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## Our Wicked Problem

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## Our Wicked Problem

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The Coronavirus is more than a health problem. It is a “wicked” problem disrupting work, education, travel, politics, financial indicators, and more. This label came about in 1973 to help describe a special class of situations that are volatile, uncertain and ambiguous, often difficult to recognize, and difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements. There is no clear problem definition due to interdependencies so the problem cannot be fully understood until after the solution comes about.

Solutions for wicked problems are not right or wrong or true-or-false, but better or worse. Solutions emerge from the interactions of many people and ideas; there are no experts who can solve this type of problem. Every complex, wicked or messy problem is essentially unique. Indeed, in our current situation we have the novel coronavirus. When you have seen one wicked problem, you have one wicked problem as no two are alike; further, there may be shared elements and symptoms confounding those who attempt to interact with them.

This kind of problem cannot and should not be attempted to be solved only by those in health care. Such an unwise approach will likely produce more unintended consequences due to the interactions among our many complex systems including health, education, social and community services, finance, and more. We see our limitations of thinking this is only about health when oil prices fall and we cannot get pharmaceutical products, hospital masks and other needed products because approximately 20% of the US retail supply chain remains tied to China, and outsourced companies cannot get the parts they need to run their businesses because of transportation and factory disruption, and all of these linked events have significant impact on the stock market.

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Consider an iceberg metaphor. We see the tip – the increasing spread of the virus which is immediately disrupting (and worse) to health and financial systems. Below the surface are emerging and interacting additional disruptions in the education system, labor and transportation systems, social and communication systems, and more. This is because we have been operating locally and globally for more than 50 years in a context of unprecedented interconnectivity, interdependence, radical innovation and transformation, and unforeseen new structures with unexpected new properties. Thinking otherwise is a cognitive failure.

While epidemics and pandemics are not new, no one has been through the complex interactive systems mess now occurring. We cannot approach this problem with the same thinking that enabled it, which is short-sighted, self-serving, and narrow-minded.

This kind of problem demands systems thinking, and teams of complex systems thinking leaders who apply a process for collaboration. Identifying health-leaders is a start, but also identifying academic-leaders, employer-leaders, community-leaders, elected government-leaders, and leaders of ethical decision making all of whom must be part of the solutions is essential. Then a process for collaboration and decision making is needed. This kind of problem requires an organized method of sharing information and of designing desired systems that can be immediately implemented from which emerges perspectives and solutions not available from talking. We need a new version of fusion centers established post 911 to enable vertical information sharing between stakeholders.

Where are these people? They are not appointed or selected by politicians as rewards for support. Rather, they are embedded throughout our American communities leading organizations of every size and type, and recognized for their leading and creative thinking, professional competencies, positive social relationships, and complex systems proficiencies. They are leaders with the disposition to effectively work in the kind of context the Wuhan wicked problem presents. While pharmaceutical companies push to develop ways to identify, prevent and treat the health elements, others must collaborate widely to identify and navigate the interacting work, education, travel, political, and ethical components. Let's get together in every community across the country so we can navigate ourselves through this mess.