

## ‘In the right circumstances, ...[collaborative consensus] offer[s] the best potential outcome’

companies have struggled to balance these two opposing arguments for decades and, when one assesses this dilemma against Rittel and Webber's 10 criteria, we can see that it fits easily into the wicked problem category. When it is crystallised into a decision about a particular product development choice or licensing agreement, it can become exacerbated into the super-wicked category.

The most authoritative and oft-cited view on how to approach wicked problems is in the work of Roberts, who suggested three possible routes. Described in the context of our market-led/product-led problem, these are:

### Revert to authority

This approach would reduce the complexity of the question by reducing the number of people involved. In our example, a small, senior team would call the product development shots. One can immediately see the attraction of this streamlined approach but of course it depends on the small team having an excellent appreciation of a complex issue, which is not always the case.

### Competing arguments

This approach depends on encouraging the development of alternatives and enabling their competition against each other. In our example, competing product-led and market-led initiatives would make their case. The merits of this approach - clarity and constructive conflict - are attractive. However, it creates adversarial relationships and depends on an objective judging process, which is asking a lot of human beings.

### Collaborative consensus

This approach depends on enabling all stakeholders to share their thoughts constructively and move towards common agreement. In our example, technological innovation and customer needs would converge on an optimal product strategy. This approach sounds ideal in theory but is very time consuming, requires expert facilitation and is

prone to influence by strong, not necessarily well-informed, egos.

Which of these approaches is the best and most effective? Well, in the manner traditional of academic researchers, I have to give the answer 'It depends'. Rittel himself seemed to lean towards the third, collaborative, approach and, in the right circumstances, that would seem to offer the best potential outcome. However, expert facilitators are rarely found internally and external experts rarely have the necessary contextual knowledge. Also, in time-pressured situations, collaboration is the slowest approach. The autocratic, revert-to-authority approach has the merit of speed and efficiency. But without a well-informed, objective leadership this approach will lead, quickly and efficiently, to a suboptimal result. The competitive approach seems to offer most when the alternatives can be well defined which, as Rittel noted, is not always the case for wicked problems. In addition, political biases and ineffective comparison processes can mean that what is superficially a competitive process is, in the end, a Machiavellian political one. So, in the end, the choice of approach to solving your own wicked problem is a contingent one. If you can, find a skilled, well-informed facilitator to enable the collaborative approach. If time or skills prevent this, and you have the ability to run a fair competition, then do so. Alternatively, when complexity threatens to overwhelm you, resort to authority that is as well informed as possible. The only sure thing is that, if your issue scores highly on Rittel and Webber's criteria, then don't default to your rational, methodical, culturally embedded approach to problem solving, no matter how comfortable.

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