




Solving wicked problems

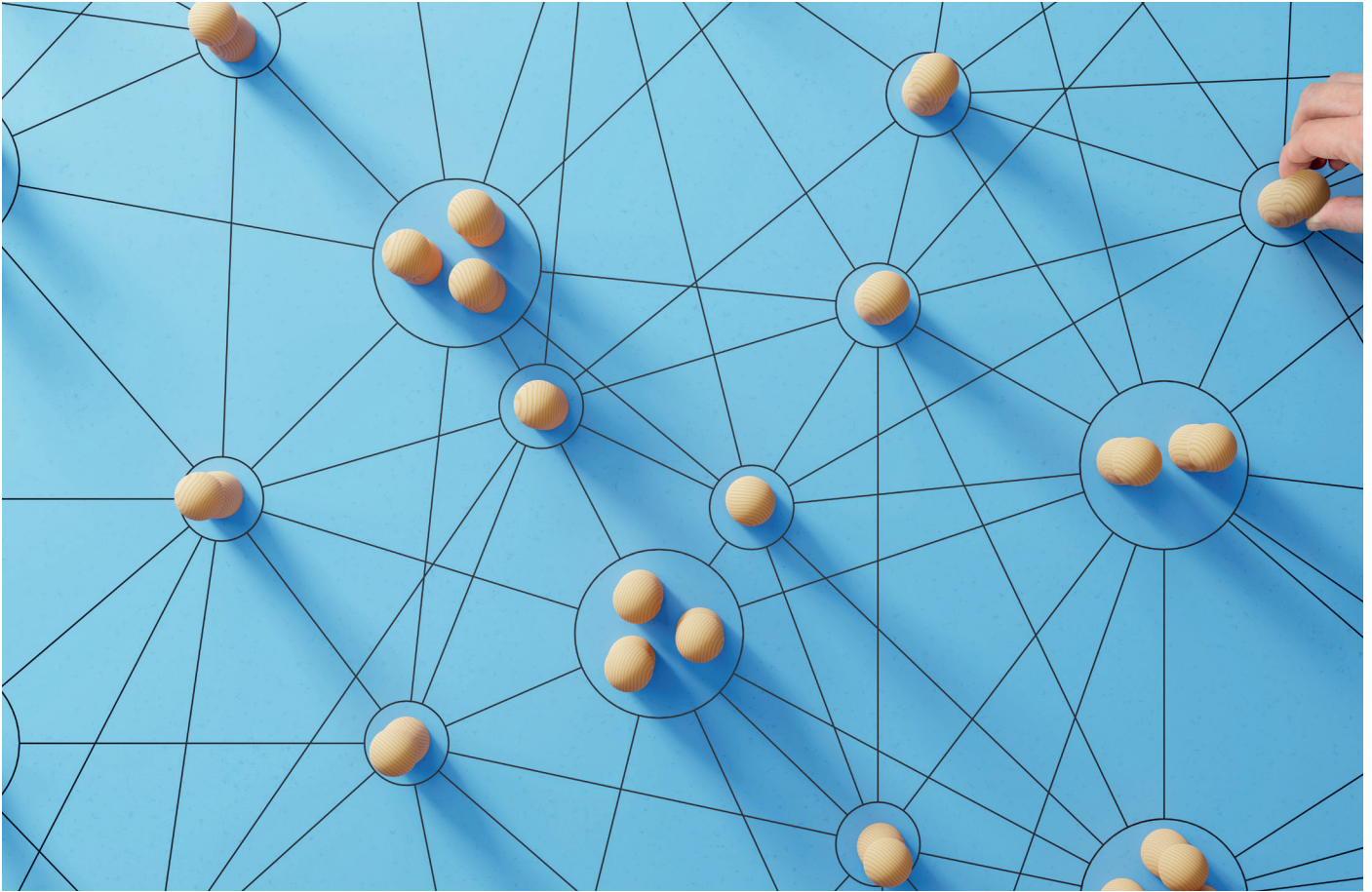


and
how to
muddle
through

Practical tips for collaborative problem
solving for today's complex challenges

shape
new ideas

Wicked problem solving



Break your wicked problems up into manageable steps

Large ambitious projects have many variables, stakeholders and interconnected systems. This makes them tricky to manage and deliver realistic outcomes.

These are often called **Wicked Problems**.

To overcome these pitfalls break your wicked problem down into smaller manageable steps.

Design and validate small-scale solutions at each step.

This approach helps you make concrete progress.

It is more flexible and prevents costly errors.

As you progress through each incremental solution you increase your confidence that you are on the right trajectory.

Complex projects are frustrating

In 1959, the American political scientist Charles Lindblom coined the phrase *The Science of Muddling Through* to address the problem of implementing large complex projects.

In essence, his argument is simple. And stands true today.

Complex systems have many variables, different stakeholder needs and unforeseen barriers to implementation. Consequently, large projects often fail to deliver tangible value.

Indeed, data from HBR suggest that up to 7/10 projects fail to deliver results.



Does this sound familiar?

At some point in our careers, we've all participated in large-scale, ambitious projects.

Conceived to create grand solutions, they are resource-hungry. Often, they lose focus and fail to deliver practical outcomes despite marvellous-looking PowerPoint decks.

Lindholm argued that to overcome these frustrations, you should break down large projects into manageable steps to 'muddle through'.

At each stage, you make progress by designing and validating small-scale solutions, or MVPs that can be implemented quickly.

This increases your chance of success. It's inherently more flexible. It prevents costly errors. It is less disruptive.

Problems are more wicked

This approach is especially pertinent to those 'Wicked' problems - where multiple and complex interrelated factors are at play.

And, let's face it, many challenges we face today are more Wicked:

- Customers are increasingly open to novel digital solutions that are changing their behaviours and expectations.
- There is more choice and competition amongst brands, services and retail channels.
- People seek more engaging and delightful experiences beyond utility and function.
- Systems are becoming more complex and often fail to account for people-centred needs.
- Climate action initiatives are complex and require us to challenge the status quo.



So, what are the benefits of a step-by-step approach?

For large organisations, there are some practical wins in managing modular projects:

- It is easier to request funds and resources for smaller projects.
- There is less bureaucratic oversight, so you are more empowered to create pockets of entrepreneurial activity
- You can extract some 'quick wins.'
- Teams focused on a tighter, defined brief can move fast.
- You assess progress through tangible outputs, e.g. a testable 'minimum viable product' (MVP).
- You de-risk innovation.



Let's take a look at some examples

Strategy development

Making those 'where to play' and 'how to win' strategy choices is time-consuming. It involves multiple stakeholders with different views. There's lots of internal debate. The analysis is template-driven and formulaic. It's easy to get bogged down in data and suffer from groupthink.

Conversely, you can create strategic options more quickly with a modular stepwise approach.

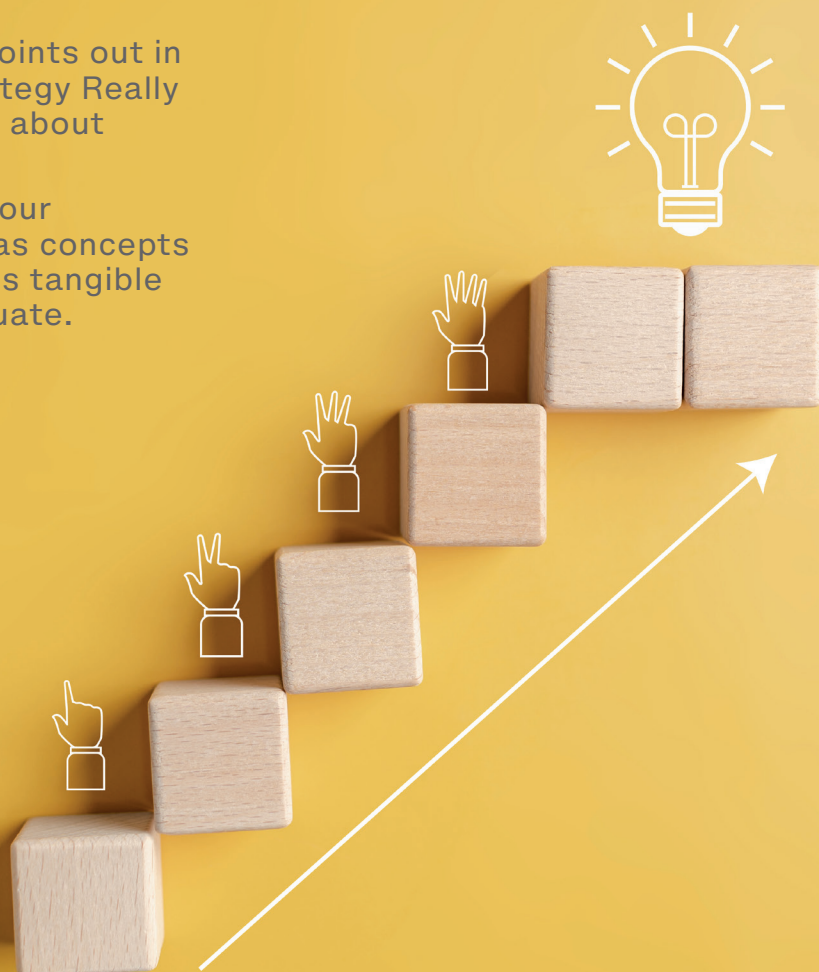
Suppose you considered a strategic move from a products to a services model.

This approach needs an imaginative new business model and novel customer experiences.

You can create concept boards, storyboards, and user-experience sketches to evaluate alternative strategies. Use these to collect feedback from stakeholders, business partners and consumers. This data and evidence will help you assess strategic options based on tangible ideas.

As Roger Martin points out in his book *How Strategy Really Works*, strategy is about making choices.

Pressure testing your strategic options as concepts makes your options tangible and easier to evaluate.



New product development

With consumers demanding more choices and entrepreneurial start-ups popping up in many categories, many established companies have shifted to more agile collaborative methods to accelerate innovation.

Better collaboration results in faster time to market and more robust market performance.

Yet, according to Nielsen, many employees believe their organisations are weak at cross-group collaboration when designing ideas.



Consider the factors at play

For a new product to be successful, it requires input from a variety of stakeholders to solve a multitude of questions, for instance:

- Who is our primary target audience?
- How is this concept meaningfully different to these consumers?
- How will this enhance our brand equity?
- How are we going to communicate this idea?
- What claims can we make?
- What is the retail and e-commerce experience?
- How will this be commercially viable?

These require input from many disciplines. Without their expertise, a key constraint can arise later in the process, which halts an idea in its tracks or results in a sub-par concept.

For example, the success of a concept may depend on specific benefit claims. Lack of involvement from R&D early on can cause issues if they later flag that the claims are impossible to make.

This requires better collaboration and sharing of perspectives at each step.

How can you enhance collaboration with a modular approach to innovation?

When we facilitate NPD projects, we involve topic experts in each design iteration.

At each stage, we foster cross-pollination of ideas and views.

By quickly moving through a series of concepts that examine key variables—and with the help of target consumers—we can spot the ideas with potential.

With each iteration, the team can decide which ideas to discard and how to maximise the potential of remaining candidate concepts.

Cross-group collaboration is crucial for this modular approach to be successful.



Innovation in complex systems

Let's take healthcare innovation as an example of a complex system. Multiple stakeholders are involved at different steps of a treatment pathway: patients, clinical specialists, services and external patient support groups, to name a few.

The systems involved are inherently convoluted. They involve many interdependencies designed to ensure patient safety.

At the centre of this is the patient, who may be anxious and face some complex, often challenging to navigate, confusing choices.



How can you simplify your approach?

When working on these projects, we break them down into manageable steps by mapping the patient journey. This requires the input of many stakeholders—who all have different perspectives on their role in that journey.

This helps us identify moments with the greatest potential to improve patient engagement and treatment outcomes.

With this focus, we can explore tangible ideas. With the help of patients and

clinical specialists, we can understand how these would have to work to be of value to them.

Such an approach has resulted in new partnerships and MVPs at a faster pace than a team is typically used to.

In a complex scenario, you can move faster and make tangible progress by focusing on a smaller subset of the system.

Muddling through

Breaking complex challenges down into smaller steps and developing ideas along the way helps make it easier to achieve your ultimate goal.

It's about taking things one step at a time and building up your evidence and confidence as you go, through tangible solutions that make an impact.

If you want help to solve Wicked Problems give us a shout.

We'd love to help!

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new ideas

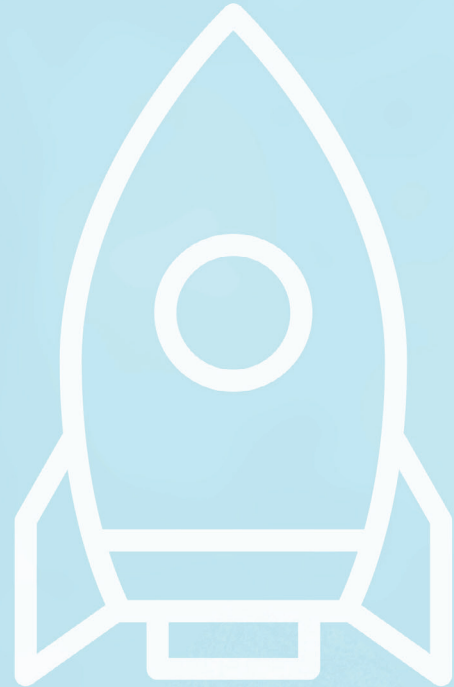
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