

## Defixation as an Intervention Perspective

### Understanding Wicked Problems at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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This case study presents reflections on a research intervention conducted at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The subject was the practice of administration. Its objective became to understand its “wicked problems” and to create action principles. It was an analytical research effort as well as a learning intervention. Wicked problems are those that have a large impact on an organization’s functioning and that persist regardless of numerous efforts to remedy them. They are characterized both by content and process complexity and are by no means exclusive to the Ministry. This paper focuses not so much on the content of the wicked problems, but on the intervention process which is described from beginning to end. Special attention is paid to intervention paradoxes. At the end of the paper we reflect on different ways to ‘defixate’ intervention progress that seem relevant when dealing with wicked problems.

**Keywords:** *wicked problems; organizational development; intervention paradoxes; research as intervention*

In this article, we reflect on a research intervention in 2004 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands. The subject was the administrative practice and its effectiveness, popularly referred to as “how steering works at the Ministry.” The objective was to critically assess and characterize the practice and to come up with principles for improvement. We were also requested to kick-start a discussion in a council of top management on the subject.

The research assignment was an exercise in dealing with dualities. It entailed analytical endeavors to uncover underlying patterns and new principles for a whole organization but was also a learning intervention for a small group. The assignment was formally contracted with its principal but was initiated by the research team itself. It was designed to challenge rather than to meet expectations. Last, the research approach and desired outcomes were designed in advance but was deliberately shifted as time went on. It is our view that dealing with dualities such as these is very much part of doing research as a practitioner, in which having multiple objectives and responsibilities comes with the territory.

We believe that our findings contributed to an understanding of the complexities and dilemmas of running a large public organization. However, we want to mainly reflect on what we did and why we did it in terms of the

intervention process. This, for us, lies at the heart of our profession as management consultants.

#### Relevance of the Case at Hand

During the research, we came across problems that persist despite the numerous efforts to remedy them over the years. Such problems exist in most organizations. Rittel and Webber (1973) labeled them as *wicked problems*, in contrast to tame ones. Mitroff and Sagasti (1973) referred to these as “ill structured problems.” Their definitions and our observations have in common that such problems are characterized by the following:

*Content complexity:* The problems are multidimensional, often even related to contrasting rationalities. The problems are interrelated; often symptoms and causes of each other. They are also ambiguous, fuzzy, and hard to pin down. One cannot understand the problem without getting involved and addressing it.

*Process complexity:* Many actors in various roles are involved in perpetuating the problem. There is considerable diversity in their ideas and values. As a result, evaluations of the problem vary among them as well as felt needs for or beliefs in a solution. Participation is ambiguous and ill structured.

Understandably, organizations have a hard time addressing such complexities. The existence of wicked problems can put a strain on organizations, be it in terms of resources, added value, or job satisfaction. This makes understanding and intervening a relevant topic, especially because complexity is not going to decrease in the 21st century. In conducting the research, we therefore wrestled with the following tasks:

*How to understand the content complexity:* What are the wicked problems in the Ministry, and what mechanisms perpetuate them? What are the inter-relationships between them? How have past change efforts reinforced this?

*How to intervene in the process complexity:* Who should be involved in the process, and how should the outcomes be presented so that they actually empower rather than get lost in the mix of different interests and values? What is the most effective role for the consultant and researcher? And how can one prevent the analysis from becoming just another viewpoint among the many?

### Putting Wicked Problems on the Agenda

Although other problems are eventually resolved in organizations, wicked problems by their very nature create chronic imbalances in an organization. As they persist, managers are inclined to stay away from them, knowing that it is difficult to solve them successfully. As a result, the wicked problems can disappear from the organization's agenda. In an organization where employees often remain employed their entire working life, the symptoms of wicked problems can become regarded as perfectly natural. Trying to address them can even become a controversial idea. For this reason, they get ignored by consultants who are neither requested to address them nor appreciated for trying to do so. Thus, we may condemn ourselves as practitioners to less relevant work. This produces a variation on Parkinson's law: Successful consultants and principals keep decreasing the risks for failure until change assignments have negligible added value. Where clients ask for proven methods and benchmarks, the consultancy business can reply with productifying and moneyfying standardized solutions. These are, by definition, not successful to deal with the dilemmas and ambiguity inherent of wicked problems.

Introducing more suitable approaches to change something so embedded can still easily fail because of the stabilizing resistance of the dominant existing systems. The organizational response is normally to water down the new

approach so that it is less at odds with existing practice, which takes the punch out of the new approach. By doing this, organizations prove to themselves that alternative and more suitable strategies do not work. The challenge for change agents is to create a realistic ambition level. Not everything has to change all at once, given that the organization has grown accustomed to living with the symptoms of wicked problems anyway and that there are undoubtedly also pay-offs for having wicked problems. Not everything can change at once either: The more fundamental the issues are, the more likely that change will take lots of time and small steps (Weick, 1984). This is where we encounter a vicious circle: The desire to reduce uncertainty and use standardized solutions is highest precisely when facing wicked problems. These, however, are also the most dysfunctional responses. Not only do they not work, but they create additional resistance against future efforts to deal with wicked problems. In such cases, one is better off not trying at all until one can create the conditions necessary to deal with them over a prolonged period of time and with all the incumbent ups and downs. That is not an easy option either. Once placed on the agenda, the decision to leave things as they are may be wise but is a hard sell.

### Working Through Intervention Paradoxes

Clarity of analysis is one thing, but having people use such analysis to address wicked issues in new ways is quite another. The paradox of feasibility may well be that researchers and consultants who are serious about the practical uses of their work can succeed only if they not only understand but also use the dynamics of the existing dominant practice of their client's organization (see, e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Not doing so usually results in insufficient attention for the problem or disqualification of the message and its bearers. However, by conforming too much to the existing practice, clarity and credibility can also get lost. This intervention paradox manifests itself in different ways.

First, with regard to the analysis, one has to decide how much the content should correspond with prevailing mental models and participant's expectations. How much should complexity be reduced so that the analysis remains accessible for those involved? How critical can the analysis be without fueling defensiveness? And how transformative can action perspectives be without being disqualified as unrealistic? Should these perspectives be rendered as principles, or should they be actionable right away? There are no quick answers to these questions, but failing to deliberate the choices will definitely land practitioners in trouble.

Second, the choice is whether to play according to the established interaction rules or to bend them. Research interventions in the Ministry typically result in executive summaries (preferably with bulleted highlights) for a hierarchical decision platform in which people have little time to discuss it, let alone explore underlying ideas. Then negotiation takes place until a solution is found that is acceptable for relevant stakeholders. Implementation is subsequently delegated down the line. Such an interaction game is not conducive to learning nor for strategizing about wicked problems. As stated earlier, wicked problems are best understood through a process of trying to solve them. Thus, the preferred intervention platform is a group with mutual task dependencies, being able to experiment collectively with the findings on the job. This contrasts to an echelon of managers, which is the logical presentation platform at the Ministry.

Third, the paradox plays out in the consultancy's and researcher's role. To what extent do we choose to be an entrepreneurial change agent instead of service provider? May we surprise the client with unrequested interventions, or is it better to deliver what is being asked for? Addressing wicked problems requires more than living up to expectations, but surprises are not always understood or welcomed immediately. As researchers and consultants, our stay is temporary, so there is also an ethical issue concerning the extent to which we can kick-start change if we are not likely to be the ones taking professional responsibility for it down the line. To what extent are we responsible for future consequences or needed continuity of interventions?

Another issue is that the nature of wicked problems implies a need for reflection. Instead of delivering an expert report, it is thus desirable to have the client in a coresearchers' role. It would be a contradiction to plead for more reflection while excluding others from taking part. However, this requires uncommon reflective leaps by all participants of the research team to not compromise the quality of analysis. During this case, we struggled with these intervention paradoxes, and in the following description, we highlight the choices we made to encourage further discussion.

### Case Description

For the past 200 years, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been the channel through which the Dutch Government communicates with foreign governments and international organizations. It coordinates and carries out Dutch foreign policy, ranging from promoting international

stability and furthering European integration to assisting poverty reduction. In doing so, it has to work intensively with other Dutch ministries (e.g., in promoting trade or peace keeping). The Ministry employs 3,000 people, many for their entire working life. The headquarters are located in The Hague, where most of the staff (62%) works. The rest works abroad in one of the 155 missions (embassies, consulates, and permanent representations). This division appears stricter than it is: Most employees switch positions every 3 or 4 years. The organization has a well developed esprit de corps: There is a certain pride in working for the Ministry, and people cherish a sense of prestige associated with diplomatic service. The staff is higher educated and higher paid than in the other ministries because of the perceived demands of their jobs.

The organizational structure was last changed in 1996. In The Hague, there are four main directorate generals that do policy work: one on political affairs, one on European cooperation, one on regional policy and consular affairs, and one on development cooperation. Their activities often intersect, and much work is done across these directorates. Support departments serve the Ministry in areas such as finance and personnel and report to the Secretary General (SG). The other senior civil servants are four Director Generals (DG). Together with their deputies and some of the most important support department directors, they form the top 20 of the Ministry and report to three government members: a Minister of Foreign Affairs, a Minister for Development Cooperation, and a Minister for European Affairs. All in all, the Ministry consists of many people in many locations doing lots of interrelated tasks bound together by both the formal bureaucratic organization and by its esprit de corps.

### Context of Public Management Reform

The first round of public sector reform efforts started in some English-speaking and Scandinavian countries in the late 1980s as a response to criticism about the bureaucratic nature of governments and the need to increase efficiency with ideas borrowed from the private sector. Although progress was made, negative side effects also occurred, due to, for instance, a lack of appreciation of the contrasting values of private trade versus public governance and an overreliance on formal systems of specification and measurement. Nevertheless, reform stayed on the agenda and even widened to include these issues, for example:

- increasing public transparency and accountability (e.g., by performance targets, measures, and indicators)

downsizing civil service, partly also by privatization or creating arm's length public bodies  
cutting down on procedures, being more selective in priorities  
delegating power to local governments and to departments

The Dutch political arena embraced many ideas and the present administration made public statements to its renewed commitment, spearheaded by the program "A Different Government." Without us trying to separate rhetoric from reality, it is still abundantly clear that this context greatly influences the change agenda of the Dutch ministries. A typical example is the change initiative called "VBTB," a Dutch acronym roughly translated as "from policy budgeting to policy accountability," which started in 1997. Its aim was and still is to link policy and budgets to the measurement and review of actual performance.

### How it Started

In March 2003, informal brainstorming began with the VBTB project manager at the Ministry and his colleague and consultants who were involved in organizational development at Dutch embassies (the authors). Basically, the project manager felt that VBTB was running out of steam. The approach became too instrumental and it would be good to step back and take stock. But how to organize this? The consultants and the colleague helped him to come up with an approach. The most likely platform for taking stock was the VBTB Steering Group composed of the Deputy SG and Deputy DGs as well as important Directors of Staff Departments. A round of interviews was held with its members to draw preliminary conclusions about the introduction of performance management within the Ministry.

The opinions voiced in these interviews varied. Although most supported VBTB in theory, a few felt that the focus on results was associated with financial controlling rather than implementation quality, with top-down control rather than decentralized accountability and with reacting to the government's commitment to VBTB rather than a felt need within the Ministry. Somehow this did not do justice to the reality of the Ministry's work, which was conceived as dealing with not only the control rationality of VBTB but also the political rationalities of policy formation and the professional realities of policy implementation. It is not easy to do result-based management on, for example, the Iraq war. A need for differentiation and pluralistic views was suggested by the Project Manager to the Steering Group with open discussions on "steering" as a starting point. The conclusion

was controversial and perceived by some interviewees as a threat to the VBTB initiative. Nevertheless, the conclusions were accepted in June 2003. It also led to relabeling the Steering Group VBTB as the Deputy DG Council (further referred to as "the council") who would from then on address a wider scope of issues

### *Debate on Steering?*

Brainstorming continued between the initiators and the consultants on how the open discussions could become a reality in the council. The ideas were ambitious: a series of discussion meetings, explorative research together with council members, and so forth. The VBTB conclusions might have been approved by the council, but the members' time was sparse, their interests and agendas diverse, and there was no real urgency felt for collective reflection on a subject that was so complex and for which no clear solutions were in sight. This created a dilemma, because understanding such problems goes hand in hand with trying to address them: This speaks for a participatory approach with the council members. To reduce intervention time, we aimed for creating insight and buzz in two to three intensive meetings, hoping that would spark further inquiry.

In August 2003, we headed for a debate on contrasting perspectives on steering: a learning setting for the council with three experts representing contrasting rationalities and each making his or her case on how steering could be improved. We hoped that each perspective would come to life and the impossibility to prioritize them would be acknowledged. Our apprehension about the conditions for organizing learning for the council was confirmed soon. First, the intended start was postponed due to other precedences such as an inventory of existing opinions for a speech by the SG's speech on the subject of steering. Then a kick-off meeting with the council to manage expectations was canceled. Last, we still had no formal contract. After 9 months of informal support and no clear plan, we began to wonder if it was time to throw in the towel.

### *Research as an Intervention!*

We rethought our approach, abandoning the idea of a debate. We now deemed the risk too high that new principles for steering the Ministry would not be convincing if we did not first lay bare the actual mechanisms that kept the wicked problems in place. The council had no shared mental map of what these debilitating mechanisms might be. Creating such a map through spontaneous inquiry at the debate seemed too tall an order. First, these mechanisms were not all that obvious; second, they

would challenge existing beliefs and might trigger defensive reactions. We therefore decided to research these mechanisms first ourselves and map them as input for discussion. We formed a small team as a learning community consisting of three external consultants and the initiators. Such a mixed composition would allow us to combine professional and experiential viewpoints. This team would map the wicked issues, describe the practices that keep them in place, and sketch the action principles suitable to tackle them more effectively. We decided to look for rich experiences in interviews and documents to allow us to get to the nitty-gritty of things and illustrate our findings. This research idea was shared in fleeting encounters with the council. It appeared to be in line with the council's interest to learn more about the subject rather than get expert advice about solutions. A formal contract was signed and actual work started. It was hoped that 2 or 3 months would suffice, but this was extended to twice that for the needed scheduling flexibility for interviews and discussions. It gave us time to sharpen the analysis further.

## Doing the Research and Writing the Report

### *Getting Meaningful Data*

It was not the first time that the Ministry addressed the topic of steering. Information on the topic was piled up in archives and memories: minutes of discussions, evaluations of organizational change, policy audits, impressions of organizational culture, farewell letters of employees, anecdotes, newspaper articles, rules of etiquette, codes of conduct, memos . . . even diplomat's novels. There was surely no lack of information, problems, tips, cases, or articulated opinions. Every piece highlights part of the practice, though generally more the formal and desired aspects than the experiential and actual aspects. The fragmented nature of all these data made it a challenge to select and recognize complementary pieces of the puzzle. We observed early on that the quality of storytelling was well developed among diplomats and that many anecdotes circulate in the organization. We made it a guiding principle to mine meaningful stories out of the archives, interviews, and experiences. We would look for critical or typical incidents rather than opinions or solutions. The data would be softer but probably richer and more complete.

### *Getting the Council Involved*

We analyzed a yard of documents, described 30 cases, and held 20 interviews with people from different parts of the organization. We discussed with members of the

council their concern about wicked problems and how not to get stuck in more of the same fixes. Once they got their story off their chest, they would be more open to explore, we figured. At the end of most conversations we started questioning some of the cherished notions and posed alternative viewpoints. It was both a way to manage expectations that findings might be controversial and to further ownership for this process of exploration.

### *Dealing With Fuzziness and Superficiality*

What is steering anyhow? Is it about management styles, about culturally enforced rules, about directing organizational change, or about how to monitor the primary process? Stakeholders had different implicit definitions and would mention diverse aspects. We decided to interpret this fuzziness as an intrinsic part of the subject matter, not something to be remedied. Much energy had already been spent in trying to solve these issues related to steering. And people weren't too satisfied with the outcomes. There was no lack of opinions as to how to fix it once again, all of them different. How to prevent that our analysis and perspectives would just be adding to that pile? We decided to describe the underlying mechanisms that keep wicked problems in place and the underlying principles that could inform future initiatives to tackle them. To get past symptoms and actions, we used sensitizing concepts at a more abstract level: related to dilemmas, loose coupling, hybrid organizations, types of systems, sense making, and so forth. The underlying principles would not be actionable right away. This would help keep the council out of their decision-making and delegating mode. Wicked problems call for learning, not for action reflexes.

### *Appreciativeness*

In understanding the underlying mechanisms, we chose an appreciative approach. We did not regard the Ministry a "sick" organization. It made no sense to us that an organization of well-educated, reasonably motivated, and socially adept employees would knowingly and willingly act destructively without incentives (perverse or not) to do so. The problems do not exist without reasons. Our hypothesis was that if we had worked 10 years in the Ministry, we would probably exhibit similar behavior. Also, we noted in previous reports that much emphasis was invariably put on outlining what was wrong in the organization, as if there was no upside to wicked problems. Each time, such emphasis would rouse resistance from those who felt that blame was implied. As one person put it later, "the blood is still dripping from the walls from the last consultants that diagnosed the big picture."

### *Causal Loop Diagrams and the Use of Jargon*

We spent much time sharing meaningful stories from documents and interviews and trying to map underlying mechanisms. We disregarded at least five such mental maps until we decided to use causal loop diagramming. This assisted us to highlight the reinforcing mechanisms and their less obvious pay-offs. It also made us sensitive to the interconnectedness of mechanisms, which is characteristic for wicked problems. Not everyone reads such conceptual pictures easily. We therefore strove to graphically illustrate the mechanisms with real incidents, anecdotes, and quotes in ministry jargon as well. This was relevant as the organization not only lacked a common framework to describe complexity but also demonstrated mixed feelings toward consultants' speak. Of course, it is easier to describe existing mechanisms without new language, as incidents and stories abound internally about such practice. Such is not the case for new perspectives. So there, we had to introduce and explained new concepts, leaving out academic terminology.

### *Intelligent Simplification*

We pressed ourselves to find a level of intelligent simplification for our findings. Simplifying matters too much makes the complexity get lost. Too little simplification would make the finding a hard read. Our initial idea was actually to just produce discussion maps of 10 pages with some background text for the council as quick reference. At that time, we regarded the report as a side product only. Later, we realized that any document that strikes a cord is not held confidential in the ministry for long. Thus, our findings should be readable and understandable without our help. We ended up with a report of 60 pages. We did not write an executive summary, because the value lay not in the conclusions but in understanding underlying mechanisms and principles. That requires reading, not browsing. We described existing mechanism in more detail than new perspectives. This helped to keep it concise. Also, we figured that some puzzlement might serve the change better than a false sense of comprehension.

### **Impressions of the Report's Content**

In the report, we consecutively paid attention to the following:

the actual practice of administration and its effectiveness in terms of wicked problems and persistent qualities

a mental map describing the mechanisms, captured conceptually with causal loop diagrams and illustrated with real-life stories

additional perspectives to tackle wicked problems more effectively in terms of six principles elaborated on with a concept and some examples

In other words, we paid attention to what we saw and heard, how we explain what we saw and heard, and what we recommend doing differently. Knowing that the report would not answer most diplomats' expectations, we also devoted the first few pages, sharing some research dilemmas and explaining why we produced something without clear-cut solutions, replete with arrow-studded diagrams. This, we hoped, would manage expectations, especially of the independent reader.

### *Wicked Problems and Persistent Qualities*

The easiest part of the analysis was to write what the Ministry's persistent strengths and wicked problems are. To our surprise, we heard much the same things, even though they were not reported comprehensively anywhere. This was in contrast to the conflicting views on what creates or can fix problems. The summarized problems and qualities have never sparked any discussion since, unlike to the rest of the report.

Qualities, for example, are that most employees are highly educated, generally well read, and have a quick wit. Also, the well-developed informal network that disseminates information swiftly around the world can be regarded as a strength. This is also true for the strong sense of loyalty toward the Ministry, its mission, and its ministers, coupled with a sense of humor among the colleagues about the diplomatic service. We also emphasized some complexities that are inextricably bound up with the kind of work of the Ministry, such as the following:

the dispersion over hundreds of locations across nations the diversity or production processes in terms of character, rules, and rhythms (e.g., presiding the European Union in 2005 next to development cooperation) thriving in the national political arena at the same time as running as an efficient and transparent operation as possible

The wicked problems are, freely translated, listed in Table 1. Each bullet could be more clearly defined, but in this article, we want to focus on the process of the assignment instead of the content. Besides, it is the nature of wicked problems that they are ambiguous and overlapping.

**Table 1**  
**Wicked Problems in the Dutch Ministry**  
**of Foreign Affairs**

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- Policies are driven by incidents and show lack of priorities and posteriorities
  - Professional know-how leaves much to be desired, specialist knowledge goes out the window, and knowledge management is regarded as a chore.
  - Coordination load and constipation in work processes, and tier (“this is not my department”) behavior and proliferation of consultation
  - Internal focus and no contact with the general public and little say for partner organizations.
  - Keeping the peace at any price, consensus driven, and nonintervention behavior
  - Too much blueprint approaches to organizational change, one-size-fits-all, and disappointing success rates
  - Overloading the change agenda, oscillating (pendulum) behavior, and change fatigue
  - Little learning behavior, especially in the formal organization, and all sorts of tensions and conflicts in cooperation
  - Not result driven, reputation and perception is cherished as one’s working capital
  - The best diplomat is not necessarily the best manager, lack of diversity in careers and development
- 

To give an impression, we sketch some characteristics of the first bulleted problem. One interviewee sighed, “Nowadays, it seems everything is *the* cornerstone of our foreign policy.” This referred to the tendency to allow everyone with some clout in the organization to have some say over a new policy to guarantee enough base of support. As a result, “everything becomes a priority,” even if it becomes quite a haphazard accumulation of issues. In cases where widespread internal consultation was not organized, this would later be criticized in audits as not taking the viewpoints of relevant departments into account. Policy is an important vehicle for the Minister to show the Parliament and the public that the Minister is taking action on anything that would be in the media at the time. As a result, migration issues or terrorism would necessarily get more attention than the long-term development of, let’s say, Mali. In other words, the short-term agenda takes precedence over the long-term one, and the formulation of policies gets more attention than their implementation. To retain the ability to be flexible and swift in response to new issues, the inclusion of lessons learned from the past and the participation of external partners in policy formation would be quite controversial: This could severely limit room to maneuver. This, of course, has a down side: the risk to make old mistakes again and to be overly focused on internal matters.

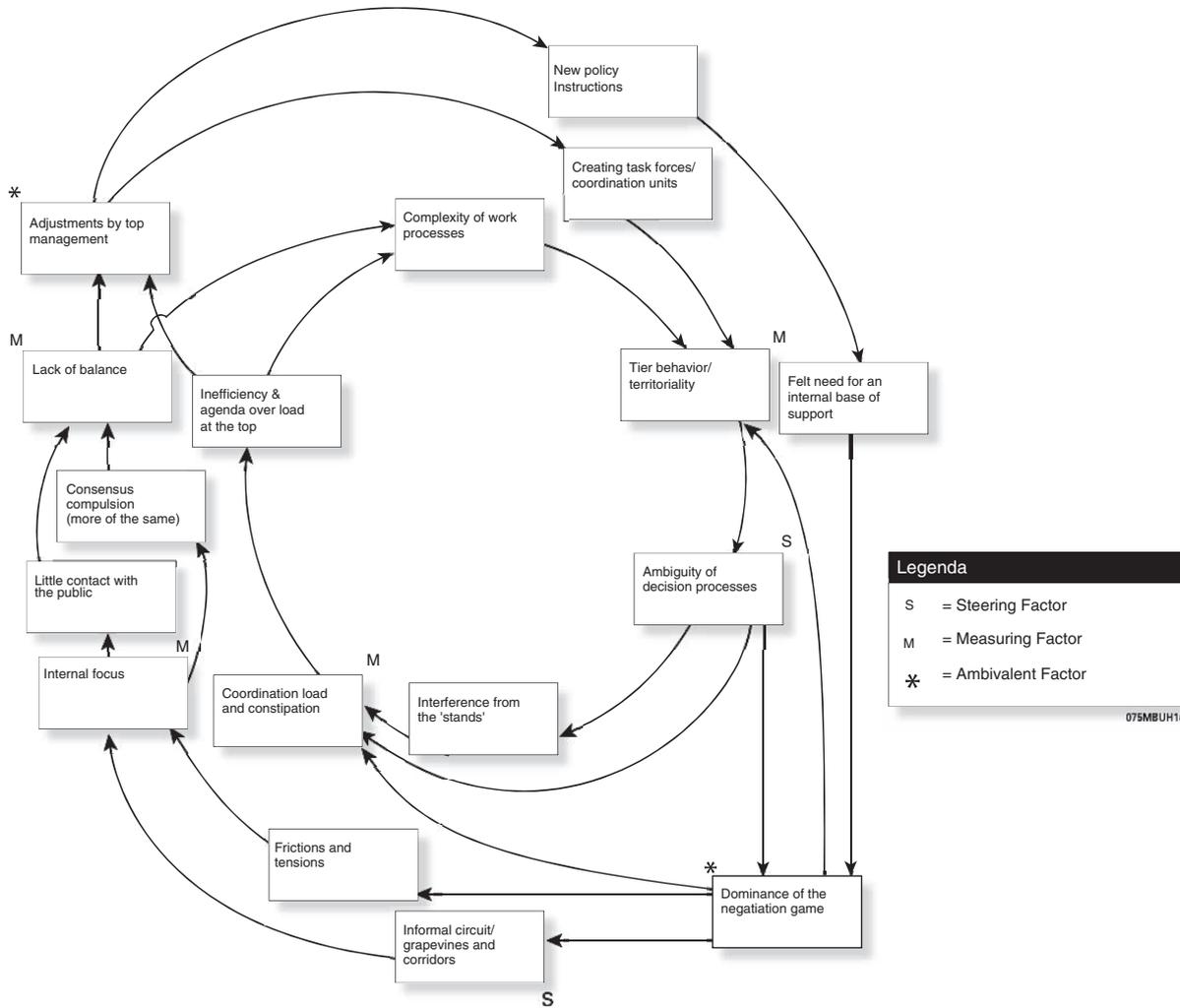
### *Mechanisms and Stories Behind Wicked Problems*

The interconnectedness of the wicked problems became clear when we were unsuccessful in articulating separate explanations for each of them. However, it was possible to create one overall causal loop diagram for all 10 of the problems combined. That diagram consisted of six parts, each of which could be regarded as a subsystem reinforcing itself. These became the building blocks of our mental model: Six causal loop diagrams that were interconnected and together paint the whole picture. These were labeled as follows: policy dynamic, coordination dynamic, steering and change dynamic, cooperation dynamic, personnel dynamic, and profession dynamic.

In the report, we chose to not conceptually explain the diagram word for word but rather to illustrate the dynamic with events and stories from the Ministry. For impression, Figure 1 is included here as well as a brief explanation, but without rich incidents, quotes, and so forth.

Figure 1 conveys the complex tasks of the Ministry: Employees operate in many arenas on many themes, and all these efforts must be managed and coordinated. This complexity cannot be eradicated: It is at the heart of ministry’s work. To create some order in all this, the Ministry has set up directorates, departments, groups, task forces, and so on. Around each theme, region, country, or project, an organizational unit has sprung up to ensure that enough attention is devoted to it. Each unit has its own agenda, and there are inescapable frictions between them. One interviewee would summarize this as “One’s real enemy is generally only one floor away.” It creates a Catch 22, because not fighting for one’s own limited agenda reflects badly on the functioning of the unit, but fighting for it leads to suboptimization. Running one’s own department is one thing; broader cohesion and cooperation across departmental boundaries and hierarchical layers is quite another. That is the Achilles’ heel of the Ministry and limits its ability to tackle the complex issues for which this diversity of units was created in the first place. Ensuring some cohesion requires a substantial amount of formal and informal negotiations and consultations between tiers and layers within the organization. It does, however, make resulting decision processes laborious and creates inefficiencies. Also, the diversity of interests and points of view cause frictions, especially under time pressure. The outcome is often viewed in terms of winners and losers. Making such assessments is part of being a diplomat: to continually gauge the players, their agendas, and power base. When the organization gets too bogged down by it all, the top of the organization tries to break the negotiation game. However, this is generally done by setting up a task force, which in a way reinforces the dynamic.

**Figure 1**  
**The Coordination Dynamic Diagram**



The diagram goes round and round in circles. In contrast to linear strings of causes and effects, this makes it harder to assign blame. This helps thwart a focus on winners and losers as well as on quick fixes. This is good news, as neither has much value around wicked issues. At the heart of the combined six diagrams, we found the (internal) negotiation game as possibly the most pervasive factor. It is also very much a cultural trait beyond the Ministry's walls; the "polder model" represents a Dutch political habit to strive for consensus at all cost. It has solid historical roots and is still often regarded as one of the underlying strengths of Dutch society.

*Principles for Handling Wicked Problems at the Ministry*

The diagrams and stories deconstruct the ministry's ways of doing things. We did see it as a necessary precondition to any transformative change effort. Transformation is not about introducing something new; it is also about letting go of dysfunctional routines. Without deconstructing how the present culture is created every day, any transformative change effort would be like building a dream house on quicksand.

The first principle underlined this by advocating to seriously reduce the multitude of change efforts, especially

those that were “more of the same.” We found that most change programs were generally large scale, top down, and policy or procedure oriented. When it comes to wicked issues, these organizational changes had little success and arguably made matters worse. We suggested that wicked problems do not disappear easily, no matter what the Ministry does. Learning to live with wicked problems would be a more innovative strategy than habitually striving for quick fixes to eliminate them. We felt this could ease much change fatigue, free up a lot of time and energy, and show respect for lessons learned from past change efforts. They would be all quick wins in a way. To spark discussion, we listed examples of change efforts that would qualify.

All six action principles were worded as provocative statements. We substantiated each with an argument, a concept, and some examples. We thought that the newness of the principles for most of the readers would mean they would come to live only by applying them in real life. We had little trust in the depth of learning by reading alone. We therefore decided to word the principles in a way that would rouse interest, cause constructive confusion, and trigger interest of those who would be willing to experiment in their own working environment. That would suffice within this context and was already quite a challenge in itself: Perspectives that are “not the way we do things around here” can easily become disqualified for just that reason.

The principles were an eclectic bunch (e.g., a plea to not solve intrinsic dilemmas in the organization but rather to embrace competing rationalities that are needed to deal with complex issues). For this end, we supplied a map of contrasting rationalities at the Ministry and ways of dealing with them constructively versus destructively. Also, there was a principle on how to look for points of leverage in change programs using systems thinking and an overview of what these points of leverage and possible interventions could be if one used the causal diagrams of the report. Another principle dealt with using small learning communities and small wins for transformative changes instead of large programs. We tried to argue that the six principles, like the six diagrams, are not independent of one another: Any change effort would have more transformative power when the principles are combined.

### **Preparing and Facilitating Discussion in a Castle**

The discussion session with the council took place in June 2004. To get away from the hectic life at the Ministry, we organized the meeting in a classy castle

among stately gardens. There was a special tension in the air as the national soccer team was playing against its German arch rivals in the European championships that evening. The afternoon was dedicated for discussion and the dinner for reflection.

With respect to setting an appropriate ambition level for the meeting, we were torn between two options. On one hand, we wanted to carefully convey our research work and share our findings and considerations so that the council could become familiar with them. On the other hand, we preferred dialogue over knowledge transfer and reflection on one’s own role and issues over consumption of concepts. Such a more active format seemed more conducive to learning. The Deputy SG indicated that he wanted both and more: We should present our findings as experts but also facilitate the meeting. We felt an intervention paradox at play: Only being experts would thwart learning by a lack of interaction, and only being facilitators would thwart learning by not introducing new ideas. Trying to do both might thwart learning by mixing different consultants’ roles and interventions, making each of them lose focus.

We resolved the dilemma by using micro separations between different modes of learning in the castle meeting. We cut the report’s content in 13 pieces (introduction, six mechanisms, and six principles) and presented for each—in roughly 5 minutes—the key notions and one telling illustration. This was our expert mode. After each introduction, we shifted into the facilitation mode and asked the participants to think of examples in their own arena and explore them. Our ambition level was limited. As experts, we wanted them to get an overall and interconnected sense of the findings. As facilitators, we wanted them to become aware of the arbitrary one-sidedness of how some things are done and to get a sense of small, transformative steps that might be possible in their own surroundings.

It is interesting how even small choices might have repercussions. One such choice was whether to send a copy of the report to the participants in advance or not. It would prepare people for the meeting, and we could perhaps reduce presentation time a bit, allowing more time for reflection. However, we felt pretty sure that not all participants would read the report, creating different needs at the meeting itself. More important, we felt that if our analysis was accurate, most attendees would interpret the report as either helping or hindering their department’s agenda. Sending it beforehand would increase the chances that the council members themselves would enter the castle with preset judgments and positions—not very conducive to learning where one’s judgment is better suspended in favor of first exploring what’s on the table. We therefore chose not to send it.

Knowing that diplomats are generally impatient to know the bottom line, we shared these thoughts as an opening to the program. This allowed us to manage expectations, get on with learning, and focus people's attention back to the details. We briefly summarized the formal assignment, the intervention paradoxes we faced, the set-up of the meeting, the good and bad news, our normative stance, and what outcomes we deemed possible for that day. We did this in a somewhat playful mode, because we figured a sense of humor and certain lightness would balance the wickedness of the subject matter. As an example, a conducive mix of laughter and indignation was roused by presenting the following:

- bad news that there are all kinds of wicked issues over the past 10 to 20 years that do not seem much affected by change efforts
- good news that people at least agree on what these wicked issues are. It would be much more difficult if they didn't.
- more good news that the Ministry can scrap a lot of change efforts, as they don't do any good any how, which frees up a lot of time and energy.
- grave bad news that there is a risk of "catastrophic learning" (Cornelis, 1999). The council is subject to the same mechanism that prevents learning on these problems in the Ministry as large.
- the final good news that we would proceed today as if catastrophic learning does not scare us one bit

Our key messages were roughly that a shared mental model with regard to steering was needed to understand why and where steering does and does not work, that this would allow them to test change initiatives and own cherished ideas, and that innovation is possible but only on a small scale. We further stated that the notion of one center of control in the organization is a bogus idea, making it all the more relevant to rethink what role they as council members could realistically play in managing and changing the organization.

The program of the afternoon flowed naturally. The group members provided a high level of participation, and they had no problem jumping into discussion and exploring the findings. We responded to requests to substantiate the findings with more practical examples only succinctly. We refrained from overexplaining so as to leave it up to the group to think it through among themselves. As a result, the council came up with new examples to illustrate and discuss our findings. Sometimes the group was inclined to put the causes of the problems outside their field of influence (such as "this is part of Dutch culture"). By bringing the attention to actual cases

within the Ministry, the conversation would veer back in focus.

The meeting was concluded at the dinner table. To signal the transfer of ownership of what happens next with the report, we had the Deputy SG chair that part of the evening. He asked each participant in turn to share what he or she had gained from the meeting and how they could see themselves apply it in their own or in the council's domain. We did little more than suggest not going into formal decision-making mode, which was readily accepted. Many showed appreciation and surprise at the content and tone of the meeting. Different ideas surfaced, ranging from pruning the council's change agenda, or reshaping the role of one of the departments with outside partners, to raising the level of knowledge among would-be managers on dilemmas of steering.

### What has Happened Since

The formal assignment was over. Shortly after, there was an unexpected request for 50 extra copies because the participants wanted to share it with colleagues. Others started photocopying, and new requests came in. A few months later, we estimate that well over 200 copies circulated, meaning that about 10% of the employees have somehow been exposed to the content. The report became referred to as a "must-read." We felt relieved about making it independently readable and recognized the strength of the informal circuit where "hot stuff" is always distributed efficiently throughout the Ministry.

Then responses came in through the grapevine, in corridors, and e-mails, often from private e-mail addresses. Generally, people had no trouble understanding the list of wicked problems nor the mechanisms sustaining them. When getting to the chapter on action perspectives, they wondered if it was not a contradiction to what they had just read about the persistent nature of wicked problems. Some felt a sense of depression in reading so graphically how wicked problems are kept in place. Others felt relief and support as they recognized their own struggles in the descriptions. After few initial criticism about the report being not too actionable to help them through tough times, most shared later that it did alleviate stress when faced with resistance. This was because the report's findings had helped them realize that resistance was not necessarily linked to them personally but to dealing with persistent organizational dilemmas. Generally, it was regarded more as a Ministry report than a consultant's report, partly due to wording, the mixed composition of the team, and the organic manner of distribution within the Ministry.

The part of action perspectives was hardest to deal with. Different people seemed to focus on different ones best. Some liked the idea of reducing the pile of change endeavors; others embraced the notion of dealing with different parallel realities, investing in knowledge on change and management, or creating small learning communities. Additions were suggested, such as to include the role of middle management as a mediator between different (organizational) worlds or to differentiate between different policy arenas (e.g., quality and cohesion was deemed better in policies that are shaped in international arenas than in homegrown policies).

Next, different follow-up initiatives started. We became aware of them mostly by accident. Many were pleasant surprises, as they seemed in line with the action perspectives of the report, be it modest in scope. They concerned opportunities to learn in small communities and opportunities to experiment in one's own work system:

*Discussions within different organizational units:* This was generally done as a means to better understand the findings and to strategize about the unit's own agenda for the future. As far as we can tell, these discussions were exploratory but rarely confrontational in the sense of looking how the unit is itself part of the problem.

*Experimentation on the job:* People tried using some of the ideas in their own work and called us to informally talk over some ideas. This ranged from rethinking a working conference to strategizing about how knowledge management might take hold. Here, the impact of the report appeared strongest.

*Organizing learning off the job:* For decades, all diplomats followed *het klasje* (an elite entry program) when they joined the Ministry: an elite half-year intensive training program that can also be perceived as a valued rite of passage. Discussions about the report are planned to be a part of this program.

Other follow-up initiatives, however, appeared more at odds with the action perspectives. If anything, they were perpetuating the mechanism that sustained wicked problems in the first place:

*Opinion games:* One organizational unit called us the last minute to present our findings to its middle managers during a lunch break. Its two managers had contrasting agendas. One disliked the report: He found it defamatory and was annoyed by the absence of bulleted actions. In contrast, the other manager thought the report worthwhile, as it might get the

middle managers on the same page in how to manage their departments. The two managers did agree that the report—now that it was hot—needed to be dealt with as soon as possible in a meeting with the middle managers. Their sense of urgency had contrasting intentions. The first manager wanted to discuss it to disqualify it. He expected us to defend it. The second manager wanted to discuss it to get the middle managers to act on it. He expected us to use our powers of persuasion. In both scenarios, the lunch meeting was not set for learning and would get the subject off the managers' own agenda as soon as possible: They would either halt or delegate it. We decided not to participate. Chances were that there might actually be more discussion and learning without us present as proponents, and opponents would have to talk among themselves. This indeed occurred 2 months later.

*Negotiation games:* Several people were observed to use the report to substantiate their own views or block agendas they were against. As one diplomat shared with us, "If anything, the overall causal loop diagram of the report is complicated enough to make it obvious that simple solutions do not really do the trick to break bad habits. Nevertheless, in our managers' meeting last week, one colleague concluded that the report made clear that it all can be solved by better incentives. While another countered that the report indeed came down to one thing, be it different: confronting people with their behavior. How can people misread the report so blatantly?" Others would wave with the report to block certain initiatives as being counter to the report's findings, even though we could not trace any such arguments in the report itself. Sometimes we would find whole sections selectively cut and edited in new proposals that in themselves bore little or no resemblance to our action perspectives.

Having little control over the follow up of our research, such divergent use is probably to be expected. The lack of control is very much a function of the entrepreneurial character of the research: the interventions and ideas were pretty much a surprise to the main platform, the council. Six months later though, it did spark a reflection on our part as to what working formats are suitable for follow-up as well as congruent with the report's suggested principles. On request, we made a small text available with some pointers. What the suggested formats had in common is that they were all less expert driven and more participatory, either through learning communities or

work systems learning on the job. One suggested follow-up, making a report on concrete actions to implement the perspectives, was deliberately not included in this list, even though it would surely be funded.

We feel that writing concretely about the mechanisms of present practice is doable: People have the experience to recognize it. However, writing concretely about actions and mechanisms to create new practice remains all too theoretical when the people involved don't have a chance to try it out, codevelop it, and experience it first hand.

## Reflection

What can be learned from this assignment? In our view, the problems' persistence is not so much a result of a lack of trying but more a result of much energy being spent day in day out to keep matters as they are. It appears to be the nature of things to change: They degrade, shift, grow, and so forth. It requires continuous small interventions to keep things stable. We pose that fixation of wicked problems at the Ministry comes in many mutually reinforcing ways, from fixated ideas, to fixated actor compositions, fixated ways of interacting, fixated roles, and fixated behavioral reflexes. Loosening things up, or defixating, could thus be perceived as the key to change.

### *Level Defixation*

Trying harder does not suffice for tackling wicked problems. This implies that the direction cannot be "more of the same," based on already existing opinions and notions of steering and change. This was our reason for not focusing on what the problems were but on how they were created. It also meant that we chose not to tell what needed to be done—in terms of tips, tricks, or action plans—but explore what different principles behind them might be.

Such choices can be linked to the literature on levels of learning. Three levels are often distinguished (e.g., Engeström, 1987; Wierdsma & Swieringa, 2002). The higher the level of learning, the more energy it requires; the tougher the issues than can be tackled, the more widely the principles can be applied.

The first level focuses on behavioral routines that fit well-defined problems and proven solutions. Change happens through action plans or procedures, which turn into new routines over time telling how things are supposed to be done. During the research, we were often confronted with such routines when we asked why things were done in a certain way and why they could not be

done differently. People explained why it was "only natural" to do things this way, that it is "how things work around here." We were frequently asked for better routines, the bulleted action list.

The second level of learning focuses on new understandings that help create tailor-made approaches for more fuzzy issues. Here, change happens through new perspectives as springboards, through cognitive models and maps or through microcosms in which new ideas can be experienced (Engeström, 1987). Much of the report's content can be regarded as being on this level.

The third level is more expansive and focuses on methodology, on how one comes to new understanding. It fits most closely with poorly defined problems, unstable situations, and lack of solutions. It requires a dialectic in which cherished notions, such as the organization's identity, can be turned upside down. One could say that we strived to create a process whereby this could happen, definitely in the research team and occasionally with the deputy DG council and during informal follow-ups.

### *Reality Defixation*

Multiple viewpoints are instrumental for higher levels of learning: It is not easy to have a true dialectic process by oneself or among like-minded people. Different realities, contradictions, dilemmas, and constructive conflicts are what fuels and allows for expansive learning. It brings the kind of richness that does justice to the complexities of social systems. We saw many dilemmas at the Ministry—for instance, between a desire for more control versus a desire for more participation, between short-term responsiveness and long-term vision, between loyalty to the Ministry and a need for more personal initiative and authenticity, and between proper procedures and dynamic flexibility. Many of these appear not particularly specific to the Ministry. They have in common that prioritizing one side of the dilemma creates imbalances that damages the organization. Conflicts arising from dilemmas in organizations might be essential to its vitality, but in this case, we observed how the Ministry made it a custom to organize conflict away by splitting into different departments and compartments. Coupled with a temperament to avoid conflicts, this constitutes a mechanism reinforcing bureaucratization. As long as dynamics of conflict avoidance are prevalent, any transformational change is doomed (Hoebeke, 1994). The dynamic of splitting in the Ministry regularly causes one dominant view to prevail. Alternative views are relegated to the fringes of the organization or beyond. In the report, we characterized persistent one-sidedness in all six

causal loop diagrams, demonstrating, for example, how change efforts are generally top-down policy and procedure-oriented endeavors put forth at the expense of tackling motivation, learning, or vitality; or how the evaluation and development of personnel is geared toward becoming masters at the political game and building one's reputation at the expense of specialist knowledge and result orientation. Overall, we tried to put pluralism back at center stage when we could.

### *Actor Defixation*

A powerful way to achieve multiple viewpoints is to include multiple voices, striving for diversity in the groups around common endeavors. This can be regarded as the opposite of splitting: bringing people together within departments or across departments who have different ideas. Another way is to invite third parties and people relegated to the fringes of the organization. Paradoxically, this is the hardest when it is most needed. When an issue is hot, consensus becomes harder and reflexes pop up to exclude external parties and fringe players. In this assignment, we purposefully created a research team of different types of insiders and different types of outsiders. At some expense to efficiency, this did create heated discussions, which helped us to scrap one-sided but cherished hypotheses and models more than once. We also achieved some diversity among interviewees, but this was limited, as one third of the names were preset: the council members themselves. As a result, the research team often had to play devil's advocate, offering alternative viewpoints ourselves.

### *Game Defixation*

Dealing with different voices, different realities, or even different levels of learning in an environment that likes to fix tensions and frictions rather than use them, requires a different way of interacting. The Ministry has a preference for certain types of interactions: the consultation and negotiation game, the hierarchical instructive game, and the informal networking game. In terms of working with consultants, it generally chooses the expert advice or the project managers' advice. We could have chosen an approach to fit in, but this would not have been conducive to the interactive learning needed to deal with wicked problems. The preparation of the castle discussion illustrates that people in the Ministry can recognize this but are naturally inclined to use their consensus reflex to mix and mash contrasting approaches in one and the same meeting. This, however, does not lead to a colorful mix of negotiation, rational planning, seduction, learning, and whatever else, because each of these endeavors require

different interaction rules and roles (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2002). The political negotiation game easily pushes other interaction games underground (Vermaak, 2006).

The alternative games we most often put forward in the assignment were learning communities and experimentation on the job. Both are geared toward learning, albeit in a different way. Learning communities happen in networks based on shared expertise and activities geared toward development (Wenger, 1998). Experimentation on the job is best achieved in work systems: task-dependent groups that span complete work processes (Hoebeke, 1994). However, these games have limited applicability, too. Thus, purposeful defixation of games requires distinguishing different ones and knowing how to switch between them. Here, the distinction between game and play is helpful: In games, we construct and deconstruct realities, whereas in play, we shape and change interaction rules (Termeer, 1993). Play is what allows us to adjust and set the rules of games where we deal with the content. Playfulness is what helps people to have enough distance to the games they play to become aware of their intricacies. In the castle, we tried to trigger a certain playfulness by bating people, telling anecdotes, lightly introducing good and bad news statements, and so forth. Play, as meant here, is not viewed as a means to an end but rather as a crooked line to the end. It gets around obstacles, but the obstacles were put there by the player in the first place (Weick, 1969).

### *Action Defixation*

New games are not mastered overnight. This requires time and patience. People need to be able to experiment in their own work situation, to see firsthand how things work when done differently, and share these experiences with their colleagues. This is in contrast with the impatience surrounding change initiatives in the Ministry. The impatience has multiple reasons. It is not only because of the popularity of the "planned change" approach but also reinforced by, for example, the need for management to sell new initiatives to colleagues and victims. They do this by inflating its qualities, which then puts great pressure on the team charged with implementation to spring into action and show some visible results soon. It reflects badly on the sponsors if the team does not succeed, so the sponsors keep the pressure on.

One way to counter this is to work on a modest scale rather than at modest depth. In the report, we advocated innovating at the fringes of the organization, in small enclaves conducive to innovation. For example, in a pilot at embassies, we found that we could be rather effective in this way. In such protected settings, it was possible to

use different rules, roles, objectives, language, and knowledge that were at odds with the dominant way of doing and seeing things at the Ministry. In that sense, we are relieved that no grand program has yet been initiated based on our report, and we will keep putting in our two cents to prevent that from happening in the future. Expansion is, however, possible by building on strengths. Picture the ink stain effect: People who participated in successful innovations that we have (seen) created at the Ministry can take their inspiration and experience with them when relocating and starting some similar initiative at their new posting.

Another way of countering a fateful jump into action is to slow the process down rather than temper its intensity. One can distinguish phases preceding the start of an actual new practice. Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1992), for instance, name three preceding phases:

*precontemplation*: no thought of changing, now or later. Others who care about us may repeatedly urge us to take action on our problem, but at this stage, we are deaf to their pleas.

*contemplation*: thinking about changing—about why one follows the bad habit, what its pay-off is—brings both mind and emotions into play as one considers committing to change.

*preparation*: remove temptations, plan how action will be taken, arrange for support and understanding, arrange for substitutes for the missed habit or activity or substance, and beware of substituting a new problem for the old.

In our case, we adopted the role of stopping people in their tracks at every opportunity to prevent them from springing into action mode without properly going through precontemplation, contemplation, and preparation phases.

Put differently, we believe that revolutions take shape in small steps on a small scale, whereas evolutions can be done in great big strides and with much easier solutions (cf. Weick, 1984).

### Closing Remarks

We are confident that we did sow seeds of renewal, but how much will attention shift elsewhere again? Was the most important intervention the discussion in the castle or leaking of the report through the grapevine? Will experiments inspired by the report outweigh possible damage of misuse by others? Only time will tell.

Insights in how to loosen fixations and start renewal do not do away with the constant need to deal with intervention paradoxes. Most organizations will not react favorably when fixations are attacked left and right. It soon becomes a little much for the people involved. One can deepen the way people look at problems, but not too much; otherwise, the client is lost. The same holds true for the extent to which one introduces either multiple realities, new people, alternate games, or limited scope and speed: When one overdoes it, the client is lost. There are always some fixations more cherished than others. It seems effective to defixate not only what obstructs innovation the most but also the obstructions that budge the easiest (Termeer, 1993). This enables one to kind of go around the resistance that way. Given that the fixations are interconnected anyhow, defixating one will affect the others. For instance, when third parties are introduced, chances are that new ideas will seep in naturally, even when those same ideas previously would have met with much resistance. Handling wicked problems is thus a bit like the problems themselves: complex, dynamic, and hard to pin down.

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