

“Wicked” problems can’t be solved, but they can be tamed. Increasingly, these are the problems strategists face—and for which they are ill equipped.

Strategy as a Wicked Problem

by John C. Camillus

Over the past 15 years, I’ve been studying how companies create strategy—the most important responsibility of senior executives. Many corporations, I find, have replaced the annual top-down planning ritual, based on macroeconomic forecasts, with more sophisticated processes. They crunch vast amounts of consumer data, hold planning sessions frequently, and use techniques such as competency modeling and real-options analysis to develop strategy. This type of approach is an improvement because it is customer- and capability-focused and enables companies to modify their strategies quickly, but it still misses the mark a lot of the time.

Companies tend to ignore one complication along the way: They can’t develop models of the increasingly complex environment in which they operate. As a result, contemporary strategic-planning processes don’t help enterprises cope with the big problems they face. Several CEOs admit that they are confronted with issues that cannot be resolved merely by gathering additional data, defining issues more

clearly, or breaking them down into small problems. Their planning techniques don’t generate fresh ideas, and implementing the solutions those processes come up with is fraught with political peril. That’s because, I believe, many strategy issues aren’t just tough or persistent—they’re “wicked.”

Wickedness isn’t a degree of difficulty. Wicked issues are different because traditional processes can’t resolve them, according to Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, professors of design and urban planning at the University of California at Berkeley, who described them in a 1973 article in *Policy Sciences* magazine. A wicked problem has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn’t have a right answer, as we will see in the next section. Environmental degradation, terrorism, and poverty—these are classic examples of wicked problems. They’re the opposite of hard but ordinary problems, which people can solve in a finite time period by applying standard techniques. Not only do conventional processes fail to tackle wicked