From Wicked People to Wicked Problems: Building Local Capacity for Deliberative Engagement in the Era of Hyper-Partisanship

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From Wicked People to Wicked Problems: Building Local Capacity for Deliberative Engagement in the Era of Hyper-Partisanship

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Overview: Three Key Arguments

#1 – The Basic Reality
Most of the key problems we face are best understood through a wicked problems lens

#2 – The Bad News
Human nature and many of our primary institutions and processes are woefully ill-suited to address wicked problems

#3 – The Hopeful News
Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level
Wicked problems inherently involve competing underlying values, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that cannot be resolved by science. They call for ongoing high quality communication, creativity, and broad collaborative action to manage well.
What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

The Problematic

We crave certainty and consistency
We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
We strongly prefer to gather with the like minded
We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views
We avoid values dilemmas, tensions, and tough choices
# What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of motivated reasoning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What and who we expose ourselves to</td>
<td>selective exposure / echo chambers/ filter or media bubbles</td>
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<tr>
<td>How we interpret new evidence</td>
<td>confirmation bias, backfire effect, cognitive dissonance</td>
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<tr>
<td>How we make attributions and tell stories</td>
<td>egoism, illusory correlation, negativity bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>How we make decisions</td>
<td>heuristics, self-serving bias, social proof</td>
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<td>What we remember</td>
<td>availability bias</td>
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The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization

1. Impact of the internet
2. Overly adversarial political system
3. Media focus on conflict
4. Individually developed subconscious biases
5. Negative interaction effects
6. The Russell effect

The cycle begins with the impact of the internet, leading to an overly adversarial political system, which then attracts media focus on conflict. This, in turn, develops subconscious biases, leading to negative interaction effects, which feed back into the political system, completing the cycle.
Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- Build local capacity for deliberative engagement
- Reinvigorate or create new key bridging institutions
- Cultivate citizens as wise collaborators
The Wicked Problems Mindset

• Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
• Become more comfortable with uncertainty
• Focus on elevating the conversation not just winning the argument
• Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
• Work toward creating a learning community
Forms of Interactive Communication

**DELIBERATION**
Purpose is to make tough decisions together by working through tensions

**DEBATE**
Purpose is to test the quality of arguments and positions through the clash of ideas and expertise

**DIALOGUE**
Purpose is to foster understanding and respect through listening, storytelling, and conversation
Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

- Overall deliberative framing
  - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)

- Discussion guides/backgrounder
  - Base of information, something to react to, framed for deliberation, not persuasion

- Small, diverse, representative groups

- Processes designed for interaction and learning

- Deliberative facilitators
The Four Key Shifts of Deliberative Engagement

• From wicked people → to wicked problems
• From adversaries → to collaborators
• From inciting the worst of human nature → to bringing out the best of human nature
• From facts as cherry picked ammunition or “fake news” → to facts as tools for addressing problems together
The Virtuous Cycle of Authentic Engagement

Opportunity for authentic engagement (primary at local level)

Development of mutual understanding

Building of trust and respect

Greater refinement of opinions (i.e. learning)

Potential for collaboration and co-creation