Administration, vol. 63, no. 3 (2015), pp. 97–100
doi: 10.1515/admin-2015-0024

***Tackling Wicked Government Problems: A Practical Guide for
Developing Enterprise Leaders***

Jackson Nickerson and Ronald Sanders (Eds) (Washington: Brookings Institution Press; 2014; ISBN: 978-0-815726-39-5; 240 pp; \$28)

How can governments respond and organise themselves to tackle ever more wicked problems effectively? This book answers this question by arguing primarily that governments cannot rely only on structural change, but must also develop a new kind of leadership development approach. Leaders need to know how to cultivate and use networks, as well as being able to encourage and facilitate collaboration between employees, agencies, departments and other organisations. In the book, those leaders are referred to as ‘enterprise leaders’. Enterprise here refers to the resources and capabilities of the many public or private organisations involved in responding to national or international issues that cross the boundaries of any one organisation. An enterprise leader is someone able to coordinate those resources appropriately and lead an efficient response.

Tackling Wicked Government Problems was edited by Jackson Nickerson, a professor of organisation and strategy at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St Louis, and Ronald Sanders, vice president of Booz Allen Hamilton and previous senior government employee. The book is a result of a symposium organised for scholars and leading practitioners to discuss ‘wicked’ government problems, and was published with the aim of collecting their thoughts and stirring more debates and discussions on the subject, to ultimately achieve progress. Throughout the chapters, the contributors offer their perspectives and propose methods to solve problems which span multiple agencies, using networks, collaboration and effective leadership.

The book outlines what the authors believe to be critical failures in responding to wicked problems. It especially criticises current senior executive service (SES) training and development, and presents multiple methods and strategies to transform it in order to create capable enterprise leaders.

Split into three parts, the book first examines the challenges that leaders of a contemporary enterprise might encounter in their careers, and the ways they could respond to them. The three chapters of this part are written by three experienced leaders, who underline the importance for leaders to use their networks in order to unify language and governance structure between organisations, and to be able to assess and manage risk in working across organisational boundaries and creating a united effort in the enterprise.

The second part contains chapters written by leaders and scholars, who reflect on what makes an effective leader. It explains that leaders should be able to develop and encourage networks in the enterprise in order to increase trust, collaboration and innovation. Through organisational adaptation, the leader should also be able to use the existing networks of the organisations. The importance of networks is here again reiterated, as well as the need for a new way of leading networks. Throughout the chapters, the practitioners and theorists look at the crucial role of networks to produce innovation, rapid problem solving and collaboration. They outline the need for a new way of leading networks, or network governance. They recommend the establishment of effective communication, trust and reputation. Dependence balancing, where organisations balance the risks and advantages between each other, and establishing mutual incentives between the employees of the enterprise are also recommended. In conclusion, the second part argues for more research in order to clarify the role of leaders in altering, adapting and improving organisational networks.

Finally, the third part outlines the methods and structures necessary to develop enterprise leaders. Scholars and experienced leaders give insights on how the culture of organisations, methods such as rotating employees across different agencies in the enterprise, and educational structures can assist in the creation of leaders ready to take on wicked problems. These chapters argue that the current system of SES training and development in the US is not able to produce leaders capable of responding to wicked problems, and outline what needs to be changed.

Overall, all of the contributors seem to agree that a new focus on leading an enterprise should be taken in training future leaders.

Changes should be made on all fronts with this new approach in mind, from small administrative details to the culture of organisations and to inter-agency rotation programmes. In the end, the authors conclude that the wicked problems the world is facing 'just do not fit neatly into the bureaucratically specialised, vertical structure that typifies the executive branch today' (p. 165). Based on this, they make recommendations on new government attitudes and structures in the training of their employees.

In the final chapter of the book Nickerson & Sanders make five key recommendations. First, they recommend establishing enterprise leadership as an Office of Personnel Management executive core qualification. They then recommend requiring inter-agency assignments as another prerequisite for promotion to the SES. The third recommendation proposes to strengthen SES candidate development by retooling it in a way that is both systematic and strategic, and by making it mandatory. The fourth recommendation is to require formal leadership education as part of executive development. Leadership education components would be mandatory and provided only by organisations that can meet rigorous government-wide accreditation standards. Finally, the fifth recommendation advises that to build the necessary infrastructure to sustain the candidate development process, it is necessary to provide a leadership development system which will better leverage separate agency executive development efforts. The final chapter summarises the arguments which are presented throughout the book, and ties them in nicely with the recommendations presented here.

Overall, *Tackling Wicked Government Problems* is an insightful read for anyone interested in public policy and administration. It leans on the knowledge and practice of relevant academics and experienced organisation leaders to discuss a subject which is increasingly important to our society. The contribution of actual enterprise leaders gives unique insights and shows how wicked problems are increasingly arising. The book first convinces the reader of the importance of 'enterprise leaders' in solving complex problems. Once the need for new leadership has been established, the book then discusses how leaders should be developed and trained. Theories of organisational psychology and network analysis are tied in skilfully with the case examples provided throughout the chapters.

The rigidity and the bureaucratic nature of government agencies and departments will certainly already be familiar to many readers. Indeed, the book's criticisms of the federal services in the US are very

similar to ones often heard of the public sector in Ireland. The book insists on the need for leaders who are able to go beyond this rigidity and organisation boundaries and accomplish the difficult task of establishing cooperation and collaboration between the agencies concerned. Those recommendations could easily be applied to the Irish public sector.

It is important to note that the book is very US centric. It is written by US scholars and leaders, and mainly looks at the problem on a national level. While it offers an introduction to the problem, the book's content mainly concerns the US government and agencies. It does not include an analysis of what is being done in other countries or if there is a different case to be made there. The book offers an interesting opportunity to compare its content with other nations. Can a similar case be made in other countries? While the book mentions the increasing involvement of international agencies and other types of organisations such as non-profit or private, their impact on solving wicked issues is not considered. It is easy to imagine this involvement would require particular skills and methods from public service leaders, and many recommendations in the book cannot apply when private organisations are involved. The book mainly focuses on national agencies and leaders working for government.

This focus on national state organisations is of course understandable. The subject is complex, and attempting to cover all its dimensions could be endless. The book offers the opportunity to discuss and debate the issue further. Overall, the book is interesting, relevant and insightful. It would be interesting to carry out a similar symposium in Europe: would the same recommendations be made, and what would be different?

Ariane Alex
Institute of Public Administration