

“Long list” of characteristics of Wicked Problems / Social Messes

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. There is a “no stopping rule”.
3. Solutions are not true or false, rather they are good or bad.
4. There is no test of whether a solution will work or has worked.
5. Every solution is a “one-shot operation”. There can be no gradual learning by trial and error, because each intervention changes the problem in an irreversible way.
6. There is no comprehensive list of possible solutions.
7. Each wicked problem is unique, so that it is hard to learn from previous problems because they were different in significant ways.
8. A wicked problem is itself a symptom of other problems. Incremental solutions run the risk of not really addressing the underlying problem.
9. There is a choice about how to see the problem, but how we see the problem determines which type of solution we will try and apply.
10. Wicked societal problems have effects on real people, so one cannot conduct experiments to see what works without having tangible effects on people’s lives.
11. As well as there being no single definition of the problem, there are multiple value conflicts wrapped up in it.
12. There are also multiple ideological, political or economic constraints on possible solutions.
13. There is great resistance to change.
14. With social messes, in addition to the complexity of the problem itself, data to describe the problem are often uncertain or missing. It may be difficult actually to collect information. There is no one expert with the answer.
15. Because the problems are complex, there are multiple possible intervention points.
16. The consequences of any particular intervention are difficult to imagine.