



Washington State
**DEPARTMENT OF
ENTERPRISE SERVICES**

Using Both/And Thinking to Solve Wicked Problems *A Polarity Experience*

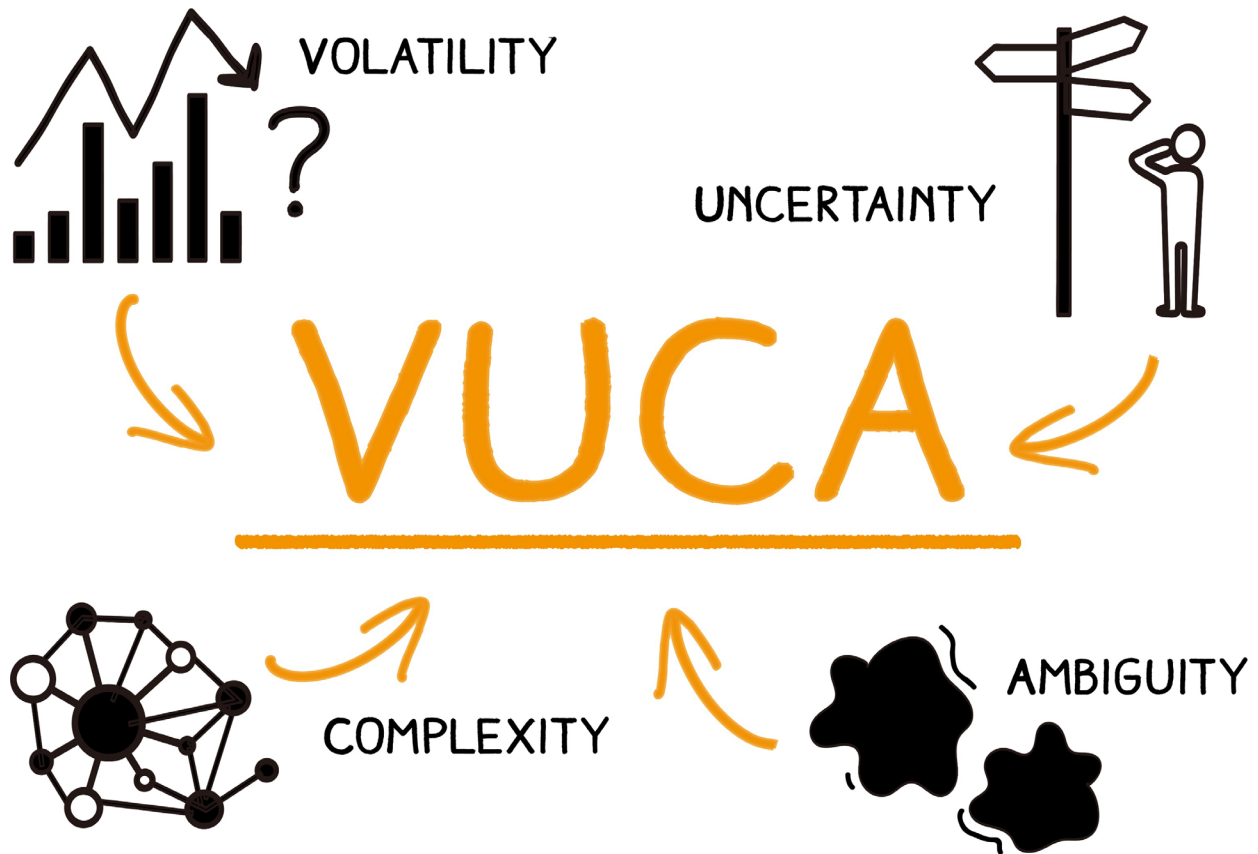
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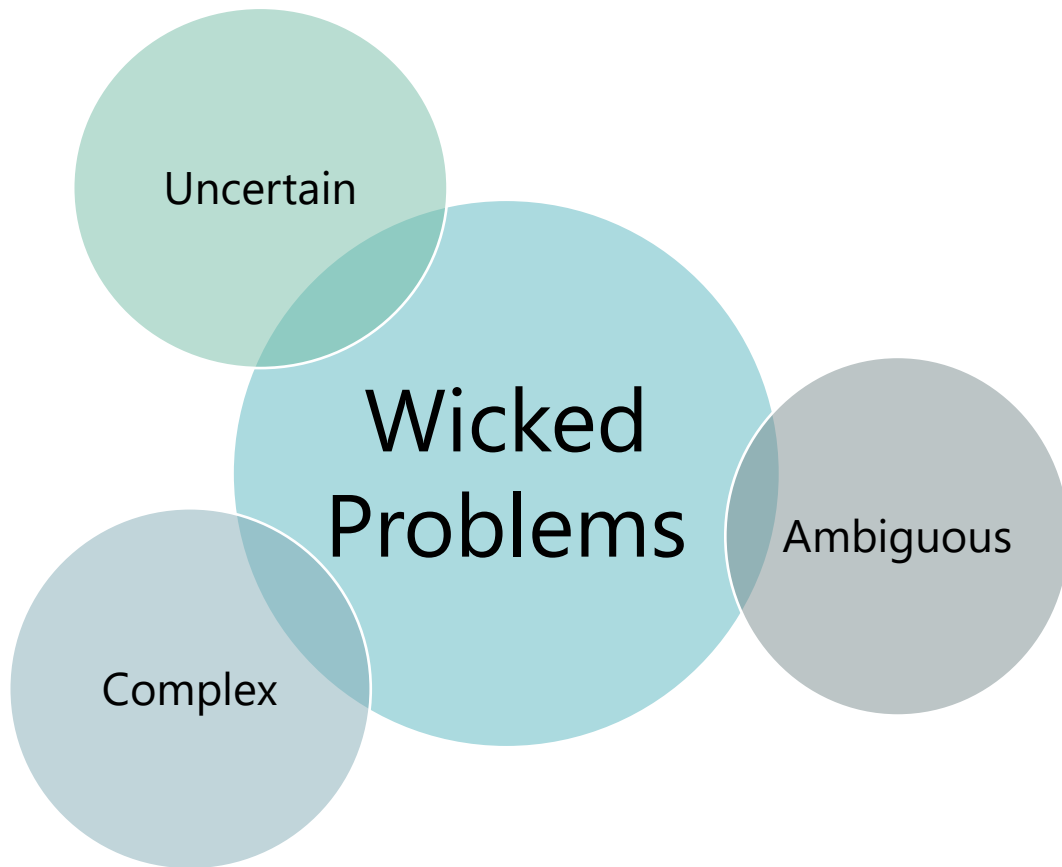
What is a wicked problem? When you hear that phrase, what comes to mind?



We live in a world which is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Technological change has enabled increasingly rapid change. COVID-19 added more unpredictability and the rise in remote work has impacted industries from restaurants to property management.

Within that world, we are presented with problems in need of solutions. Problems are more complex and often impact, and are impacted by, each other. Solutions are difficult to discover and have unknown consequences.

[Managing in a VUCA World: Thriving in Turbulent Times](#)



Also known as *wicked problems* they have main characteristics that make them tricky to solve.

First, the impacts of proposed solutions are uncertain. Because of their interrelationships with other challenges, the impacts of a particular solution cannot be isolated.

Second, they are ambiguous. People have many different points of view and values related to the problem.

Lastly, they are complex. It may be difficult to identify the parameters of the problem or to describe it sufficiently to find a solution.

Three Characteristics of Wicked Problems



Some of the biggest problems we face are wicked problems, such as environmental degradation, financial volatility, poverty, and equitable education.

What contradictory concepts do you see at the heart of these challenges?



Many wicked problems contain two seemingly contradictory alternatives. We find ourselves trying to choose between them, often leading to a swing from pole to pole. Here are some examples:

- Speed or quality?
- Growth or consolidation?
- Short-term or long-term?
- Centralization or decentralization?
- Generalist or specialist?
- Innovation or efficiency?
- Centralization or decentralization?
- Change or stability?
- Responsibility or freedom?

[Are you Facing a Problem or a Polarity?](#)



When we treat opposing concepts as irreconcilable, we get into a tug of war. For example, we might aim for our operations to stay the same for as long as possible – until outside circumstances force us to change. Then we find ourselves needing to overhaul our entire operation and we lose the benefits of the stability we've built. We end up with the negatives of each concept and none of the positives.

What might be the consequences if one of these teams wins? Or if one team drops the rope?



Self-interest VS Common good
Continuity VS Change
Short-term VS Long-term

Here are some competing concepts at the heart of the problem of environmental degradation:

- Economic growth vs. sustainability
- Continuity vs. change
- Short term vs. long term

What other concepts can you identify?



If we're going to build the world we want to see, we need a new paradigm. Take a moment and think about what that world would look like. If you woke up tomorrow and that world was here, what would you see? What would you hear?



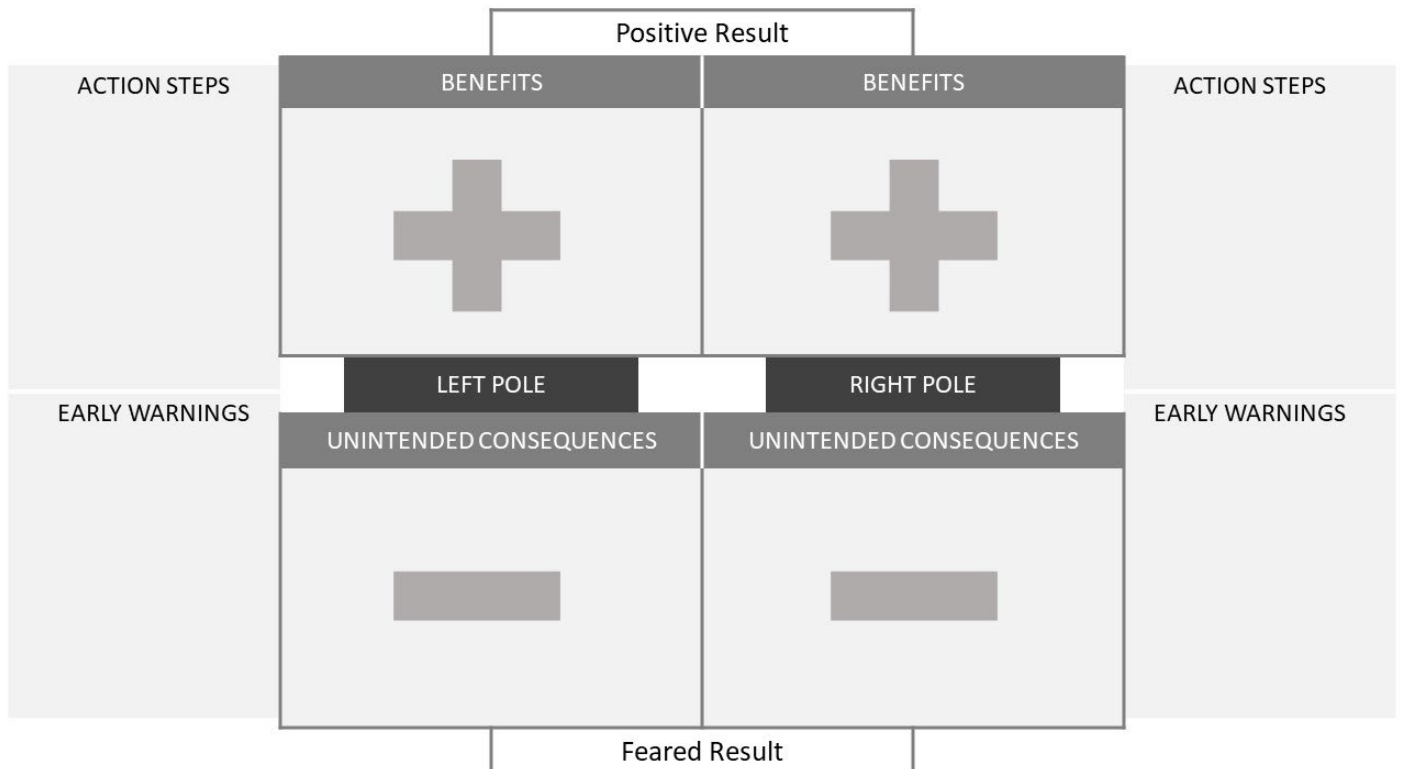
Self-interest *AND* Common good
Continuity *AND* Change
Short-term *AND* Long-term

We can look at the opposites underlying climate degradation through a different lens. Instead of treating them as *competing* we can treat them as *partners*.

By replacing the *OR* with *AND* we recognize them as polarities. Rather than competing, polarities represent concepts that **must** work together. Each pole has both benefits and drawbacks. When we focus only on one pole and exclude the other, we end up with only the drawbacks and none of the benefits. How can we get the benefits of each while minimizing the drawbacks?

It's important to remember that a polarity is one where each side has positive value. For example, the pair 'merciful' and 'cruel' would not be a polarity. Cruelty doesn't have any positives. To turn this into a polarity, we might replace 'cruel' with 'just.'

To experience a polarity for yourself, simply take a breath. 'Inhale' and 'exhale' represent a polarity. You need both to survive.



Originally created by Barry Johnson, of Polarity Partnerships, we begin a polarity map by identifying benefits and unintended consequences of our polarity. Let's take 'activity' and 'rest' as an example, with the goal of running a marathon. What are the **benefits** of activity? Of rest?

Unintended consequences result from an an overfocus on one pole to the exclusion of the other. What would happen if were only active? If you only rested?

Once we've identified the benefits and unintended consequences, we can detail our **action steps**. How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on each pole? What exactly will we do? How will we know we've been successful?

We also need a way to avoid slipping into the negatives of each polarity. We can identify **early** warnings. These are measurable indicators that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of a pole. How would you know if you were being to active or resting too much?

<https://uxmastery.com/the-joys-of-polarity-mapping/>



OUR GOAL:
To run a marathon



REST

Benefits

What are the benefits of focusing on rest?



ACTIVITY

Benefits

What are the benefits of focusing on activity?



REST

Unintended Consequences

What are the unintended consequences of an overfocus on rest (to the exclusion of activity)?



ACTIVITY

Unintended Consequences

What are the unintended consequences of an overfocus on activity (to the exclusion of rest)?



REST

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on the left pole? What? Who? By when? Measures?



ACTIVITY

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on the left pole? What? Who? By when? Measures?



REST

Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know you are getting into the downside of the rest pole?



ACTIVITY

Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know you are getting into the downside of the activity pole?

Positive Result

BENEFITS

BENEFITS

LEFT POLE

RIGHT POLE

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

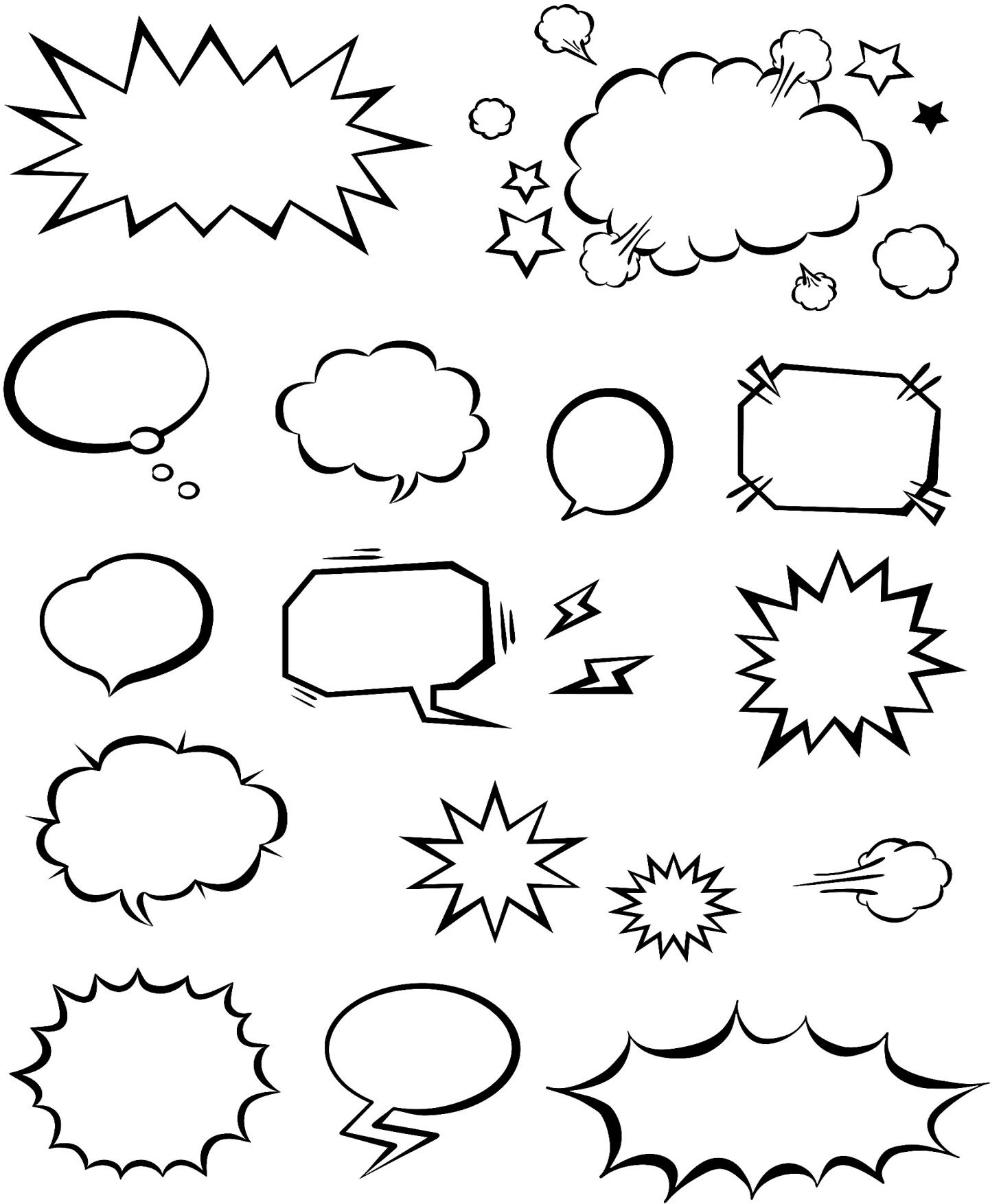
Feared Result

ACTION STEPS

ACTION STEPS

EARLY WARNINGS

EARLY WARNINGS



My Challenge

THANK YOU!



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