With the topic of leadership de rigueur in Australia these days, it is important that we ponder not just the who but also the why and the how ought.

Attending to these other questions draws attention to the real leadership challenge. This is the challenge of finding a leader with the capacity to facilitate and guide change (or reform) in a world of no certain answers.

The US Army Staff College invented the acronym VUCA to describe the contemporary Volatile world of Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. Issues and problems in such a world have been described as wicked, even super-wicked.

**Wicked problems are ultimate test**

Wicked problems cannot be solved by experts or by deferring to the judgement of an authority such as a government minister or a CEO. The diversity of perspectives and interests in wicked problems means that all the people involved in the problem need to be engaged and actively participating.

In particular, wicked problems are systemic; they are simultaneously social, economic, technical, environmental and legal problems. They require multi-faceted solutions, which are not always obvious. Where solutions are recognised, they often cannot be implemented simultaneously.

As a result, the easiest implemented solutions are often tried first. This very often then create new problems for which subsequent, more difficult-to-implement solutions may no longer be appropriate. That is, many preferred solutions to wicked problems often lead to unintended consequences, which demand totally new approaches.

Kevin Rudd gave us technocratic leadership. AAP/Lukas Coch

Liz Skelton and Geoff Aigner argue in *The Australian Leadership Paradox* that European Australia’s history and culture have not prepared us well for the kind of leadership needed to work through wicked problems together. We are more used to command-and-control or technocratic types of leaders – think Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd, respectively!

Tony Abbott is discovering the limits of command-and-control leadership. AAP/Lukas Coch

From this perspective, the real leadership challenge is the mismatch between the leadership approach we’re familiar with and ethical mindsets that prize open-heartedness, the virtue of collaboration and the two-way communication needed for leadership in a VUCA World. Only by replacing the current leadership paradigm will there be any prospect of reaching a deep understanding of problems, alternative visions of the future, and consensus on decisions.

**What sort of leaders are there?**

In partnership with psychologist Susanne Cook-Greuter, a 30-year research program at Harvard provides advice on the mindsets and approaches needed for such leadership. The Harvard team integrates mindsets and will to action into the concept of action logic: each of us has a particular action logic that determines how we see the world and, therefore, how we will think and act.

Analysing responses from a data set of many thousand senior leaders across all sectors on all continents (including Antarctica), they have identified seven broad categories of action logic among leaders:
Opportunists who focus on their own immediate interests. They are often manipulative and believe that “might makes right” and “ends justify means”. Source of power: coercion. How they influence others: control and authority.

Diplomats who focus on being approved by everyone and avoiding conflict. Source of power: persuasion. How they influence others: use conformity with existing norms to get others to follow.

Experts who focus on their own expertise and prioritise proven technical competence. They seek rationality and efficiency. Source of power: logical argument. How they influence others: give personal attention to detail and seek perfection.

Achievers who focus on the delivery of results, efficiency and success within the system. Source of power: Coordinating the sources of power of previous three action logics. How they influence others: provide logical argument, data and experiences; make task-oriented contractual agreements.

Individualists who focus on their own abilities to offer original and creative solutions; they take more systemic and broader positions on issues than opportunists. Source of power: Confronting, often deconstructing other positions. How they influence others: adapt (ignore) rules when needed or invent new ones.

Strategists who focus on the interactions in systems and anticipate long-term trends. They believe in cultivating a shared vision and culture as first steps in a proactive approach to issues. Source of power: Integrative; consciously transformative. How they influence others: lead in reframing situation so that decisions support overall principles and strategy.

Alchemists who focus on the interplay of awareness, thought, action and effects, and on transforming self and others. They value social transformation, environmental responsibility, equity and support for global humanitarian causes. Source of power: authentic, values-driven leadership. How they influence others: reframe issues; hold up mirror to society; often entails working behind the scenes.

The leadership challenge is to elect a government capable of forming a cabinet composed of achievers, individualists, strategists and alchemists – and a prime minister who is, preferably, a strategist or alchemist. Opportunists, diplomats and experts do not make for effective leaders in a VUCA World of wicked problems.

What are the odds of getting the right leader?

The Harvard research indicates that 52.1% of leaders can be categorised as opportunists, diplomats or experts. So, leaving them out: of a combined House of Representatives and Senate membership of 226 people, that leaves 108 who could make decent cabinet ministers, at least if we had cross-party governments.

However, only 6.9% of leaders are strategists and alchemists. This severely limits the choice of prime minister to a pool of 16. But, as a senator cannot become prime minister and we do not have a tradition of cross-party cabinets, this translates to a prime minister chosen from possibly eight of the 90 Coalition MPs – or, more accurately, six as the Coalition always awards the top job to a member of the senior party – that is, the Liberals.

On this basis, we potentially have six members of parliament in Canberra capable – on the statistics – of being a good prime minister.

Overcoming the intra-party politics so that we get the best one of these is the real leadership challenge.

John will be on hand for an Author Q&A session between 3 and 4pm AEST on Wednesday April 8. Post your questions about the article in the comments section below.