We need to stop creating tame solutions for wicked problems

By Patricia Digh

I got a call recently from a human resources director. "We've got a problem," he said. "Some of our employees have hung nooses from their African-American coworkers' lockers. We need help."

The solution he requested? A one hour workshop.

"You've got to be kidding me," I replied. "A lifetime of mental constructs led these people to put nooses on their black colleague's lockers, and you're going to give it one hour?"

"If I could solve this in an hour, don't you think I would?"

Like that HR director, we continue to focus on the race issues facing our communities in ways that ensure failure. By applying "tame solutions" to what is a "wicked problem," not only do we <u>not</u> solve the problem, but we obfuscate the reality that racism is a wicked problem to begin with—and in so doing, actually exacerbate the problem.

Before defining "wicked problems", it is important to understand what a "tame problem" is. By definition, a tame problem has a well-defined and stable problem statement; a definite stopping point; a solution that can be objectively evaluated as being right or wrong; solutions that can be tried and abandoned; and belongs to a class of similar problems that can be solved in a similar manner.

By contrast, wicked problems like affordable housing, disparities in health care, and institutional racism are ill-defined, ambiguous and associated with strong moral, political and professional issues. Since they are strongly stakeholder dependent, there is often little consensus about what the problem is, let alone how to resolve it.

Furthermore, wicked problems won't keep still: they are sets of complex, interacting issues evolving in a dynamic social context. For example, the significant differences in achievement and graduation rates between white and black students in the U.S. aren't just school-based problems, but intertwined inextricably with a host of connected societal and economic issues.

Often, new forms of wicked problems emerge *as a result* of trying to understand and solve one of them. While attempting to solve a wicked problem, the solution of one of its aspects may reveal or create another, even more complex problem; like a Rubik's cube, solving one facet changes the face of other sides.

Problems—like racism—whose solutions require large groups of individuals to change their mindsets and behaviors are likely to be wicked problems. And yet, we persist in looking for what are essentially "tame" solutions; we pile program upon program and hold forums in which it is difficult to get beyond the surface of the issues—why is that?

Here's what defines a "wicked problem":

- Every wicked problem is unique—lessons learned are hard to transfer to other problems

- Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem

- The problem is not fully understood until after the formulation of a solution

- Stakeholders have radically different world views and different frames for understanding the problem

- The problem is never solved

- Wicked problems do not have an exhaustive set of potential solutions

- Wicked problems are often "solved" (as well as they can be) through group efforts

- Wicked problems require inventive/creative solutions

- Every implemented solution to a wicked problem has consequences, and may cause additional problems

- Discrepancies in wicked problems can be explained in numerous ways—and the choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.

Racism is a wicked problem. Yet the interventions we undertake to address it are often, in fact, "tame solutions" which, by definition, exacerbate rather than solve the problem.

As analyst Jeff Conklin has written, "Business and government persist in applying inadequate thinking and methods to solving problems. One reason they do that is because

it is possible, in fact easy, to tame a wicked problem. To do so, you simply construct a problem definition that obscures the wicked nature of the problem, and then apply linear methods to solving it (this sets off a chain reaction that perpetuates the problem)."

What if racism can't be "solved" by linear methods? What if there isn't a programmatic solution to it? What if it resists strategic planning and forums? What then?

We have been trying to dismantle racism using what Paul Watzlawick calls "first order change"—an incremental, linear progression to do more or less, better, faster, or with greater accuracy. Instead, we need "second order change." First order changes occur within a system that itself remains unchanged. Second order changes change the system.

Conferences on racism and other diversity issues are important—overflowing crowds tell us that, but real change will be messier and more transformational than a panel discussion. We must create second order change by changing the system itself. We must resist tame solutions. And we must address this problem as if our future depended on it. Because it does.

Patti Digh's first book, Global Literacies*, was named a Fortune magazine "Best Business Book." She consults widely in the U.S. and abroad on diversity issues and can be reached at* patti@thecircleproject.com*.*