

HUMILITY, DELIBERATION, HYPERACTIVISM AND HYPERBOLE: WHY CSR IS BEST VIEWED AS A WICKED PROBLEM

Professor Paul Willis

University of Huddersfield Business School





THE AWARDS
WINNER
2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016

2013
THE AWARDS
AWARD WINNER
UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR





Provenance

- urban planning (Rittel & Webber, 1973)
- other areas of public policy (Roberts 2000)
- applied for the private sector (Conklin, 2006)
- used in leadership studies (Grint, 2005)
- a way of viewing corporate strategy (Camillus, 2008)



So, what makes a problem wicked?

- complex issues which generate uncertainty
- difficult to determine their cause...knotted & tangled
- intractability requires on-going action & commitment
- the search for a solution never stops
- those involved will disagree on the solution



This means...

...strategies for resolution need to be assessed within a **complex social context** characterised by **competing** perspectives, values and goals

...the greater the disagreement amongst stakeholders the more **'wicked'** the problem



Examples

- climate change
- poverty and social inclusion
- drug trafficking
- public health issues, such as obesity

each one of these challenges is shaped by a complex cocktail of social, political, economic and psychological factors which generate dilemmas, tensions & contradictions



CSR as a wicked problem

the pressure on business leaders to serve the short term interests of shareholders to the wider detriment of society, is more acute than ever...

...a view reinforced in recent research by both European central banks (Haldane, 2015) and governments (Kay, 2012).



Key drivers

- quarterly earnings targets & reporting
- generational shift in the nature of shareholding

while in the 1970s the average shareholding was held for six years, today that figure stands at six months (Haldane, 2015)



Lies, damn lies and emissions



Public Relations and the 'taming' of CSR

- CSR is treated as a 'tame' rather than a 'wicked' problem
- 'solved' through technical solutions/corporate initiatives
- PR has played a legitimising role in this process
- CSR literature equates PR with spin & 'glossy' communication

(Blowfield & Murray, 2008; Friedman & Miles, 2006)





THE AWARDS
WINNER
2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016

THE AWARDS 2013
AWARD WINNER
UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR



Where do we go from here?

at the nexus of CSR and 'wicked problems' *should* be a pre-occupation with stakeholder engagement, highlighting the relevance of **both** concepts to PR

paper proposes **three organisational priorities** designed to guide the strategic advice PR leaders might give when tackling the 'wicked problem' of CSR



The three priorities

- a collective organisational humility
- deliberative approaches to stakeholder engagement
- localised innovation



HYPERR





