pattillo

DYNAMIC & COMPLEX – A FRAMEWORK FOR WICKED PROBLEMS

We know quite alot about complex problems

We know that it is not easy to navigate complexity, let alone find solutions for wicked problems.

We know that once we start exploring the problem, certainty becomes less certain and often the problem we think we are trying to resolve is only a part of the problem, if at all.

We know that solutions to wicked problems are unlikely to be singular and fixed and are likely to need multiple responses.

We know that we can't find the solutions by ourselves and that the policy shop is only one player – sometimes leading, sometimes not.

We know that ministers and leaders need to be engaged early so that they can be part of the solution.

We know that we need people to apply their existing skills but also have the courage to think of new ideas and new ways, to test, to notice, to change and to adapt.

We know that the current policy paradigm isn't working for complex problems. It leads to policy responses that are often too narrow, inwards looking and process-focused.

po box 683
wellington
new zealand

t + 64 4 473 2702
www.pattillo.co.nz

»»

Critical shifts – from the known to the unknown, around and back again

We know that we need to make critical shifts from the current paradigm so that we can embrace the challenge that a complex environment offers. And with these shifts, provide a framework to help us explore and search for solutions to difficult problems.

Making these critical shifts means moving from knowing enough to act to acting enough to know, from an approach which puts emphasis on we are here to help you to one which asks what are we going to do. And to move from consultation to an approach where collaboration and creation are core features.

These shifts can only be achieved within a framework which treats the problem as a whole. One which recognises that the solutions may not be policy solutions or that the extent of the problem may not be clear at the outset and may not be clarified until much later. A framework which encourages the exploration and probing of ideas and which supports innovation, learning by doing and observing with opportunities to test and try potential solutions.

A framework for a complex environment

Our framework encourages us to lift our gaze and keep our eyes on the outcome, with a focus on resolving the complex problem and not on reinventing a policy process. It is embedded in:

- **Invest in relationships**
  Relationships are the critical lynchpin to successfully work through complexity. They underpin all aspects of problem solving where the problem and solutions become a shared responsibility. There is openness to different ways of working together rather than independently. Multidisciplinary teams can be pulled together very quickly if necessary. And there is a recognition that core business may change as a result.

- **Being grounded**
  We will expect something different from teams that work on policy. There is strong participation internally between different parts of the organisation, with other agencies and those with an interest/stake in the problem and its solution, such as NGO's, iwi, community groups.

  Policy will be part of the collaborative effort. It will have a changing role depending on the nature of the problem. Sometimes policy will be at the forefront of the work and other times its role will be to contribute to what's needed for solution development.

- **Honour the promise**
  Problem solving is open and honours the promise between government and stakeholders. It's about bringing stakeholders into the process and acknowledging their contribution to finding solutions.

A complex environment calls for a framework that is both dynamic and integrated to provide fertile ground for the development of workable solutions. Curiosity needs to be actively encouraged so that the problem can be unraveled and stretched for potential solutions to be tested and tried.

Our framework is dynamic. It is fluid, comprising a package of core components which will work together to navigate complexity and to find solutions that are both practical and workable: It fits well where there are uncertainties about the boundaries of the problem, a high level of interdependency with other work, information gaps, a thin knowledge base, and a complex set of interested parties. The difficulties are compounded if there are time constraints and a requirement to manage risks tightly.

Core features of the framework

Working on a complex problem can be compared to gardening. Preparation and groundwork is needed – the soil should be fertile to provide a good base for planting. Sometimes we don't know what to plant, when to plant and where, so we will seek out information that will help us make these decisions. We will talk to others who have been successful with their gardens; we may even talk to experts to find out what will grow.

We generally have many choices but these may be limited by weather conditions, poor soil quality and changing seasons. So we will put in a range of plants and will fertilise as needed. We will notice what is growing and what isn't and will learn from our own observation about what will grow best for the next season.

• Connect and engage

Good groundwork comes from connecting the problem into the organisation and engaging with the minister.

Touch base with the leadership team to let them know about the problem (if they don't already). Find out their expectations and get an indication from them about what they consider the extent of the problem to be, particularly if there are any constraints which may impact on how the problem will be worked through. Have they thought about intended outcomes and what resolving the problem will achieve?

Ministers will want to have contact with the problem at the front-end. Their insights are invaluable and they will say how much they want to be involved. They may want to be engaged early in the scoping and initial thinking around the work with less involvement as the work becomes more established.

Find different ways to engage the minister. A regular meeting may do this but as is the case with a busy minister, these sessions can compete with the minister's time and other priorities. Written briefings will get the information to the minister in a passive way but without face to face contact, some of that information may not be meaningful.

Do not present solutions to the minister without any up front engagement and after they have been finalised. Often ministers are part of the complexity and they need to be part of the solution. And given the complexity, it is unlikely that a minister will accept such solutions without previous contact and discussions.

The interest of the minister and leadership team is a priority and must be maintained throughout the process so that they can continue to contribute. Keep them updated and informed to maintain their confidence. Continue to update and inform so that they can talk about this work with other ministers and their professional peers providing a broader base of interest and support in the work.

• Spark curiosity

We want information - to find out as much as we can about the problem. Information may be held in many places so some effort is needed to consolidate what is there. It can be collected before the work begins and all the way through the problem solving process.

Like the gardener, we would want to talk to others to find out what they are doing either around the problem or in similar areas, what has been tried and the degree of success or not. We can look for relevant international information for examples. And as we learn more ourselves we will continue to refresh and top-up the knowledge base around the problem.

We want to know:

- Why the problem is complex – although we may not have a clear idea about the essence of the problem just yet.
- To what extent is it a problem for people who are affected by it.
- What are the linkages with other similar or related work being progressed in the organisation?
- Is the information coming from this connected work being shared with others?
- Are there other agencies and external interest groups who have an interest in how the problem will be resolved?
- Have there been previous attempts to resolve the problem, what happened and why?
- Has this been a complex problem in other places and if so, was it resolved and how was it resolved?
- What has worked before and why?

• The invitation

The springboard for resolution starts with an invitation to others to form a collective to solve the problem with permission to probe, explore, test and create solutions. If a collective is already working on the problem it will need to be modified to suit.

Who we will invite to join this working group?

It is not an exclusive club. But decisions on membership are critical and must be based on the skills and expertise needed for the problem we are trying to resolve at the time. Assess what skills are needed. We want our best and brightest to turn their minds to the problem. And we want to provide the opportunity for participants to learn through exposure to diversity and broad experiences.

Collective membership is not necessarily fixed throughout the life of the problem. Different expertise may be needed as the problem evolves and becomes clearer and other expertise may only be needed for discrete parts.

The emphasis of our framework is to reach successful solutions. This may mean that the role of policy will ebb and flow depending on the problem. Policy may be central to finding solutions or it may mean that policy participation has a contributing and supporting role. Similarly, finding solutions may focus on the front-line, operational or service delivery, again the nature of the problem will determine the focus and the mix of talent and experience needed.

We have already said that relationships are crucial, this is especially so in relation to who should be invited. If there are existing relationships in place, the task is easier. We can find out who has been thinking about the problem already, who has been working on it and who has the expertise we need. Don't limit the conversation to other agencies. Rich information and contribution will come from NGO's, community groups, iwi and those who have a stake in the solutions.

It is much less straightforward when relationships are not already established. More time, more effort will need to be invested before the invitation can be made.

• Build talent

Working on wicked problems creates a learning space for all involved. It provides opportunities for them to be curious, to learn from others and to share their expertise. A key aspect of the framework is to nurture the capability of the working group with a specific emphasis on less experienced staff who will be supporting the work.

Invest in the talent by matching their skills to the work and identify any skill gaps that may need to be expanded. This will highlight what skills need to be enhanced or topped-up.

It will also identify different and new skills to develop. With the focus on relationships, it would seem that relationship management and facilitation skills are a priority. Support staff to develop these new skills with a comprehensive coaching and mentoring programme which reaches beyond the life of the work. Identify touchstones within the working group who can continue to provide support and mentoring. Introduce new techniques such as appreciative inquiry and participatory evaluation processes.

• Resolve and transform

An outcomes focus provides the best promise for collaborative work because it offers a fertile common ground for the collective and stakeholders. Collaboration instills a sense of ownership in the work. It will generate solution champions which will continue once the work has been completed. Relationships will be strengthened and touchstones will be identified who can provide ongoing support and mentoring for others in the group.

In essence, there will be a shared responsibility for resolving the problem. The solutions and problems will be owned by many. The working group will understand the problem and transform these into solutions that make sense in the real world.

We will sow seeds of curiosity by asking questions and we will keep asking questions. Like our gardener, we will watch, notice and observe what grows and why. Answers

are likely to be discovered by analysis, by action, from front-line staff, though service delivery and the operational parts of an organisation. Answers will also come from the NGOs, iwi and the community who may be already be moving in the area of the complex problem.

To find solutions, there will be a number of actions and activities happening at the same time. It may require a mixture of policy development and innovation testing. Immediate action could be taken for one aspect of the problem to test and learn while yet another may require further research and analysis.

It is not surprising that relationships are embedded in shared responsibility. This occurs at all levels within the framework – working with the minister and leadership team, finding out more about the problem, the membership of the working group, building the capability of the team and how the problem will practically be resolved. Keep stakeholders in the in the loop as solutions are prepared, if they are not already part of the working group. Adopt a 'no surprises' policy so that those who will be impacted by the solutions know what they are before they are rolled out.

The focus of the working group will be to:

- Probe the complexity, what are the interlocking issues, the nature and extent of the problem (which may not be immediately evident).

- Look for diversity in shaping the problem and creating solutions.

- Talk to people on the ground to get a practical perspective of the problem and their ideas of potential solutions.

- Discover possibilities and opportunities that could form a package of solutions to respond to the complexity – for example, what will work now, what can we try, what needs to be tested to see if it will work?

- Have a better understanding of the risks and manage these through the group.

- Incorporate real time evaluation at different points of the project so that learning is continuous and improvements can be made along the way. Real Time Evaluation is a participatory qualitative evaluation process that provides continuous feedback throughout a project. It enables decision-makers to make sense of emerging outcomes in time to influence decisions. This evaluation is also critical to find out if outcomes for the project are being met.

- Keep the minister and leadership team up to date with where the group is at.

• Reflect and refresh

Learning through action, both spontaneous and formative, is a vital part of knowledge building. We want to be in a position where we can shift from knowing enough to act to acting enough to know.

We can do this by reflecting along the way – as we continue to explore and test the problem. Participatory real time evaluation will identify how the proposed responses are working so that the group can continue to refine or rework solutions in part or entirely.

Reflection is also critical once solutions have been found and are being put into practice. This ensures that they continue to remain relevant to the problem. Evaluation should include decision makers and key stakeholders so that they work together to find out the significant changes that are/have been occurring.

Dynamic and circular

Complexity produces a busy landscape

All components of the framework interact together and operate as a package. The minister and leadership team will need to be engaged many times throughout, information will continue to be sought, and expertise will join and leave the team at different stages. Finding solutions will comprise thinking, exploring, testing and reflecting which can happen many times before solutions are found.

By its very nature the framework has to be flexible, where actions can happen across in response to what's needed at any given time to reach solutions.

Activity throughout the framework may be intense when the doing is taking place. Or more modest when the working group is waiting for results from their explorative efforts before transforming these into solutions.

A linear approach will not respond to complexity and will stifle innovation. It will restrict thinking and doing to specific and contained stages where each must be completed before moving on to the next.