Leadership: what it is (and isn’t)

Despite our familiarity with – and craving for – leadership, its precise meaning is often elusive and resistant to consensual definition. Partly because of this, actions that are adjudged as exemplary leadership by some are damned as failures of leadership by others.

The debate about the federal government’s vision for the country, as reflected in the recent budget, is illustrative of this. It is framed as the government’s response to a crisis, a “budget emergency”, and seeks to make us receptive to an authoritative, commanding approach to problem solving.

But is this leadership?

There are many formal definitions of leadership and countless opinions, and we are loath to add another to the collection. It is salutary, however, to be reminded of what leadership is so that we may better find our bearings in these volatile, uncertain times.

Types of problems: critical, tame and wicked

Whenever we turn the door handle each morning and walk out into the world, we encounter problems. These can be defined as discrepancies between how the world is and as we believe it ought to be or ideally should be.

As a moment’s reflection confirms, problems are not all the same. Some pertain to our personal relationships. Others concern shared problems, such as those that afflict our organisations and communities.

However, despite obvious differences between problems, problems often share common characteristics that hang together in meaningful patterns. For example, some problems may seem definable and solvable but others intractable, resisting definition and solution.

Forty years ago, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber recognised and categorised these patterns in their seminal paper on tame and wicked problems. This was expanded more recently by Keith Grint into a typology of critical, tame and wicked problems.

Critical problems and command

Critical problems are those that arise from a crisis of some sort (for example bushfires). These problems are self-evident and must be addressed urgently, allowing little time for decision-making.

Although the people who are directly affected by the crisis may not fully understand it or how to solve it – after all, it can be hard to see the forest for the (burning) trees in the middle of a disaster – our expectations of those charged with addressing the problem are clear: provide the answer, fix the problem.

Because a crisis is not the time to plan strategy (as in management) or build collaboration around values and vision (as in leadership), critical problems are judged as warranting an authoritative, commanding approach to problem solving.

Command, however, is not leadership.

Tame problems and management

Tame problems are often familiar or recurring and can be resolved using rational, linear decision-making processes. In other words, tame problems are associated with management.

F.W. Taylor, the originator of scientific management, advocated this approach to problem solving: simply apply science properly and the best solution will emerge. The (scientific) manager’s role is to provide the appropriate
processes to solve the problem.

Unilateral acts by experts (e.g. doctors, accountants) often solve tame problems. The ability of experts to unilaterally solve tame problems means that tame problem solving requires minimal involvement of the actors involved in a problem.

For example, all that an accountant needs to successfully perform an audit is a complete record of a company’s financial statements. For the most part, she does not need to take into account the perspectives, beliefs and interests of the people who belong to the company she is auditing.

Management is, of course, crucial. Management is not, however, leadership.

**Wicked problems and leadership**

_wicked problems_ are the antithesis of tame problems. Wicked problems are more than complicated – they are complex, difficult to define and ever changing. Whereas experts are often ascribed responsibility for managing tame problems and authorities responsibility for commanding during crises, responsibility for addressing wicked problems falls to the actors involved.

This means that coordination among those actors cannot be patterned by compliance with experts (as in management) or obedience to authorities (as in command). What is required here is leadership. This, according to John Kotter,

> …is about vision, about people buying in, about empowerment and, most of all, producing useful change.

Nelson Mandela’s humility, honesty and empathy built trust in his leadership vision for post-apartheid South Africa. EPA/Nic Bothma

What is distinctive about leadership, as opposed to command and management – which, we hasten to add, are perfectly legitimate sources of authority – is what it asks of us.

This is what makes leadership, especially in the context of wicked problem solving, so interesting. Its enactment calls on all those who are part of the problem to engage with it and to partly think, partly feel their way towards an understanding of it. Combined with shared imaginings about possible futures – visions – this understanding helps all involved to see the forest and the trees.

Wicked problems need to be approached iteratively, in a spirit of experimentation, knowing that today’s solution could very well be tomorrow’s new problem. Adaptive, ethically sophisticated leadership is thus called for – and this requires wide stakeholder engagement and participation.

To be successful, such collaborative adaptive leadership requires humility, honesty and trust, empathy, suspended judgements, commitment and authentic listening. The “inner game” of leadership can be tough to master.

Although leadership will look different in the context of different wicked problems – and may not be immediately recognisable as leadership – we can at least all agree that we need more superb leadership.

Thank you to everyone who participated in today’s Author Q&A. You can read Samuel’s answers below.