”. This is where traditional risk and project management guides operate.
- **“Messes** have high levels of system complexity and are clusters of interrelated and interdependent problems, that (they) cannot be solved in isolation, but need to be considered holistically”. We need to deal with system complexity here.
- **"Wicked problems"** are characterized by high levels of behavioural complexity. Each problem we encounter is essentially unique with no real definitive statement of the problem and is framed in vague ambiguity”. He also considers them divergent since they do not promise a solution as with convergent problems, which with sufficient study a solution eventually emerges.
- **Wicked messes** are where “behavioural and dynamic complexity coexist and interact” and require very different approaches to resolving them.

The following diagram from page 63 helps us to understand the type of problems and possible approaches:

![Diagram showing relationship between four problem types and risk](image-url)
Behavioural complexity occurs when “there is diversity of opinions, mental models, and value of the key decision makers” and is “characterised by deep disagreement in assumptions and beliefs”. We have all seen this happen either covertly or very overtly. System complexity occurs when there are “complex levels of system interaction” especially when we consider the broader system in which the problem resides.

He offers three strategies for dealing with wicked messes:

- Authoritative strategies where the power resides with a small number of stakeholders, and can to an extent reduce the complexity, but the solution may not be sustainable;
- “Muddling through”, and we see a many instances of this in life, but “the problem is never fully resolved as the solution is constantly changing” as stakeholder’s perceptions evolve;
- Collaborative strategies are “the most difficult to implement, but the most rewarding because they include buy-in from all stakeholders”. Ultimately this is the best and lasting approach.

In chapter 4 he introduces the idea of risk as a behavioural concept, since "the range of risk possibilities are limitless and framed by an individual's experience……………….. even given the same set of conditions”. Therefore there will be ambiguity and the best way to resolve this is through dialogue with the stakeholders in order to examine the problem and explore solutions. Whilst there is a role for traditional risk management with its structured approach, probabilities and impacts not all of the problems surfaced will be amenable to that approach. This dialogue with stakeholders will require excellent facilitation skills in order to ensure that ambiguity is reduced and that opinions, perceptions or predetermined solutions are not transferred to other participants.

In the conclusion he proposes that "we need to move risk management from predominantly a science driven by numbers, systems and processes to an art with greater behavioural foundation”. This new form of approach to risk he calls risk leadership and contrasts it with traditional risk management approaches.

The book reminded me of the work by David Snowden and others with the Cynefin Framework (see www.cognitive-edge.com Cynefin Framework and papers by Snowden) who also divided up the problem space and the preferred responses in similar manner. They have Known, Knowable (aka complicated), Complex and Chaos problem spaces and the responses to each vary accordingly, however you will need to read more on it to appreciate its insights.

The author of the book has held risk management positions in a number of large organizations and was responsible for creating and delivering the risk management system for the successful Terminal 5 Project at Heathrow. He uses this project to demonstrate how they started out with a view of the project as a tame problem, and then realized it was more like a mess, and then a wicked problem and ultimately a wicked mess. Therefore the ideas outlined in this book have been well and truly tested in practice over a number of projects.

The lesson for us is to first understand the type of problem that we face, so that we may apply the appropriate approach. Applying the wrong approach can actually make the situation worse. Whilst the book is primarily about risk management the principles involved apply to a wider range of project and other challenges. However I suspect that many organisations normally prefer a more standardise and structured approach as it is easier to ensure compliance, and they derive more comfort from the illusion that results will probably emerge, even though experience often says otherwise.