

# WICKED PROBLEMS

CHAPTER

1

*When we open to the reality of what is, even if we don't like what is, it helps almost immediately.*

—Kristin Neff, *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*

At the University of Berkeley in 1973, a phrase was coined by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber. The phrase was “Wicked Problems.” Rittel and Webber were not talking about the Wicked Witch of the West, nor were they discussing any grand form of “wickedness” in a moral or religious sense. No, they were just two clever social planning theorists (it’s a thing). They used the phrase in an article called “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” (1973).

Its fun imagining a cozy, 1970s-era office somewhere on the campus of Berkeley where two theorists (probably pals) are chatting or sparring and eventually doing what all good planners do: admitting and accepting how big and bad the problem they’re facing actually is. We also love how perfectly the word *wicked* fits for those problems that feel bigger and badder than most.

Anyway, according to Rittel and Webber, a Wicked Problem defies any standard attempt to find a solution because it is a symptom or result of multiple, contingent, and conflicting issues. (Think about the problems related to the environment, social and economic inequity, or terrorism, etc.) Due to their complexity, Wicked Problems require the work of collaborative teams of people with a range of expertise over space and time.

What Rittel and Webber could never have imagined was just how frequently educators and their teams would encounter Wicked

Problems on a daily basis. Let's take inventory of just a few of the Wicked Problems educators face:

- Childhood Trauma
- Parental Involvement (or Lack Thereof)
- Funding (or Lack Thereof)
- Classroom Management
- Paperwork
- Balancing Diverse Needs of Students
- Pressure From School Administrators
- Lack of Time for Planning
- Bullying
- Ongoing Support

That's just to name a few. Now, we're going to do something uncomfortable at best and emotionally triggering at worst (we're sorry—it is part of this whole process, though). We're going to drill down and identify just how "wicked" some of the aforementioned problems truly are. We promise, we won't drill down on *all* of them because, well, we don't want to completely overwhelm you at the outset. However, spending time staring down our Wicked Problems is necessary in our journey toward optimism.

Okay, deep breath in and out. Here we go:

- *Childhood Trauma.* The occurrence of traumatic events in the lives of children is not only a relevant and prescient obstacle educators face, it is relatively widespread. Depending on how various traumatic experiences are defined, 8–12% of American youth have experienced at least one sexual assault; 9–19% have experienced physical abuse by a caregiver or physical assault; 38–70% have witnessed serious community violence; one in 10 has witnessed serious violence between caregivers; one in five has lost a family member or friend to homicide; 9% have experienced Internet-assisted victimization; and 20–25% have been exposed to a natural or man-made disaster (Saunders & Adams, 2014). These types of events are the epitome of wicked. As a result, many school-age children come to school carrying the weight of these events and are asked to learn and behave at high levels in spite of their situations.
- *Parental Involvement.* Why aren't more parents involved in their child's education? Just ask 'em! Most parents are facing their own set of Wicked Problems ranging all the way from Maslowian needs (e.g., shelter, food, clothing) to the day-to-day management of parenting in the modern world (e.g., social

media, information overload, etc.). We have been working with parents through school-based parent workshops for the past 20 years. From our vantage point, parents are struggling. It's hard out there for many parents. The bar for parenting is "did we survive the day?" If parents can answer "yes" to that question, they believe they're doing fairly well.

- *Funding.* Why aren't public schools more adequately funded? Public schools are a frequent battlefield for our country's current sociopolitical warfare. Whether we like it or not, funding for public schools is an issue related to taxation. Taxes are one of the quintessential thorns in all our political sides. Once politics become involved, common sense tends to evaporate. Regardless of where one lands on a political continuum, politics nowadays feels more and more toxic and less solutions-oriented. In other words, funding for public schools is the definition of a Wicked Problem: It's based on multiple, contingent, and conflicting issues, none of which are focused on what is ideal for our learners and our educators.
- *Classroom Management.* The capacity for a classroom teacher to manage a large class size (20–30 students) can be developed over time (Hattie, 2006). What is much more difficult to develop over time is facilitating universal instructional design to effectively reach such large groups of heterogeneous learners (Scott, 2018). When the unique needs of diverse learners are not reached, behavior problems arise. These behavior problems place a burden on teachers and school administration alike. Time utilized on addressing student behavior in schools is typically reactionary (as opposed to preventive). In this approach, parents are contacted and they, too, become reactionary and defensive. This defensiveness erodes the quality of home-school communication and trust. The antidote to this dilemma requires school systems to adopt preventive systems that should include proactive parent outreach with an emphasis on building a trusting relationship with parents. True to "Wicked Problem form," this antidote is anything but simple for most schools.
- *Paperwork.* Unpaid work that is often unacknowledged is considered "invisible labor." Modern educators are not only tasked with improving achievement for diverse learners, but they are also tasked with collecting a substantial amount of data to do so. This data collection, data literacy, analysis, interpretation, and progress monitoring may be considered invisible labor. Too often, we presume "the job" of an educator is to stand in front of a classroom and "teach." This is definitely not the only role of a modern-day educator and certainly nowhere near the norm for special educators. The invisible labor of keeping everything documented (aka

paperwork) is a task mandated by both federal and state Departments of Education, yet it is rarely (if ever) acknowledged within the primary role of an educator.

- *Balancing the Unique Needs of Students.* While this problem is related to classroom management, it is actually its own problem. The public school policy in the United States is one of compulsory education. In other words, school-age kids must be enrolled in some sort of education (e.g., public, private, home, or a combination of all of them). When U.S. education policy is compulsory, educators are tasked with developing quality instruction for all learners—every child who steps foot in the school. It won't take you long to review your local school district's achievement data to identify students requiring unique needs. Upon review of your local school district's achievement data, you will notice a bell curve. Those students with unique needs may be found on either tail of the bell curve (those well below the normal curve and those well above the normal curve). Once you've identified those unique needs, go ahead and ask your building administrator or curriculum specialist how easily they can meet the needs of those unique learners. What you will find is that they are struggling to meet their needs on a regular basis. This creates an entire subgroup of students whose needs are never met in the instructional setting.

Feeling overwhelmed yet? We could go on and on, and if we did, we'd all leave this chapter a little (or perhaps a lot) defeated. That's what Wicked Problems do. They defeat us from the get-go. Too often, our teams, our parents, our students (and yes, even ourselves) are defeated before we even start. It is not uncommon for this defeatist feeling to lead to what we refer to as the "blame and shame game." In this game, there are no winners, just losers. Our biggest loss? Optimism.

## **The Blame and Shame Game**

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One of the most common human reactions to Wicked Problems is frustration. Over the years, we've learned that frustration is like a hornet: It stings, and it's constantly looking for a place to nest. When frustration stings, it's painful, annoying, and even worrisome. After the sting, it looks for a place "to nest." The "nesting" of our frustration results in blaming. Most of the time, this all starts out by attempting to blame others (e.g., "Damn kids!" "Damn parents!" "Damn admin!" "Damn coworkers!" etc.). When that doesn't eliminate our frustration, we end up blaming ourselves (e.g., "I'm no good at this!" "I'm worthless!" etc.). When that doesn't eliminate our frustration, we begin to experience

shame. Now, if frustration was a hornet, shame would be the toxic, dirty venom emanating from the sting. Once stung, the “shame venom” often triggers the following chain reaction:

1. Withdrawal from others. Which leads to . . .
2. Diminished self-compassion. Which leads to . . .
3. We become socially and professionally avoidant. Which leads to . . .
4. We become prone to lash out when given (any) task or direction. Which leads to . . .
5. Guilt for lashing out. Which leads to . . .
6. More withdrawal. Which leads to . . .
7. More diminished self-compassion. Which leads to . . .
8. Increased reclusivity or avoidance. Which leads to . . .
9. Increased anger and depressive mood states. Which leads to . . .
10. A downward spiral of steps 1–9.

In any human endeavor, it is critical that we help ourselves and our teammates avoid the blame and shame game at all costs. The minute any one of us begins to play that game, situations deteriorate quickly. Avoiding the blame and shame game requires one basic step: validating the frustration. Remember, frustration is like a hornet, and it is obsessed with finding a nest. When we validate the frustration, it nests and rests in our awareness. It’s okay to be frustrated in our work—even expected! Once we’ve validated the frustration, we must help ourselves and our teammates accept it. We must accept the existence of Wicked Problems *and* the frustration they cause. Now, if this were easy to do, there’d be no need to write this book or develop professional learning in this area. The fact is, this type of acceptance is not only challenging, but it can also be radical in nature. Radical means all the way, complete and total. It’s about accepting our hearts and minds and the hearts and minds of our teams completely. Our understanding of the efficacy of this process comes from the pioneering work of Dr. Marsha Linehan and her colleagues from the University of Washington.

## Radical Acceptance

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Back in the 1980s, Dr. Linehan was one of those rare, courageous researchers who accepted the tragedy and plight of individuals engaging in suicidal behaviors and endeavored to help by taking action. Dr. Linehan and her team recruited the most

severe, highly suicidal patients from local area hospitals (Linehan et al., 1991). One of the preliminary findings of their early work was that such high-risk and complex mental health patients found typical “problem-solving” models of support as extremely invalidating to their circumstances. Through what must have been an extremely nerve-racking trial and error form of research (literally life and death stuff), Linehan developed an approach based on the following (2018):

1. A methodology of change and a methodology of acceptance;
2. Spaciousness of the therapist’s mind to “dance” with movement, speed, and flow;
3. Radical Acceptance by the therapist of the client as is, with slow and episodic rate of progress and the constant risk of relapse;
4. Therapist humility to see the transactional nature of the enterprise. This led to a synthesis of both acceptance and change-accepting clients.

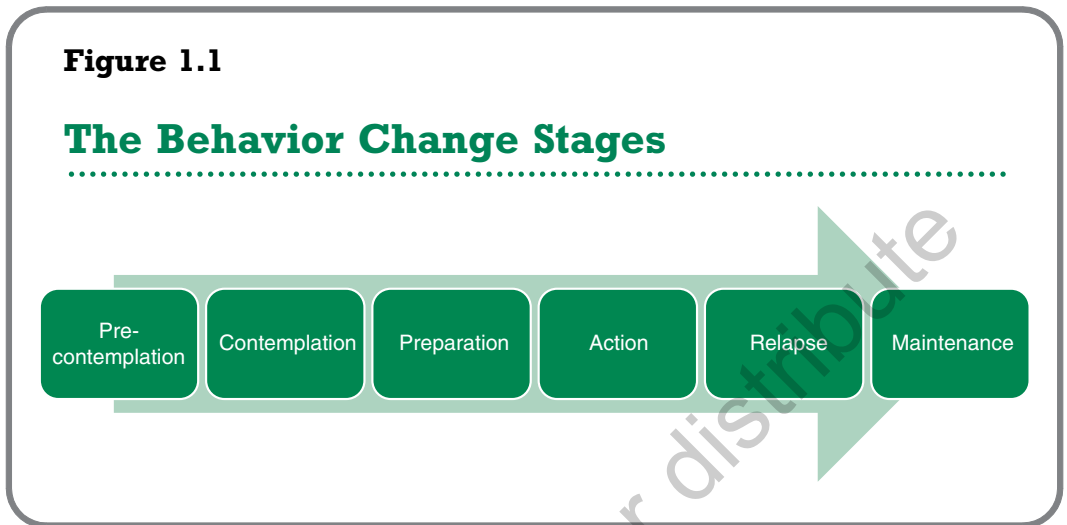
While the scope of this book and our professional learning are not to train you and your teams across the comprehensive tools of Linehan’s approach (known as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, or “DBT”), it is worth exploring the most applicable components to our goals: working with (and sometimes managing) teams tasked with addressing dangerous and challenging student behavior in the school setting. We’re going to explore these four areas and apply them to our goals as helping teams improve outcomes for children exhibiting dangerous and challenging misbehavior.

## **A Methodology of Change and a Methodology of Acceptance: The Nudge**

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If you’re reading this, there’s a good chance you’re in the behavior change business. If you’re in the behavior change business, you know that we don’t really change behavior at all. We nudge others toward change. Whom do we nudge? Both the students with whom we work and the adults in their lives. “The Nudge” only works by understanding where we’re starting from. Back in the 1970s, authors Prochaska and DiClemente examined the experiences of smokers who quit on their own. They found that people quit smoking only if they were ready to do so. Allow us to repeat this finding for emphasis: People only changed their behavior when they were ready to do so. In other

words, people don't change their behaviors quickly and decisively. Rather, the change occurs continuously through a cyclical process. [Figure 1.1](#) illustrates this model:



In its simplest form, our job in helping change behavior requires two actions from us:

- *Action #1.* Evaluate situational awareness. We can accomplish this evaluation by asking questions to our target student and our teammates. In a developmentally appropriate way, an example question we can ask our target student is: “Hey! I can tell you were upset. You completely destroyed the classroom by throwing chairs and tearing down posters. What did you think this would accomplish?” A sample question we can ask our teammates: “Wow! Did you see the classroom? It was completely destroyed. Do you think this behavior can be fixed quickly? Why or why not?” Based on their respective answers, we can create an informal rating of their awareness of the situation (e.g., high-level awareness, mid-level awareness, or low-level awareness). High levels of awareness typically mean we can make aggressive goals toward behavior change. Low levels of awareness typically mean we should make more conservative goals toward behavior change.
- *Action # 2.* Once we’ve determined the level of awareness from our student and our team, the job is to set realistic goals based on where the child (and the team) fall on the Stage Change Model. In Appendix A, we’ve included sample goals you can use based on where the target student (and their team) fall on the Stage Change Model.

# The Art of the Nudge: Motivational Interviewing

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Once we've identified where our target student and our team fall on the Behavior Stage Change Model, we can utilize concrete steps to nudge them toward their goal. These concrete (and evidence-based) steps may be found in the practice of Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI was identified and introduced as an effective “nudger” of human behavior by Dr. William Miller in the 1980s. Dr. Miller worked with problematic drinkers whose lives were at risk due to their chronic consumption of alcohol. In a 2005 meta-analysis, it was concluded that, “We can therefore argue that motivational interviewing is not limited in any way to counseling of small group of selected clients but can be used in the treatment of a broader area of needs that to some extent are influenced by behavior” (2005).

It has been our experience that this process of (a) identifying where students and teammates are on the Behavior Stage Change Model and then (b) nudging them toward their goals via Motivational Interviewing are absolutely essential to supporting a methodology of change. Unfortunately, many school teams (particularly teams in special education) are not privy to these steps and instead work solely from an Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) framework. In our work across many of the most challenging student situations across the United States, ABA frameworks (on their own) have not proven sufficient to address meaningful behavior change. In the book *Happy Kids Don't Punch You in the Face*, we cover how to braid the ABA framework with motivational interviewing, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response-to-Intervention (RTI), and Applications of Positive Psychology.

Additionally, in Appendix B, we have provided you with a “slide deck” of the most critical aspects of Motivational Interviewing. However, for your review and consideration, we've summarized the steps in [Tables 1.1 and 1.2](#).

**Table 1.1**

## The Five Commitments of Motivational Interviewing

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- Commit to Expressing Empathy With Students and Teammates
- Commit to Helping the Student and Teammates Develop Discrepancy Based on Their Current Situation
- Commit to Resistance to Change of Students and Teammates
- Commit to Support Self-Efficacy of Students and Teammates
- Commit to Developing Autonomy of Students and Teammates



**Table 1.2**

## The Five Techniques of Motivational Interviewing

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- Understand the Difference Between Close-ended Versus Open-ended Questions
- Understand Reflective Listening
- Understand the Utility of Affirmations
- Understand Summary Statements
- Understand the Evocation of Change Talk Versus Importance and Ability Rulers

## Training Our Minds to Dance With the Movement, Speed, and Flow of Behavior

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When Dr. Linehan references “the spaciousness of the therapist to dance with the movement, speed, and flow of their clients’ thoughts, feelings, and behavior,” we believe she’s talking about psychological flexibility. What is psychological flexibility, and how does it help us facilitate change in our target students and teammates? While we could mine Linehan’s work for the answer, we think it’s slightly more fun to quote martial arts master Bruce Lee. He understood psychological flexibility so well, he could describe it poetically:

*Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.*

This concept of bending (but not breaking) is the key to Radical Acceptance. Water does not argue it is a bottle when it is in a cup. It simply adjusts and molds to the environment it finds itself in. While doctors in clinical psychology (Linehan) and martial arts gurus (Lee) may have a fundamental understanding of psychological flexibility, how do we achieve

such levels of understanding? In Appendix C, we have created an exercise for you and your team to practice psychological flexibility. Like all good things, it comes from practice. We can promise you that engaging a mindset of flexibility will be a critical component for yourself to radically accept Wicked Problems, for your teams to accept Wicked Problems, and for your students to accept Wicked Problems.

## Radically Accepting Our Students and Our Teams as They Are

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This next section is going to be based on a few assumptions, assumptions we can make if you have read and comprehended the preceding chapter up to this point:

- *Assumption # 1.* You have identified the Wicked Problems you, your team, and the target student are facing.
- *Assumption # 2.* You have acknowledged how frustrating those problems truly are and have accepted your own personal frustration, the frustration of your team, and the frustration of the child.
- *Assumption # 3.* You have deliberately refused to blame others or yourself for these problems, thereby deliberately avoiding any shameful feelings or thoughts.
- *Assumption # 4.* You are deliberately seeking tools to help you plan and coordinate how to help in spite of the Wicked Problems, the quality of your team, and the interest in behavior change from the target student.

If we can safely rest upon these four assumptions, you have begun to peel the first layer of the onion that is Radical Acceptance. This is no small accomplishment, and will continue to be one of the primary anchors to your success and well-being as you continue your work to support teammates and students.

We now must leverage this complete and total acceptance of our circumstances to impact meaningful change and improvements for all parties affected by the student's misbehavior. Our complete and total acceptance of what is (not what we wish was) is the charging station for our optimistic batteries. Radical Acceptance is the energy we will

draw from to charge our optimism. When we accept what truly is and what is truly happening, our attitudes and beliefs can be grounded in reality and therefore more actionable. What aspects are “actionable”? We are activating a belief—an optimistic belief—that our target student and our team can improve. We are activating an understanding of how moments of frustration and despair are very real, but also very temporary. In essence, we are activating optimism as a strategy—not just an attitude. With these actions, we can begin to dive deeper into the applications of working with teams faced with dangerous and challenging misbehavior. But first, we must round out Dr. Linehan’s advice for surviving the turmoil of Wicked Problems. . . .

## Practitioner Humility

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As practicing school psychologists and self-diagnosed “know-it-alls,” one attribute we are continually attempting to manage is our levels of humility on a team. If we’re being brutally honest, it has gotten more difficult the longer we are identified as “specialists” or “experts.” Fortunately, we’ve been able to work on teams that feel comfortable shutting down our inflated egos. We have no problem sharing how our own personal “Stop-It-Ben” button can be pressed when the focus is brought back to the child and the team. (There will be more insight on team dynamics and managing ourselves as quality teammates in Chapter 3. We’ve made the mistakes, so you don’t have to! Yay!)

On that note, each of us on the team should work to accept that neither improvements nor setbacks are entirely our responsibility. Certainly, we are responsible for a tiny bit of the successes and setbacks, but there are simply too many cogs in the machines and systems we operate in to isolate a singular driver or source. This is a team sport. We will simply add, subtract, or provide neutral contributions to team endeavors based on the level of our awareness to (a) the situation and (b) the goals we’re aiming for. We will only ever be responsible/accountable for our individual levels of optimism. As you may have already surmised, successful outcomes are entirely based on how well our teams (and ourselves) understand the situation we’re facing and the goals we’re making. Once we understand those two variables, the application of optimism is the fuel that will get us to the places we need to go.

## Transactional Nature of This Work

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The final insight we can glean from the groundbreaking work of Dr. Linehan is surrendering ourselves to the transactional nature of this work. What is this work? It's human work, therefore it is difficult, challenging, messy work. Working with children and teammates from all different and unique backgrounds is terribly inconvenient. Yet this work is actually very definable and understandable under a transactional model. What is this transactional model? Think of it like a basic math problem:

$$\text{Emotional Sensitivity} + \text{Invalidating Environment} = \text{Emotional Dysregulation}$$

Where does emotional sensitivity come from? DNA and family trees.

Where do invalidating environments exist? Anywhere the individual with emotional sensitivity doesn't "fit" or "belong."

What is emotional dysregulation? It is the whacky, scary, dangerous, alarming, kicking, spitting, running away, property destruction, scratching, shouting, crying behaviors we see in school-age children every day.

This process is understood as transactional. The transaction between an emotionally sensitive person and an invalidating environment results in emotional dysregulation. In contrast, the transaction between personally managing emotional sensitivities within a validating environment results in emotional regulation and wellness.

Where the former transaction results in stress and burnout for our teams, the latter results in increased optimism and accomplishment. I think we all know which transaction we want to help our teams aim for. We are all 100% capable of reaching these results. How? We've already started. When we radically accept the Wicked Problems as they are, avoid blaming and judgment, and activate (a) situational awareness and (b) realistic goal setting, we've begun our journey into optimistic teaming. The best part? We've only just begun! Let's keep moving to gain a deeper understanding of the evidence and research supporting optimism as a strategy in teams.

# TOOLS SECTION

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE GOALS BASED ON BEHAVIOR CHANGE STAGE THEORY

APPENDIX B: MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING SLIDE DECK

APPENDIX C: PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY EXERCISE

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