Wicked

How can we use cooperative action & deliberative democracy
to make life better?

How do we thrive in a world where we are fast consuming our key natural resources?

How do we deal with a degraded environment?

And how do we do this together?

These are questions so big that the temptation to evade them is overpowering. They are too big for any one person to deal with, no matter how clever, no matter how well resourced. It is easy hesitate and sit back, waiting for someone else to lead, holding out for a hero.
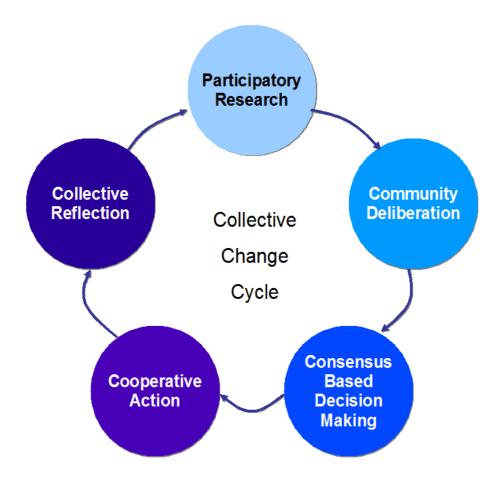
However heroes aren't what they were. Now we are reluctant to delegate responsibility to others – to our leaders, politicians, scientists. They should know where to go and what to do next but we all have our own ideas about priorities and possible actions. And if someone attempts to lead without a broader commitment from the rest of us, they will fail. Perhaps we don't need another hero. Perhaps what we do need are more sustainable approaches to the complex environmental, social and economic problems that we face as citizens.

Engineers and designers have a name for these complex problems that we face. They call them "wicked". All wicked problems have several characteristics.

- They are hard to define clearly.
- They are subject to vehement dispute by the parties involved.
- They are dynamic and constantly mutating.
- They lack a "single" right answer.

Wicked problems do not need yield to best practice or by-the-book solutions. Wicked problems cannot be solved by a small group of clever people. Wicked problems can only be successfully tackled using collective, iterative and evolutionary methods. Fortunately we have encountered many different tools and techniques out there to help us with these challenges. They can be found in the deliberative democracy movement, they can be found in development studies, in organisational learning and knowledge management, in mathematics, economics & sociology. We are not helpless.

We wanted to put a simple framework around this abundance of assistance. We are sure that other frameworks have been developed and we look forward to you telling us about them but for the moment, this works for us. We call it the Collective Change Cycle.

Participatory Research

Collective Reflection

Community Deliberation

Collective
Change
Cycle

Cooperative Action

Consensus Based Decision Making

Participatory research asks the diverse range of stakeholders to understand first their own situations and then those of each other through a mix of experiential and scientific investigation. Outsiders may add new perspectives but this process is owned by participants. Methods used here may include surveys, ethnography, focus groups, narrative collection and sensemaking, network modelling, unobtrusive measurement collection.

Community Deliberation asks participants to discuss, explore and evaluate the different perspectives generated by the research. Methods used here include citizens' summits and juries, dialogue, open space, ritual dissent, appreciative inquiry and world cafes

Consensus-Based Decision-Making takes these discussions into the realm of planning and resource allocation. Methods used here include partnership bodies, participatory budgeting, microfinance, and prediction markets.

Cooperative Action moves from discussion back into communities and engages citizens further in their own environment. Again outsiders may bring necessary skills and resources but action must be directed from within the community. Methods used here include social network stimulation, peer assists and positive deviance.

Collective Reflection asks participants to understand what has worked and what has not worked before the cycle begins again. Methods used here include after action reviews (AARs) and most significant change (MSC).

As the name given to each stage of the framework indicates, we invite broad based active participation rather than relying on a few designated representatives. It is worth explaining the role that experts can play in Collective Change. Experts can bring experience in many tools and models outlined above, and the ability to advise on what might be appropriate for any given forum. Both the rational and the emotional are valued. Wicked problems can touch our values and beliefs so feelings can't need to be parked outside.

Of course expertise should be balanced with a curiosity for learning in any situation. We should value ways of working together over a majority rule, and stand for everyone and their inclusion, even the troublemakers. We should support democracy while listening to opinionated loners - because they can see things that others can't. We should follow agreed plans but willingly return to the drawing board. All in all we should have the enthusiasm and the persistence necessary for working on wicked problems with communities.

Who wants to start first?

Who are we?

Anne Murphy

Anne has a background in project management and management consulting. Much of her experience has been gained in multi-national organisations requiring her to develop a collaborative consensus driven style to work effectively across geographic, cultural, and social borders.

It is her facilitative style that saw her move into learning and development roles focused on training project managers for delivery excellence and training consultants to build strong team and client relationships. She has worked across Asia-Pacific to train project-managers and consultants to deliver in-house training believing the learning messages to be more effective when delivered by a respected peer.

In 2007 Anne completed a Masters of Conflict Facilitation and Organisational Change at the Process Work Institute in Portland Oregon and started her own consulting practice shortly after. The Process Work paradigm shares aspects with Deliberative Democracy in that it is a cross disciplinary facilitative approach to working with groups and communities to support coherent and democratic consensus to emerge.

Anne is based in Melbourne.

Matt Moore

Matt has a background in facilitation, training and information management. He is skilled in creating physical and virtual environments that encourage collaboration.

He has worked in training, knowledge management & corporate communications roles with PricewaterhouseCoopers, IBM, Oracle and the Australian Securities and Investment Commission. He is now a director of Innotecture, a lecturer at University of Technology Sydney and Chair of the New South Wales Knowledge Management Forum.

Matt is based in Sydney.