

# Working Paper Series

▶ Leadership tools for wicked problems



No. 3 May 2014

**John Fien and Sam Wilson**

Swinburne Leadership Institute

## About the Swinburne Leadership Institute

The Swinburne Leadership Institute (SLI) seeks to promote **Leadership for the Greater Good** across government, the private and not-for-profit sectors, and civil society.

Our mission is to enrich the understanding and practice of authentic, ethical and sustainable forms of leadership in Australia.

Leadership for the Greater Good can take many forms. It always needs to be locally relevant and culturally appropriate. However, in all cases it recognises the legitimacy of the individual as citizen, the reality of our shared interests, and the importance of judiciously balancing competing interests in ways that enhance the public good.

The emergence in Australia of a political, business and civil culture that elevates immediate private interests over long-term public interests is a worrying sign that the Greater Good and leadership in its service is insufficiently valued in our society.

It is a social and research priority to understand the meaning and the myriad manifestations of Leadership for the Greater Good so as to enrich the practice of leadership in Australia.

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## **Abstract**

Leadership for the Greater Good is not easy to achieve. Many of the issues leaders face are so complex that they have been called 'wicked problems' – not in the sense of being evil, but because they seem almost intractable. Patience, insight and collaboration are required to resolve wicked problems and, even then, many preferred solutions often lead to unintended consequences that demand new actions that, unfortunately, too often descend in a cycle of quick-fix solutions. Policy failure and crisis management often result, as seen in wicked problem areas such as climate change, resources tax policy, refugee responses, and Indigenous health.

This Working Paper utilises Grint's 2008 model of critical, tame and wicked problems to differentiate between the needs and uses for command, management and leadership approaches to the exercise of authority in working with them. The paper suggests that the increasing complexity of the problems leaders in all sectors of society are facing, together with the increasing volatility and uncertainty of contemporary social, business and political affairs, demand special efforts to develop and enhance leadership for wicked problems. Five tools for working with wicked problems are suggested: collaboration, character, continuity of commitment, competence and communication.

## Introduction

Formerly known as Port Keats, Wadeye is 400km drive southwest of Darwin. It is home to the largest Indigenous communities in Australia and, historically, one of the most troubled.

Mal Brough, a former army officer, was appointed Minister for Indigenous Affairs in January 2006 and spent much of his time in the following months visiting remote towns like Wadeye. It has been reported that he was surprised to visit Wadeye just three months after his swearing-in, and walk into a stand-off (Toohey 2008, p. 21). Confronting each other were two clan-based gangs – the Evil Warriors and the Judas Priest. Earlier that day, according to Adam Shand from *The Bulletin*, and the only journalist travelling with Brough, 150 Evil Warriors,

*... split into three forces, came rampaging through these streets. The melee rolled like a wrecking ball through Wadeye for more than half an hour, ending only when police fired a volley into the air. There's unfinished business here but Brough is not leaving until both sides have heard his message. The time for diplomacy is past; the language is blue and blunt as he addresses the Judas Priests.*

*"I'm the Man from Canberra," he booms. "I control all the [expletive deleted] money that comes in here for Centrelink ... If you boys go over the hill tonight to fight those guys [the Evil Warriors], I will cut your money off. Do you [expletive deleted] well understand what I'm saying?"*

*There are surprised expressions; gang members are looking nervously at their feet. The only white men who speak like this usually wear police uniforms. "But what about them other boys?" says Silvester, a Judas Priest leader, gesturing to the main street which forms Wadeye's line of demarcation.*

*Brough's party of politicians and public servants moves over the ridge to the Evil Warriors' headquarters and the boss repeats his line of bluff. Agreement is finally reached and at least for one night there will be quiet, if not peace, courtesy of an empty threat. Families might come out of hiding, kids can go to school tomorrow and the clinic will treat the chronic diabetics and kidney disease sufferers. (Shand, 2006)*

Was this an act of leadership?

It was certainly taking charge, achieving a goal, a real act of courage and command. But are leadership and command the same? Is the difference just a matter of semantics – or are there substantive differences?

In leadership research and practice, we often try to distinguish between leadership and management. We told the Mal Brough story because it reminds us that command, management and leadership are three different sources of authority or of what Max Weber called 'legitimate power'.

There is a corollary of this insight. If command, management and leadership are legitimate sources of authority, all

are valid ways of solving a problem. However, exactly which will be best to use in different situations will depend upon the context, that is, upon the nature of the particular problem at hand and the circumstances under which it is playing out..

We suspect that Mal Brough made the right choice that day at Wadeye.

However, moving on from command being the appropriate sort of authority to use in one-off, crisis situations, it could be said that:

1. Management is the most appropriate sort of authority to ensure the success of individual organisations, whereas
2. Leadership is needed when we look at the more complex problems faced by organisations in their wider social, cultural, economic and political contexts.

Very often, we call such complex problems 'wicked problems'.

Adam Shand's closing lines about families able to come out of hiding, kids go to school the next day and the clinic to open speak to a terribly wicked problem of which the stand-off that day in Wadeye was just a symptom.

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An account of life in Wadeye is provided by Whittaker (2007) in "A town like Wadeye: It's made news for all the wrong reasons but what's it like living in Australia's biggest indigenous town?" *The Australian*, 3 November, 2007.

## Definitions, definitions

“Wicked problems” is one of the two key phrases in the title of this Working Paper. The other phrase is “Leadership Tools”.

We don’t often think about “tools” – or skills or techniques – in relation to leadership. We tend to think about such practical things as the realm of management. However, we chose the term deliberately, for two reasons. First, it allows us to make a comment on the distinction between leadership and management by way of explaining what the Swinburne Leadership Institute is all about. The second reason flows from this, and is related to those different types of problems that management and leadership – and command – address.

However, before making a distinction between leadership and management, we should note that they are not mutually-exclusive. As a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* said:

*Leadership and management must go hand in hand. They are not the same thing. But they are necessarily linked, and complementary.* (Murray nd)

Nevertheless, they are different. Leadership is about vision, about ethics and about the capacity to motivate and generate commitment. It is the ethical dimension of leadership – the responsibility and integrity – that separates it from the often charismatic but command-and-control intentions and approaches of despots. For this reason, we wouldn’t call Stalin, Hitler or Pol Pot ‘leaders’.

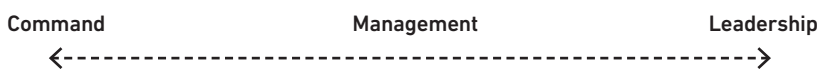
The Swinburne Leadership Institute deliberately focuses on leadership, and especially on how leaders can create visions that serve not just the short-term goals of their organizations but also the longer-term, wider public good – and then catalyze managers and followers to achieve excellence in both.

In this view, management is the process of organizing ‘followers’ in the best possible way to make sure that the desired vision or change is achieved. This involves management responsibilities such as: work flow planning and scheduling, budgeting, structuring and staffing jobs, measuring performance, and quality assurance.

Such responsibilities are crucial. The visionary, ethical work of the leader could not be realised without them – but management is not leadership. As John Kotter (2013) from Harvard University writes:

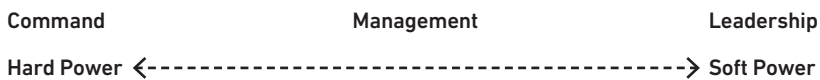
*Leadership is entirely different. It is associated with taking an organization into the future, finding opportunities that are coming at it faster and faster and successfully exploiting those opportunities. Leadership is about vision, about people buying in, about empowerment and, most of all, about producing useful change. . . . Some people still argue that we must replace management with leadership. This is obviously not so: they serve different, yet essential, functions. We need superb management. And we need more superb leadership.*

Returning to Max Weber, we could say that management and leadership respectively sit in the middle and at one end of a continuum of his three types of authority, with command at the other end.



As we saw earlier, command is a form of power that relies upon unquestioned authority. This is what Joseph Nye (2004) called coercive power or 'hard power'. The military and police forces, for example, tend to operate through 'hard' power.

At the opposite end of the continuum, leadership tends to draw upon the 'soft power' of shared values, vision and collaboration. In the middle, management draws upon rational authority, and is applied through systems of reward (e.g. weekly pay, a pat on the back or even a promotion) or threat (e.g. a demotion or dismissal).



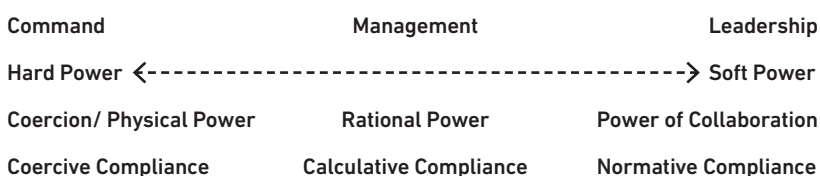
Of course, these are not discrete categories. For example, the military has to 'win hearts and minds' and this can only be through 'soft power' while politicians may need to authorise coercion – hard power – e.g. John Howard's compulsory 'gun buy-back' scheme after the Port Arthur massacres, or Mal Brough that day in Wadeye.

An interesting thing about power, also, is that is not always a one-way, imposed process. In many cases, power is handed or granted upwards: that is, if we do not accept someone's authority, they cannot make us do something, even in a command structure.

Thus, Etzioni (1964) recommends that we should always speak of power in relation to its corollary, compliance – and forms of power in relation to forms of compliance.

Thus, for the three forms of power, he distinguished three forms of compliance: *coercive* compliance related to command; *calculative* compliance was related to 'rational' institutions, such as managed bureaucracies; and *normative* compliance in relation to leadership based upon the soft power of shared values.

We can put these ideas about power and compliance on the command, management and leadership continuum.



Keith Grint from the University of Warwick Business School in the UK made an intuitive leap when he took the continuum of Command, Management and Leadership and their associated forms of power and compliance one step further (Grint 2008). This is the link we made after the Mal Brough story when we said that the nature of the particular problem at hand will determine whether we need a commander, a manager or a leader.

Grint linked the continuum of Command, Management and Leadership and their associated forms of power and compliance with a typology of three types of problems: critical, tame and wicked problems. Thus, he argued that critical problems are often associated with coercive compliance; tame problems with calculative compliance; and wicked problems with normative compliance.

<b>Critical Problems</b>	<b>Tame Problems</b>	<b>Wicked Problems</b>
<b>Command</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
Hard Power ←-----> Soft Power		
<b>Coercion/ Physical Power</b>	<b>Rational Power</b>	<b>Power of Collaboration</b>
<b>Coercive Compliance</b>	<b>Calculative Compliance</b>	<b>Normative Compliance</b>

As depicted in Figure 1, Grint portrays this relationship as a two-way – almost correlational – matrix in which increasing uncertainty surrounding a problem meant that the more it required normative compliance and the collaborative approaches of leadership.

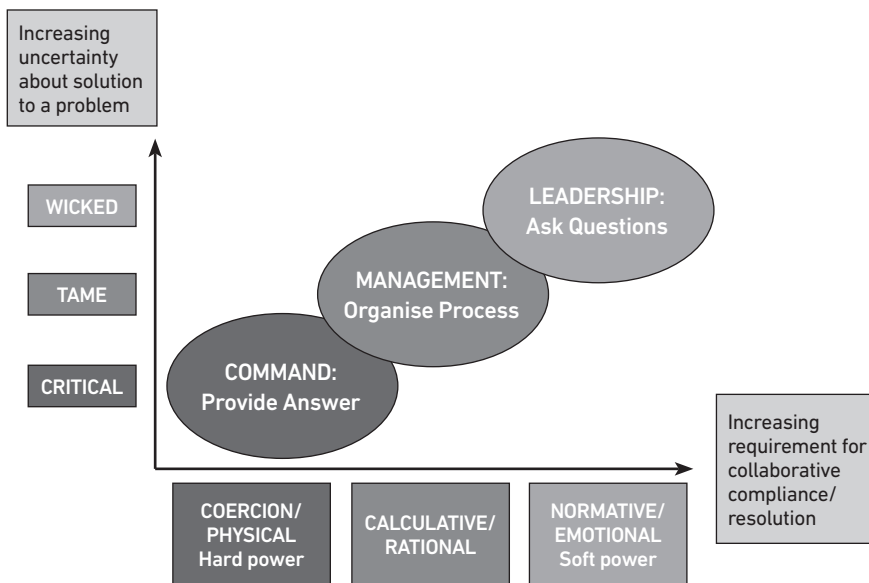


Figure 1: The relationships between types of problems, forms of power and compliance and approaches to authority (Grint 2008, p. 15)



## Notes on critical, tame and wicked problems

*Critical Problems* are those that arise from a crisis of some sort – or in training a team to prevent one. For example, after a natural disaster or a leak from a nuclear reactor, during a riot or an armed attack, the problems are critical and there is often little time for decision-making. There is also little uncertainty about what needs to be done. The Commander has to take the required decisive action to provide the answer to the problem. A crisis is not the time to plan strategy (as in management) or to build collaboration around common values and vision (as in leadership).

Management is best suited to tame problems.

A *tame problem* lacks the urgency of a critical problem and often is a familiar or recurring one. As a result, it can be addressed through a rational, linear, decision making processes. In other words and thus it is associated with Management.

This was the approach to problem solving advocated by F.W. Taylor, the originator of Scientific Management: simply apply science properly and the best solution will naturally emerge. The (scientific) manager's role, therefore, is to provide the appropriate processes to solve the problem.

In general, tame problems present few or none of the difficulties encountered when trying to understand wicked problems. None of this exposition is intended to diminish the importance of tame problem solving. A good many of our problems have been encountered time and time again and it stands to reason that our understanding of them and how to solve them will have developed and evolved over time. Indeed, when knowledge in a domain develops and accumulates to the point that it can be codified, disciplines and their attendant professions emerge.

In consequence, tame problems are typically solved by unilateral acts by experts (e.g., accountants, lawyers, engineers).

The ability of experts to unilaterally solve tame problems means that tame problem solving requires minimal involvement of the actors involved in the problem. For example, all that an accountant needs to successfully perform an audit is a complete record of a company's financial statements. For the most part, she does not need to take into account the perspectives, beliefs, and interests of the actors who are members of the company she is auditing.

The fact that specialist knowledge is typically required to solve tame problems means that non-experts tend to seek and comply with the advice of experts who are ascribed responsibility for solving the problem (i.e., the "calculative" compliance of Etzioni, 1964). Although this requires some work on the part of those who seek help from experts, the technical, ethical, and legal responsibility for defining (e.g., diagnosing) and solving (e.g., treating) the problem falls to the expert.

By contrast, a *wicked problem* such as "Closing the Gap" cannot be solved by simply deferring to the judgment of an authority, such as a government minister or her expert advisors. Instead, the diversity of perspectives and interests of the stakeholders involved means that this problem, and problems like it, cannot be solved unless all the people involved are engaged and actively participate in the problem solving process.

Wicked problems are the antithesis of tame problems. Hence, whereas tame problems are definable, separable, and have solutions that are findable, wicked problems resist easy definition, cannot be cleanly delineated from other problems, and do not possess a correct solution (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

In particular, wicked problems cannot be removed from context or system of which they are a part, solved, and then returned without affecting the system. Also, there is no clear relationship between cause and effect with wicked problems. Indeed, they intractable, and diagnoses of cause, effects and, importantly, solutions are hotly contested. Wicked problems – such as "Closing the Gap" or just one part of it, such as remote Indigenous housing – are simultaneously social, economic, technical, environmental and legal problems and require multi-faceted solutions which, unfortunately are not always obvious and, where they are recognised and planned, often cannot be implemented simultaneously.

As a result, the easiest implemented solutions are often tried first – and very often create new problems to which later, more difficult-to-implement, planned solutions are no longer totally appropriate. That is, many preferred solutions to wicked problems often lead to unintended consequences that demand totally new approaches. Sadly, governments and businesses often lack the time and resources for starting anew through adaptive leadership. Instead, locked in by the path-dependency of the rationales for their first set of policies and actions – and fear of being criticised for changing tack mid-stream – decision makers often drop into a cycle of quick-fix solutions, policy failure and crisis management.

Wicked problems are more than just complicated; they are complex (Grint, 2010). At least three types of complexity are pertinent to understanding the nature of wicked problems: dynamic, social, and generative (Kahane, 2010).

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a view of the natural and social world as one constituted by myriad energetically open, but organisationally closed systems

(Capra, 1996). This has heightened our sensitivity to the diversity of hidden connections that inhere between actors, entities, and phenomena (Capra, 2004), as well as the waves of repercussions that ripple through these systems (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Further, it has become apparent that, in these systems, cause and effect not just far apart in time and space, but are interdependent and, hence, not always amenable to clean disambiguation. Social-ecological systems and the wicked problems encountered within them that possess these characteristics are *dynamically* complex (Kahane, 2010).

It is one thing to be cognisant that dynamically complex systems have these characteristics in an abstract sense, but quite another to formulate a concrete conception of a wicked problem that reflects this understanding. We are notoriously bad at understanding dynamically complex systems, and the wicked problems encountered within them, as a whole.

Indeed, systems in which cause and effect are far apart in space and time constitute what psychologists call a wicked learning environment. Because so much of our learning about causal relationship is based on observing the temporal coupling between events, wicked learning environments *miseducate* our intuitions about how the world and teach precisely the wrong lessons about cause and effect (Hogarth, 2001).

In consequence, in dynamically complex systems, it is difficult for people to develop a shared understanding – technically, a shared mental model – of what the problem is. Further, because mental models involve causal beliefs – that is, beliefs about how one thing leads to another – it is also difficult to develop a shared understanding about how to solve a problem.

Further, unlike tame problems, which yield true or false, or right or wrong answers, the solutions to wicked problems can only be judged as good or bad (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Typically, the actors involved are equally equipped and entitled to judge the proposed solutions to wicked problems, although none has the power to set formal decision rules to determine correctness (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are therefore *socially* complex, which occurs when the actors involved possess a diversity of perspectives and interests (Kahane, 2010).

To the extent that the interests of each actor, or group of actors, are inimical – or perceived as inimical – to the interests of other actors, cooperation recedes and competition escalates. Under such circumstances, the chances of discovering a ‘solution’ that most actors believe is sound or fair declines precipitously.

Finally, problems are *generatively* complex when they are unfamiliar, uncertain, and undetermined, which means that the future state of the system in which a problem is encountered is influenced by present behaviour (Kahane, 2010). The proposition that each interim solution to wicked problems creates waves that reverberate through the system (Rittel & Webber, 1973) exemplifies this.

Whereas experts are typically ascribed responsibility for managing tame problems, and authorities are ascribed responsibility for commanding during crises, responsibility for wicked problems – and the attendant uncertainty – falls to the actors involved (Grint, 2010; Kahane, 2010). Few, perhaps none, of these people will be recognised as possessing problem-specific expertise or authority by other stakeholders, which means that the

social organisation of these actors enacted is unlikely to be patterned by ‘mindless’ compliance with experts or obedience to authorities. Critically, this means that leadership in the context of complex systems and wicked problems – complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008) – requires that the actors involved both influence and enable each other to accept collective responsibility for their collective problems and to act with collective purpose (Grint, 2010).

These processes of enactment may call forth temporary social systems, distributed forms of leadership, and novel patterning of social behaviour specific to the wicked problem at hand. Above all, the actors involved must want to solve the problem because it is important for them to do so; that is, they believe it is in their shared – that is common – interest to jointly solve their problem (i.e., “normative” compliance; Etzioni, 1964).

However, this means that many wicked problems cannot be successfully addressed within the analytical approaches to policy typically favoured within the public sector – working from defining a problem to gathering evidence, consulting with stakeholders, evaluating options, and then deciding and justifying preferred courses of action (Althaus et al 2007). This linear process works with ‘tame’ problems, especially when treated cyclically through the additional steps of policy evaluation and review. However, wicked problems require multidisciplinary insights and cross-departmental contributions as well as structures to promote adaptive leadership to respond to unintended consequences (APSC 2007). A further barrier to addressing wicked problems is the common belief that ‘that the more complex the problem is, the more important it is to follow the linear, analytical approach (p. 11).

## **Collaboration, character, continuity of commitment**

It is time we come to the consideration now of 'leadership tools'. As we noted in the introduction, the term 'tools' is used here as a metaphor for the practical task of trying to successfully address a wicked problem. So what is needed to address wicked problems?

First of all, we should heed Einstein's message that "We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them".

Wicked problems are complex, difficult to define, and ever-changing. Therefore they need to be approached iteratively, in a spirit of experimentation, knowing that today's solution could very well be tomorrow's new problem. Adaptive leadership is thus called for – and this requires wide stakeholder participation. We argued earlier that this was to ensure the 'buy-in' of normative compliance but it also is vital to provide on-going feedback and advice.

To be successful, such collaborative adaptive leadership requires humility, honesty and trust, empathy, suspended judgments, commitment and authentic listening. These are all part of *the* key tool for addressing wicked problems – the character of the leader. It has become fashionable in some aspects of leadership studies to criticise 'trait' theories of leadership (e.g. see Western 2013). However, there is no understating the significance of character in a leader. Collaboration is impossible without it.

Following collaboration and character, the next tool for working with wicked problems is continuity of commitment. Endurance and long-term commitment are necessary to adaptive leadership: the leader must be prepared to stay the distance! As an aside, it could be said that many of the difficulties that Australia has had with developing an effective climate change policy are due to Prime Minister Rudd's walking away from an emission trading scheme in 2009 following the opposition of the Greens.

## **Competence and communication**

There are two more 'C-tools' for working with wicked problems. The first is competence. Leadership is a skillful practice and effective leadership, especially over wicked problems, requires a high degree of proficiency and the willingness to seek advice and guidance. It is also here where leadership must be complemented by good management practices to ensure that the strategies for adaptive, collaborative wicked problem solving that are chosen and planned are implemented comprehensively, efficiently, effectively and most of all, flexibly.

The final 'C-tool' is communication. The complexity of wicked problems and their embeddedness in conflicting values and competing interests mean that any decisions and strategies will please some social groups and upset others. Leaders must be able to communicate in open, honest and persuasive ways to explain the nature and seriousness of the problem at hand, the difficulties in resolving it, the reasons for the chosen actions, an appreciation of the views of those who may be feeling aggrieved by these actions, a promise to keep their implementation under constant review, and a willingness to respond adaptively to issues that will arise.

In conclusion, let us recommend three valuable guides that leaders committed to character, collaboration, long-term commitment, competence and communication might use in order to work in an adaptive way with wicked problems. These are:

1. *Keith Grint's clumsy solutions framework*. This approach to leadership for wicked problems integrates some wonderfully intriguing concepts (such as negative capability, positive deviance and constructive dissent) and is aimed at

promoting creativity, innovation and collaboration in problem solving. This framework is also especially good for its emphasis on asking questions not giving answers, utilizing systems and networks, and catalyzing responses and reflection not reactions (Grint 2008).

2. *Working with Wicked Problems*. This booklet identifies three approaches – 'Ideas' (systems thinking), 'Dialogue' (investing in social relationships), and 'Design' (visualising new worlds) – and five methodologies (Soft Systems

Methodology, Transition Management, Future Scenarios, Design Thinking, and Appreciative Enquiry) (Vandenbroeck 2012).

3. And, of course, the KL Kennisland's animated lecture, *How to Deal with Wicked Problems* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrWbicvDLPw>)

Perhaps, start with the animation for an overview, move onto *Working with Wicked Problems* for the practical tools, and then read Grint's *Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership* for the theory.

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### SLI Working Paper series

The Swinburne Leadership Institute's *Leadership for the Greater Good Working Paper Series* was established in 2014 to disseminate work-in-progress by members, Fellows and associates of the Swinburne Leadership Institute.

Papers in the series include the revised text of presentations at SLI Dialogues (held monthly through the Australian academic year), conference and seminar presentations, research papers, review essays, and other reports.

The series aims to encourage discussion and collaboration on ways of clarifying the meanings of the greater or common good and to enrich the understanding and practice of leadership in its service. Working papers are available at the SLI website: [www.swinburne.edu.au/leadership-institute](http://www.swinburne.edu.au/leadership-institute).

### The Working Papers in this series include:

1. *On leadership, continuity, and the common good*  
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3. *Leadership tools for wicked problems*  
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4. *Chasing the honey bee: Enhancing leadership for sustainability*  
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### About the authors

John Fien is Executive Director of the Swinburne Leadership Institute. He was educated at the University of Queensland (BA, PhD) and the University of London (MA) and, previously, was Professor of Environmental Education at Griffith University and Professor of Sustainability at RMIT. He has been a member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO and led research, policy development and training projects for a number of state and national agencies as well as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNEP, WWF-International, the World Bank and the OECD.

Professor Fien has been awarded 11 grants from the Australian Research Council to investigate wicked problems such as improving natural resource management, applying household environmentalism, leading organizational sustainability programs, and improving remote Indigenous housing. He has also led research and education programs for four Cooperative Research Centres focusing on collaboration and partnerships in coastal and catchment management and community bushfire safety.

His current research continues the focus on leadership and wicked problems and seeks to develop ways of clarifying and enhancing leadership for the greater good, leadership development, and leadership in a greening economy.

Samuel Wilson is a Research Fellow at the Swinburne Leadership Institute. He received his Master of Psychology (industrial/organisational psychology) and PhD (social psychology) from the University of Melbourne. After spending a year as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute at the University of Melbourne researching the adaptive and transformational capacity of rural communities, he joined Monash University as Lecturer in Psychology for two years, before moving to his present role at Swinburne University of Technology.

His empirical and theoretical work has been published in a number of journals, such as *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Social Networks*, *Ecology & Society*, and *European Management Journal*, as well as book chapters in *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a technological society and Global issues and ethical concerns in human enhancement technologies* and a book *The Moonlight Effect: Debunking business myths to improve wellbeing*.

His research examines conceptions of humanness in the Anthropocene and in the debate about human enhancement technologies, respectively, as well as the causes and consequences of self-continuity, especially as it relates to leadership for the public good.

## Leadership for the Greater Good – Values

The Swinburne Leadership Institute's conception of **Leadership for the Greater Good** is grounded in the values and principles embedded in the culture and aspirations of Swinburne University, including:

**Innovation and creativity** in solving real-world problems.

**Integrity, honesty and the highest ethical standards** in everything we do.

**Accountability** to ourselves, each other, and the communities we serve through transparency and evidence-based decision making.

**Celebration of diversity** and respect the strength that difference creates.

**Teamwork and collaboration** through mutual respect, open communication and the sharing of responsibility.

**Sustainability** at personal, group, national and planetary scales.

## ▶ FURTHER INFORMATION

(03) 9214 5717  
PO Box 218 Hawthorn VIC 3122  
leadershipinstitute@swin.edu.au  
swinburne.edu.au/leadership-institute

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