

Trust and Judgement in Decision-Making

The thoughts in this article draw from the author's work as a sounding-board for people with leadership responsibilities in the private and public sectors, with military and religious organisations, social enterprise and not-for-profit groups on five continents.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Saint Benedict wrote guidelines for people living and working together in the messy, disordered, unpredictable realm that is real life. These guidelines are traditionally referred to as "The Rule of Saint Benedict." However, the root meaning of the Latin and Greek words translated as "rule" is *trellis*. Saint Benedict was not promulgating rules for living; he was establishing a framework on which a life can grow. While a branch of a plant climbing a trellis cannot go in any direction it wants, you cannot know in advance just which way it will go. The plant is finding its own path, within a structure. The space in which it moves is open, though not without boundaries.¹

In any organization not staffed entirely by robots, every individual working in that organization must exercise judgement, finding their own path within the structure of their work. Unlike past experience or previously-acquired knowledge, judgement is the decision-making capability that comes into play when we do not, and cannot, *know* what to do.

Because judgement is what we rely on in unfamiliar, volatile and ambiguous situations, the exercise of judgement is fraught with uncertainty. It is therefore the responsibility of leaders to build and maintain a framework, a trellis, that can support and cultivate confidence in the judgement of those who work to them, and crucially, confidence in their own judgement.

Such frameworks may not seem necessary when life is moving smoothly and problems are "tame". A "tame problem" is one that may be complicated, but has likely occurred before – a combination of experience, knowledge and judgement can be applied to resolve it. "Wicked problems", on the other hand, are the ill-defined, ill-structured, real-life decisions that have incomplete, contradictory and changing requirements.² In these situations, experience cannot inform and knowledge is incomplete. Therefore it is when we face wicked problems – when we do not and cannot know what to do – that we are forced to rely most upon our judgement.

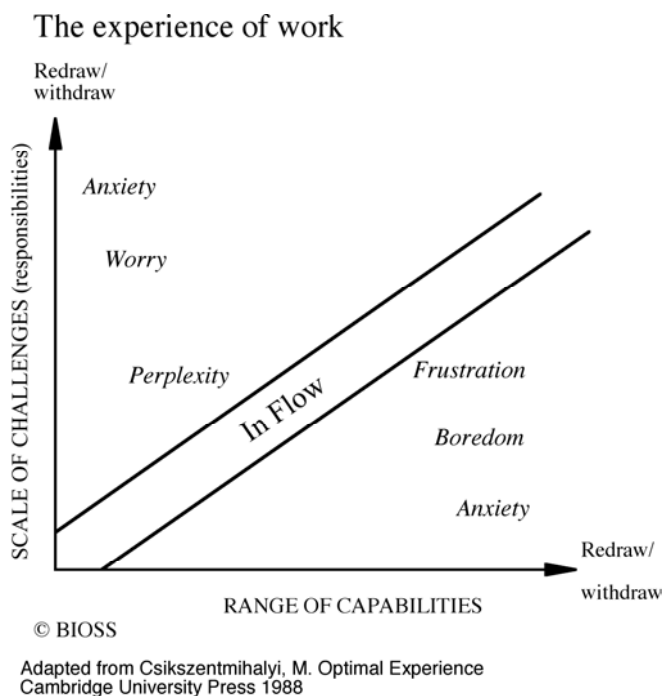
¹ Henry, Patrick, *Benedict's Dharma*, 2001

² Rittel, H. & Webber, M. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 1973, 4, 155–69.

The Trellis as Tripod

When people use their judgement they feel both exhilarated and unsure. Unsure because they cannot put into words what it is they are taking into account, and do not know that what they are doing will achieve the desired result – only time will tell³. Exhilarated because using judgement brings something of themselves to bear, something *only* they can bring.

People all over the world and at all levels in organisations describe a sense of well-being when their capacity for judgement matches the challenges they face. They speak of feeling energised, competent, confident in their capacity to make decisions. This sense of trust in their judgement is also called being “*in flow*.”⁴



By providing a framework for people to use their judgement wisely, leaders not only create conditions for the successful engagement with “wicked problems” faced by an organisation, they also enhance personal well-being in the members of that organisation.

One way to think of this trellis, this framework for enhancing confidence in judgement, is as a tripod which the leader builds from three complementary and equally vital activities: tasking, trusting and tending.

³ Jaques. E. Work, Creativity and Work, 1990, International Universities Press Inc.

⁴ M. Csikszentmihalyi, The Psychology of Optimal Experience. 1990. Harper and Row.

Tasking

Leaders are dependent on the good judgement of the people they lead, a dependence known as *felt accountability*. Delegating tasks to others gives rise to a constant tension between control and trust. Leaders manage this tension through *tasking*, a process that enables the leader to define the limits for judgement and establish criteria for review, by:

- sharing intention
- agreeing objectives and resources and
- agreeing a completion time.

*Prescriptive trust*⁵ refers to how far people are (and feel they are) trusted to obey the rules that limit their discretion. Leaders send signals about prescriptive trust through the way they design systems, processes and targets, and people respond by staying within the prescribed limits and applying their expertise and knowledge. The CEO of a global company describes tasking as “ensuring people understand the framework within which they have freedom to act.”

Where prescriptive trust is high, people see limits as external standards that give the relief of knowing when they have done well and what they can improve. Where prescriptive trust is depleted, there is a temptation for leaders to add rules, controls and measures, at considerable cost, yet often with limited gain in quality or value.

Trusting

Once tasking has established the objectives of the work, the second element of the tripod, *trusting*, comes into play. More specifically defined as *discretionary trust*, this refers to how far people are (and feel they are) trusted to use their own initiative and judgement in forwarding their work.

Leaders send signals about discretionary trust through shared values and purpose, and people respond by using their judgement in the light of those values. Depleted discretionary trust leads to decline in respect for observance of the prescriptive element of the work, and/or manipulation of measures and definitions – for example, reclassifying a trolley as a bed in order to meet a target for hospitals to get patients off trolleys and into beds within a certain number of hours.

⁵ A. Fox. *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations*. 1974. Faber and Faber. See also E. Jaques *ibid*.

People are very clear about the differences between prescriptive and discretionary trust – as one civil servant put it, “prescriptive trust is trust without space, and discretionary trust is trust with space.”

When he was head of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit Michael Barber made the point that targets and prescription (tasking) are effective in lifting service and delivery from poor to mediocre, but that people need to be *trusted* to use their judgement if services are to go from mediocre to excellent.

Tending

The third element, *tending*, is the process of maintaining the balance of trust and control. Tending is the work that keeps things working, that keeps the organisation “in flow.” It monitors without crowding, is vigilant in attending to both prescriptive and discretionary trust, and in continuously communicating a sense of purpose and relevance that enables people to use their judgement to make adjustments in specific cases on their own initiative. Throughout history, tending has been the work of slaves, women and great leaders.

Tending requires that a leader stay alert and responsive to constantly changing circumstances, but sometimes it can also benefit from actively changing those circumstances. The leader must have the courage to “nudge”. Nudging, or provoking change, requires courage because it adds to the prevailing uncertainty, and there is no guarantee that it will yield relevant information or comfortable knowledge.

One leader uses the image of a kaleidoscope to describe facing ambiguity that is dynamic rather than static, where the variables are not only in constant motion, but continually change in their order of importance. This degree of ambiguity and chaos means not only that there is a need to stop this ever-varying kaleidoscope to try to identify patterns, but also that common interpretation between individuals is problematic. I often have the experience of looking down the kaleidoscope and seeking to see patterns that others simply cannot see. And sometimes I have to give the kaleidoscope a nudge to shift the pieces so as to develop a slightly new pattern. I then have to understand not only the power to nudge but also the journey through the pattern that I can turn into a roadmap for others.

Another leader takes the kaleidoscope image further:

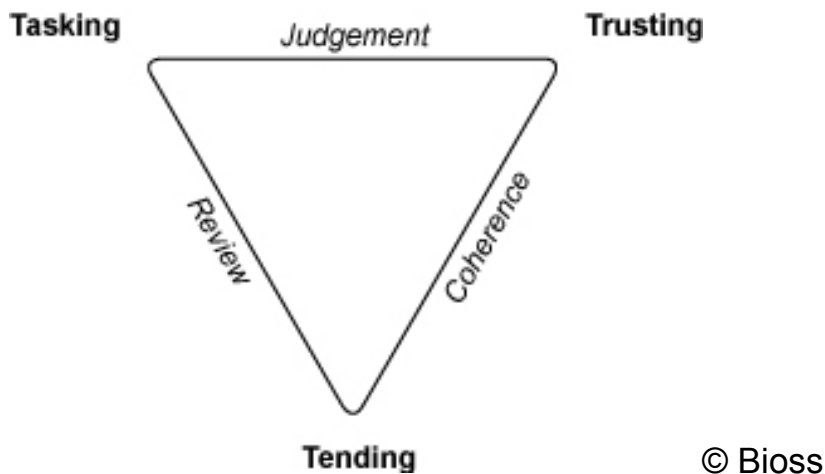
For me the essence of the analogy is that the pattern is *not* static. I never look for the freeze-frame but rather the patterns created by the pieces in motion. Nudging helps me to gain some understanding of what is, and will continue to be, a dynamic environment by *causing* something dynamic to happen and thus testing my preconceptions. Nudging is important as it can provoke some of the shadows of surprises to reveal themselves, and sometimes that shadow of the surprise is all that is needed to create the mask, shadow or template for the nature of the beast that we are trying to see.

Balancing the Tripod

Tasking, trusting, tending. On the face of it, this sounds like common sense, and it is. But as one CEO put it, the tripod “sounds simple but is far from easy. The art lies in the appropriate balance of the three. I know that if I tell people both what to do and how to do it, they feel I don’t trust them either to stay within the framework we agreed or to use their judgement. Then we all lose out on that vital blend, the choice of which objectives to go for with the local know-how of how that can be achieved in their particular circumstances.”

On the other hand, too little specification of what to do can leave people uncertain. As another leader observed, “The last thing I want is to be ‘managerialist’ or for people to feel I am micromanaging, so I say as little as possible. But I do know that it means people are not only unsure, but even seem worried that they do not know what is expected of them. So they keep coming back to check and in the end we all get irritable.”

As a third leader said, “The whole point about the tripod is that it is dynamic. And so – using an engineering analogy – I can adjust the relative tensions, be alert to whether more tending is needed, or whether things in a particular department have got a bit loose, a bit vague, and could do with some clearer tasking. Or I reflect and realize someone is on too short a leash and needs to know they are trusted in a bit more space.”



High and Low Trust

Leaders are aware that trusting the judgement of those who work to them can be a double-edged sword. The benefits of increased discretion can be lost if it is not exercised in the light of shared values and purpose.

As Mulgan⁶ points out, “Without trust it is impossible to delegate, and much of the business of government involves principals commissioning agents to do things for them, and then trying to track which promises have been kept and who has turned out to be trustworthy.”

While felt accountability causes some leaders to see a policy of high trust in their people’s judgement as hazardous, low trust can be even more so. Low trust reduces the capacity to address “wicked problems” while increasing financial, transaction and human costs. This is because people who do not feel trusted are inclined to:

- put their energy into suspicious watchfulness rather than productive work;
- calculate costs and benefits carefully;
- seek to minimise dependence on each other’s discretion by spinning webs of rules around each other;
- suspect and invoke sanctions against ill will or default on obligations;
- assume that failures or inadequacies result from negligence; and

⁶ G. Mulgan. 2006. Good and Bad Power. Allen Lane.

- distort communications
- become rule-bound and lose their motivation to take responsibility
- become passive and lose their creativity.

In short, people in a low-trust environment bring all the attendant costs of a win/lose, zero-sum approach to every encounter.

When wicked problems abound and trust is low, good leaders resist the temptation to:

- prescribe ever more tightly by imposing rules and other forms of control through routines, targets and schedules;
- assume that failures or inadequacies result from negligence;
- increase inspection and control out of fear that such discretion as people do have will be used in their own interests rather than those of the organisation.

High trust, as well as creating conditions for engaging with wicked problems, controls financial, transaction and human costs. This is because people:

- feel trusted to use their judgement in the interests of the organisation;
- give each other the benefit of the doubt;
- see inadequacies as honest misjudgements;
- communicate freely and honestly;
- offer spontaneous support without narrowly calculating the cost or anticipating any short-term reciprocation; and
- resolve disagreements through problem-solving or working through.

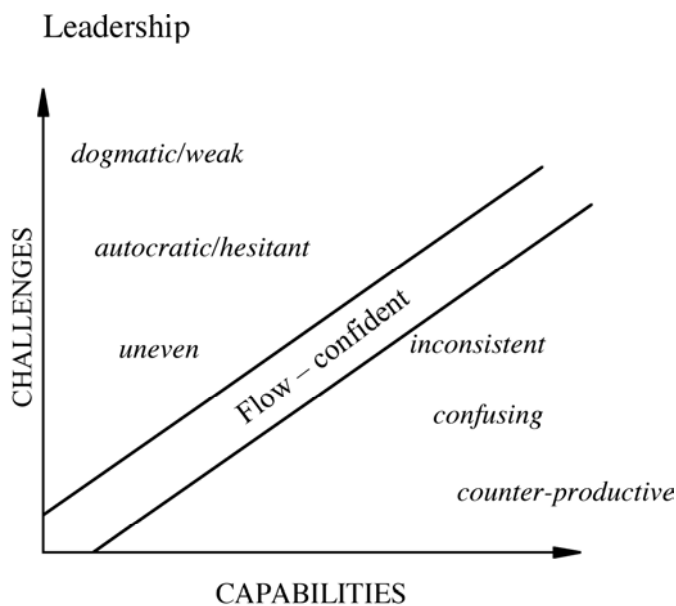
Tasking, trusting and tending enable the leader to create a working atmosphere of high trust, in the confidence that this trust will not be abused, but will in fact pay significant dividends in the form of enhanced judgement throughout the organisation.

The Leader's Tripod

A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow, his or her light. A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and move and have their being.....a leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him or herself.....lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.⁷

Because leaders use their judgement in ways that impact on many other people and institutions, they have a particular duty of care for their confidence in their own judgment – a responsibility to recognise when they are not “in flow”, and to take action to restore this balance for the benefit of the whole.

A leader overwhelmed by challenges first becomes perplexed, then worried and eventually anxious; his or her leadership becomes uneven, autocratic and dogmatic, or hesitant and weak. Alternatively, a leader underwhelmed by challenges may decide to use his or her “spare capacity” to lead and develop others, but may also become frustrated, apathetic or subversive, their leadership becoming inconsistent, confused and counterproductive.



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One way for a leader to strengthen confidence in their own judgement is to use the three T's of the tripod – tasking, trusting and tending – in relation to the self.

⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *Leading From Within*. Indiana Office for Campus Ministry, 1990.

Tasking

Tasking the self is an important discipline, an expression of the ancient wisdom “know thyself” – strengths, vulnerabilities, graces and thirsts. In particularly difficult circumstances, leaders who find themselves out of flow are often tempted to choose shortcuts, diversions or substitutes over the exercise of genuine judgement. A vital element of tasking the self is becoming aware of such temptations in order to resist them.

Common temptations for leaders include:

- treating a wicked problem as tame, or vice versa;
- continuously gathering facts in the hope that there is some way of processing them that will decide the issue;
- trying to freeze chaotic motion in order to reduce pace and variety and thus solving yesterday’s problems;
- ignoring inconvenient facts;
- denying uncomfortable knowledge;
- relying on lessons learned in obsolete circumstances (“fatal baggage”) to deal with a new and unrelated situation;
- allowing premature foreclosure.

Trusting

Trusting one's inner resources is at the heart of being in flow. As a senior manager put it, “When you are in flow, you are confident. When you are out of flow, you become a searcher. You search everywhere and you cannot trust what comes to you. So you try to delay and avoid decisions.”

Just as the abovementioned temptations undermine judgement, there are other, more positive techniques leaders can use to enhance their confidence in their own judgement:

- *Discern the situation.* As one banker described it, “Discerning is seeing what might not be there, grasping and comprehending what is obscure, and deliberately navigating that shaded area between the view of things as expressed in models, and the infinitely more complex and changing world.”⁸
- *Attend to sparseness.* In mathematics, sparse areas are those where there is little or no apparent connection between input and output. As one CEO with a mathematical background observed, where “there is a need to discern which inputs impact on which outputs and in what magnitude, it is not so much extrapolating between dots as choosing which dots are important to start with... One way of looking at sparseness is with an overexposed picture – lots of white but very little image. Before taking the picture, the image in the viewfinder was balanced and clear – however something was lost in the translation to the photographic paper. The detail is somewhere in the background but cannot be seen, however most people can recognize the image without a perfect exposure, and are able to establish the context reasonably accurately by letting their brain fill it in! Another way of turning the lack of information around is to imagine it was the sparseness that you focused on, by turning the image into a negative – the dark shadows would now be bright and white, and the familiar highlights would become dark and less prominent, and maybe we could see things differently.”
- *Make the most of surprise.* Leaders cannot tell what *will* happen, but they are able to imagine what *can*. There is a significant difference between probability and possibility, a distinction originally made by the economist George Shackle.⁹ While *probability* assumes a list of suggested outcomes that must be finite and known, *possibility* acknowledges the inherent uncertainty of wicked problems. Uncertainty need not necessarily be seen as risk – a leader who embraces the possibility of surprise will be stronger than one who tries to force knowability.

Tending

Tending the self is the core of living in and with turbulence, uncertainty, impermanence. This practice could be walking, listening to music, keeping pigeons, learning a new skill, sport.

⁸ P. Caron. Discernment Beyond The Church. In Discerning Together. The Way Supplement 1996

⁹ See Unknowledge and Choice in Economics. ed S. F. Frowen. 1990

But as soon as there are demands we are likely not to find the time for those activities that sustain us. Grappling with wicked problems, especially, can tempt us to deny the inevitability of uncertainty – we find ourselves dwelling in the past, fearing or even leaping to the future, rather than “being here now,” living in the “dimension of the present moment”¹⁰ and accepting its transience.

Tending is so often neglected partly because, for the self it can so readily seem “selfish”, while tending others or a team, department or organisation does not seem like real work. As someone put it, “It’s like the plumbing, no one knows it’s there until it breaks down.”

The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus described the duty of care to tend the self: “Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful; he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also....never cease chiseling your statue.”¹¹

Restoring Trust in Judgement

One leader who had come from outside to a top role in an organization quickly saw that not only was there a need to engage with several wicked problems, but also that many such problems were being addressed as if they were tame, and so apparent solutions were unraveling. He also saw a legacy of low discretionary trust, a decline in respect for observing prescribed limits, and manipulation of measures to meet targets.

As he reflected on how best to restore trust, he decided to give attention first to his immediate team on the premise that as they changed, so they would be able to restore trust for those who worked to them.

So where to start? Well, tasking and trusting will give me the ‘in’ to reinforce, extend and elaborate both on the boundaries and on the choices they can use to achieve what we all want... and we must shift the culture from blame to learning. So, if I make sure people are aware of the framework within which they have freedom to act, there will be clarity and evidence as the starting point for review rather than just vague expectations and that will feel fairer.

¹⁰ M. Holub 1990. The Dimension of the Present Moment. Faber and Faber.

¹¹ Plotinus translated by A. H. Armstrong. 1966. Harvard University Press.

I will make a start by asking each member of my team what they need from me by way of time, approachability, working together to agree milestones, listening to their ideas when they disagree, reviewing in ways that motivate and help to learn.

I know the first steps must be small as I gradually increase their freedom to act so that each of them becomes more comfortable with using their initiative and then I can let further off the leash, and so on. But I also know that it is all too tempting to do something dramatic and in the present state of depleted trust, that might startle, but would not have the lasting effect the department needs.

So, must do the low key tending and keep systems, practices and people heading in the right direction at the right pace through what's going to be a turbulent few months. If people feel tended they will be readier to learn and improve. And if this all works, we will be able to monitor activities without interfering, compare what we are doing with the best external standards, and keep a close eye on costs as well as on how we're being perceived.

But I know this is not going to be easy; I'll be tempted to tighten the framework if something seems to be too slow, or even not as I think it should be, and that will undermine the fragile emerging trust. Will need constant reminders....

Further Thoughts from Leaders

From a CEO of a global company based In Europe: "More and more I find that I can dismiss the numerous optimistic business models and NPV calculations in favour of the best view from the team not of all the upsides and synergies of a project but rather a list of the unknowns and downsides. My feeling is that we can be happy when synergies arrive but we can be out of business when a surprise from the sparse region of the unknown comes and kills a project...."

From the CEO of a British not-for-profit organisation: "Thinking more about the temptations, I would be inclined to add the need to resist the temptation to pretend, consciously or sub-consciously, that actually 'I am not the *real* leader. The minister is – the board is – all I can do is advise – the outcome is not my fault.' And to resist focusing on problem definition or diagnosis as though progress can only be made when 'the problem' is accurately defined – and then defining it again and again because the diagnosis has not told you what to do – or because you can't get everyone to agree with that diagnosis. And I would add to the temptation to deny uncomfortable knowledge that of not looking for/not asking for facts which one senses will be irritating and/or will get in the way."

From a retired CEO of US-based global company, now a consultant: “One of the things I have found most helpful on complex projects (the things closest to wicked problems) was a team meal and a communal de-briefing at the end of day. Everyone from my CEO and the Exec VPs to the Assistant VP was given a very few minutes (and a safe space) to tell the group what they found most important, most troubling and what they most wanted those in other disciplines to know. This way we got terrific cross-pollination of ideas and a better collaboration on projects than the same people normally exhibited in their day jobs. It also spurred better creativity. Plus the ‘breaking of bread’ together is one of the most basic ways to form an adaptive community of trust – it triggers and responds to something in our social genes.”

Conclusion

While tame problems may sometimes be very complicated, they are nevertheless comfortably resolvable. By contrast, if a wicked problem does have a solution, it is likely to be messy. It will resist analogies with problems dealt with in the past, so experience will give insufficient insight. It will confound analysis, so sheer deduction cannot show the way. Wicked problems demand the exercise of judgement, the deepest and most ineffable form of knowledge.

The Greeks had a word for it. Well, Aristotle did. He called this kind of judgement *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is the practical wisdom of what to do and how to do it, at the right time and with the right people, with the right mix of persuasion and challenge, and the right sense of what to leave unsaid and undone.

Organisations facing turbulence and uncertainty cannot survive without such “practical wisdom.” Given the proper trellis for support, trustworthy judgement, in both leaders and the people who work to them, will flourish, thrive and become leaders themselves.

Gillian Stamp. Bloss. January 2007.