

SONJA WEKEMA & MATTHIAS SCHRAMM

LEADING IN A WICKED WORLD



HOW TO UNRAVEL, EXPLORE
& MAKE SUSTAINABLE IMPACT



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**THE OTHER
PERSPECTIVE**

Introduction

In a world that often feels like a complex puzzle, Leading in a Wicked World emerges as a guiding light, taking you on a journey through the intricate labyrinth of organisational dynamics. It's a journey that might seem whimsical at times like Alice in Wonderland, enchanting like The Wizard of Oz, or simply fantastic and almost impossible to believe, like M.C. Escher's mind-bending illusions.



This book is not a conventional guide. See it as a collection of riddles, with each chapter inviting you to dive deeper into the unknown. While you are reading this you might wonder at times if you've fallen down the rabbit hole or entered a technicoloured fantasy land. But fear not. Within these pages, you are being encouraged to keep following the path, wherever it leads, because this journey is not about finding all the answers at your destination. It's about keeping an open, sharp mind while facing uncertainty on the road ahead.

Leading in a Wicked World offers something profound. It provides you with the tools to navigate the enigmatic terrain of modern organisations with confidence. It also encourages you not to fear complexity but to embrace it, for it is within chaos that true leadership emerges.

Leadership in today's world is no easy task. One of the biggest challenges facing leaders is the relentless pace of change, pushing you to continually adapt. The world is becoming increasingly complex, what we call "Wicked," with a multitude of interconnected issues and problems that are difficult to understand and even harder to solve. Add to that the growing complexity of today's organisations – with more people, departments, and stakeholders involved than ever before, including the community at large, leaders must artfully navigate rough, uncharted waters while getting everyone on board to work towards a common goal.

In that sense, *Leading in a Wicked World* offers you a new way of looking at organisations, seeing them as social entities whose purpose is to flourish. We see this book as a much needed, original perspective and are offering you our vision about how organisations can thrive in a chaotic world filled with Wicked problems.

Importantly, we believe that leading in the Wicked World must be done with sustainability in mind for we have arrived at a time when the fate of individuals, society, organisations, and the planet are all intertwined. As the world becomes increasingly connected, the actions organisations take fall under ever greater scrutiny and leaders are now being asked to consider the impact their decisions make on society and the environment at large. This is why our book provides you with the knowledge and practical strategies to benefit not only your personal leadership, but also your organisation and the greater collective.

In a nutshell, leadership in the Wicked World is a tricky and complex task. You need to be adaptable, adept at dealing with complexity, able to take bold action while remaining ethical, and as M.C. Escher (1898-1972) once said of his artwork, you must also "retain a sense of wonder." With this book, we encourage you to assess and revise your leadership style by looking at your personal scripts, bringing your whole self to your organisation and therefore, inspiring those you manage to do the same.

This book offers you a

j o u r n e y
of self-discovery

and
collaborative

growth,

one of wisdom gained from

fearless

self-reflection

... and it begins on page **01!**



How this book came about

This story begins in a magical place where powerful kings and queens once lived, and in the year 2020, a time full of wicked twists and turns.

We met during the final year studying for our Master at Hult Ashridge Centre for Executive Coaching. Located just north of London, Ashridge House is a beautiful estate built by the 7th Earl of Bridgewater that became a university in the late 20th century. Once a royal residence to Henry VIII, its elegant architecture and landscaped gardens are truly magical – parts of the Harry Potter movies were meant to be filmed here, although the film was inspired by the Main Hall's grand staircase.

The story gets its start in one of the university's classrooms. Both of us were seeking answers to questions we had gathered over the years as organisational development practitioners, leaders, and coaches. We quickly discovered that we were drawn to this place

for similar reasons: we were both supporting clients and leaders in making sense of a world that was moving faster than ever as their organisations struggled to keep up the pace of change in their respective ecosystems. We also sought to support them in reflecting on their personal leadership style.

We saw that the only true constant our clients faced was the fact that rapid change, uncertain environments, and volatile markets and societal developments were ubiquitous and going to stay. All these elements lingered in the dark like phantom creatures from a fairy tale which were hard to grasp, but whose shadows were frightening. It felt like the world we knew from the past – or at least the world we thought we knew – had gone wicked and unpredictably weird.

We knew then that we wanted to write a guide to explore this new world, knowing we can't avoid or withdraw from it because it's never going away. Ironically, only a month after we met at Ashridge, the global COVID pandemic hit, bringing with it suffering, social distancing, and isolation. But we decided to continue our quest, despite only meeting once in person.

In writing this book, our tour of the Wicked World led us into the deeper realms of psychology because business thrives on understanding people. We also learned that no true guide can comprehensively explore the Wicked World because that world changes continually, so there's no magic compass that will keep you on track, and no guarantee that reading this book will grant you unlimited wisdom.

Still, we invite you to join and experience this world with us, setting off on an adventure that requires courage, patience, and curiosity. Having gone through it ourselves, we promise you're in for quite a ride!

Happy reading!

Sonja Wekema & Matthias Schramm

CHAPTER ONE

The Wicked World Dilemma

This chapter covers the rapid developments and complexities we face in the world around us. We illustrate how we've ended up in a complex, uncertain situation and how to start navigating the complicated web of contemporary challenges. We provide guidance on how to deal with the unknown and insights to understand the chapters to come.

CHAPTER TWO

Your Personal Script

This chapter emphasises the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness, particularly from your perspective as a leader. When you understand yourself – how you tick, your preferences, behaviours, assumptions, and more – you will live a better life, forging deep connections with those around you. You will be encouraged to actively examine your personal patterns, learning more about yourself so you can apply it going forward.

CHAPTER THREE

The Org Script

We introduce you to innovative approaches to understand organisations within their respective contexts. This approach challenges traditional perspectives on organisational structures and invites you to embrace alternative viewpoints, the unfamiliar, and collaborative efforts and empowerment. The chapter empowers you to take responsibility for your own understanding and decisions without imposing expert opinions. It's a perspective you can also apply to your organisation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Embracing Different Perspectives

This chapter builds on the previous ones and introduces a third, a systemic perspective. We introduce suggestions for reflection, which you can use after finishing the book, empowering you to take further steps in your personal and professional life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dance with the Wicked World

This chapter is full of food for thought, inspiration, and suggestions for you to consider before continuing your journey alone. We offer some exciting perspectives for making a positive impact in the Wicked World.

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With ***Leading in a Wicked World***, we aim to leave all our readers transformed and give you the confidence and inspiration to make your life, organisation, and the world a better place. Starting today!

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“

***Toto, I have a feeling,
we're not in Kansas
anymore.”***

Dorothy, The Wizard of Oz





CHAPTER
ONE

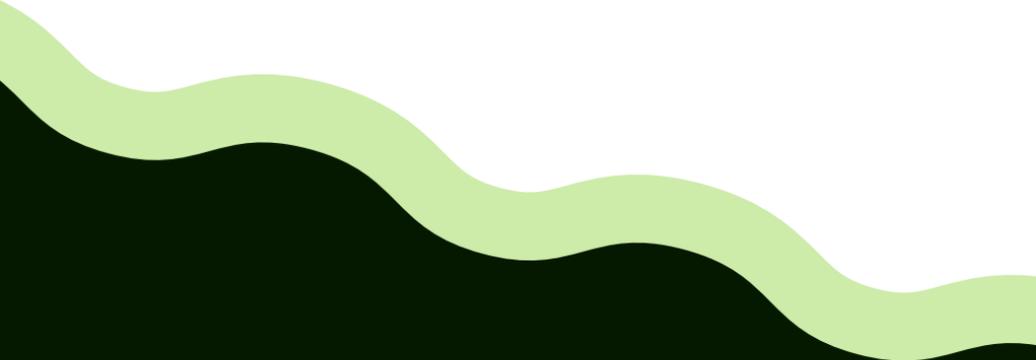
THE WICKED WORLD DILEMMA



In the world of stories and fairy tales, there's a fantastic place we call The Wicked World. Entering it feels like how Dorothy felt when she was sucked into a tornado in The Wizard of Oz, or when Alice accidentally tumbled down a mysterious rabbit hole into Wonderland. Imagine being in their shoes: you have no idea where you're going or what's going to happen next.

The Wicked World certainly isn't like the one you're used to experiencing every day. It's a place where strange, unexpected things happen, where logic and reason occasionally apply, and where reality twists in sudden and unpredictable ways. In this new world, what you once knew as good or bad has been turned on its head, making you question what's real. But the longer you stay, you start understanding how imagination is the only limit.

In our careers as consultants, coaches, executives, and entrepreneurs, we have often found ourselves in situations that felt like we were straddling two different worlds. In one, we would be attending boardroom meetings, discussing serious business opportunities and strategic business plans, sensing that we were on the brink of something significant. In the other world, we would be knee-deep in massive transformation projects, dealing with numerous change management considerations and actively discussing this with leaders and employees. Yet we felt like we were operating in a different reality. Whenever that happened, we realised this wasn't Wonderland but somewhere else – what we started calling the Wicked World.



The Wicked World is a place full of chaos, rapid transformation, and dizzying, never-ending change. This world has become so complicated that trying to predict how people or systems will react is like trying to do a puzzle that contains too many constantly shifting pieces – it's just impossible to put it all together. Analysis and professional discussions only go so far when you are dealing with countless fluctuating factors.

And that's the Wicked World dilemma: it is a situation that doesn't correspond to finding one right solution because there are thousands of them at any given time. In the Wicked World, what we once understood and knew – based on the past, its patterns, and our own observations – no longer applies. It's an outmoded paradigm. So how do you move forward and make decisions, then?

This is the journey you are embarking on now, so let's get started!

Changing landscape of the 21st Century

Changes are all around us, happening at a pace like never before. We are witnessing remarkable technological advancements, from the rise of AI to the potential of quantum computing, the multidisciplinary field involving computer science, physics, and mathematics. There are also the transformative capabilities of New Genomic Techniques, which enables us to precisely influence DNA, making humans the masters of their own biology. It's incredible to think that nearly 99 percent of all scientists who have ever lived on Earth are alive today, contributing to an explosion of insights and innovations that surpasses what humanity has seen in the past 10,000 years.

This rapid pace of change extends to our economic landscape, with times of uncertainty marked by unprecedented situations like negative interest rates, which defies the traditional economic paradigms we built our world upon.

On the political front, we find ourselves grappling with new challenges, including conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, and a resurgence of polarisation and populism that many believed we overcame in the previous century. Then there's the widespread use of the Internet and social media, which have blurred the line between fact and opinion because unlike traditional media, there's no vetting process requiring content producers to mention what's fact and what's not. Consequently, many people regard facts as opinions or accept opinions as fact, leading to further confusion. All this is a reminder that the uncertainty and doubts we experience daily are not isolated incidents but rather an integral part of the modern world. This is like the realisation Neo had in *The Matrix*: there's more to reality than meets the eye. What we perceive and think is real could just be a fragile façade.



In our quest to maintain the illusion of a pristine Potemkin village, we have popularised the concept “a VUCA world,” which is an environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Briefly for those who aren’t familiar with it, a Potemkin village is a metaphorical term used to describe an elaborate façade which masks an ugly reality and your underlying problems. The term comes from Grigory Potemkin, the Russian military leader and statesman who supposedly erected fake villages (designed to look prosperous and thriving) to impress Empress Catherine II during her visit to Crimea in the late 18th century.

By structuring the world and seeing it as VUCA, we have attempted to cope with chaos, but really, we have created a flimsy façade. This reinforces the false idea that we can describe, compartmentalise, and understand what is inherently uncertain, complex, and ambiguous – i.e. life itself.

As we explore the Wicked World in this chapter, looking at its implications for leaders and organisations, we want to emphasise there’s no magical “Drink Me” potion that will transport you to Wonderland because you are already in it! Likewise, we can’t offer you a blue pill that returns you to a simpler reality, the illusionary one you thought you understood, like Neo took in *The Matrix*. What we are offering you is the opportunity to see the Wicked World as it really is, encouraging you to befriend the Mad Hatter and any white rabbits you meet on the way, and teaching you how to decipher the intricacies of the Matrix.

If you’re still with us, let’s look longer at what VUCA means before immersing ourselves in the Wicked World.

Could you add a little VUCA, please?

A few years ago, on a grey and rainy afternoon in a spacious Berlin meeting room, we found ourselves engaged in a tech company strategy workshop. It was the second day of discussions, and we had already dedicated considerable time gathering the leadership team's opinions. Now, it was decision-making time about the path ahead and we turned to a well-known consultancy firm. Their presentation centred on the concept of VUCA, highlighting the need for an agile approach to planning and organising.

The firm stressed the importance of adaptability and maintaining a proactive attitude towards change, underlining how change would be the only constant. By the end of the day, the board reached a consensus, deciding they would focus on being more agile, eliminate hierarchy, reduce complexity (e.g. by adopting an adaptive approach to planning), and prepare employees and leaders for constant change. People left the meeting with a sense of accomplishment. But looking back, we realised we had spent two days discussing how to run faster without a clear destination. Instead of truly engaging in dialogue, creating a safe space to admit what we knew and didn't, and what we were frightened of, the team got stuck repeatedly talking about buzzwords like "agile". While the results sounded good, it felt hollow and superficial.

Does this situation sound familiar to you? VUCA discussions are ubiquitous, yet they contribute little to actual strategic decision-making. They result in a proliferation of buzzwords around agility and adaptiveness. Consultants base their recommendations on it, HR leaders highlight the skills and traits necessary to excel in a VUCA environment, and discussions inevitably combine VUCA with suggestions to organise and become more agile, using agile project management techniques. All this effort targets objectives that, according to VUCA, are slippery and challenging to define in the first place.

But what does VUCA mean and how does it differ from the Wicked World?

How the military sees the world

The term VUCA was first coined by the U.S. military in the 1990^s to describe the complex and unpredictable conditions that arose after the end of the Cold War. Initially meant to capture the uncertain nature of the global strategic environment, the term gradually extended beyond the military and found its way into the business world.

The early 2000^s witnessed the widespread adoption of VUCA by business leaders facing the challenges of globalisation, technological advances, and market disruption. VUCA was seen as a suitable framework for encapsulating these difficulties, encouraging a flexible approach to strategic planning and decision-making.

Over time, VUCA has become a guiding principle for leaders and management experts navigating the complexities of the modern business landscape. It offers a framework for understanding and addressing the types of issues organisations confront, driving them to develop strategies to make them better equipped to thrive in an unpredictable world.



Leaders in the Wicked World must deal with disruptive change, change that transcends the very boundaries of your organisations. Unlike problems in the natural sciences, which are typically definable and distinct, disruptive change defies definition. As a result, you cannot find any singular "solution" for these challenges, which are never fully resolved nor ever will be. Instead, the best you can do is to keep resolving, re-evaluating and reassessing issues repeatedly. Once you have identified a re-solution (or new solution), gaining acceptance for it will involve bringing diverse decision makers to the table. This new approach highlights the social aspects of our constructed reality and psychology, where the perception and acceptance of change plays a pivotal role in navigating the Wicked World.

Ironically, the very first ideas you present about taking on radically new strategies, restructuring or reorganisation will be perceived as a threat from within. These adaptations grounded in new paradigms are so severe, that they fundamentally disrupt the organisation (or we might say the "system"). Or as the famous Austrian-American family therapist, psychologist, communication theorist, and philosopher Paul Watzlawick (2011) described it: the (re)solution becomes the problem.



To sum things up

A Wicked World full of wicked problems calls you to think, feel and act in new ways, taking risks, trying new approaches, and staying open to learning from the valuable experience of others. We want you to start getting comfortable with this. Just like Alice did in Wonderland, you are going to have to be willing to learn how to talk to strange creatures while navigating this new adventurous terrain.

We will explore this in the next chapter. It's going to challenge your traditional understanding of how organisations work and how you can influence, steer, and manage them. You are going to learn how to see the world like M.C. Escher, moving from the lens of the past (when he saw the world as realistic, known, and two dimensional), to viewing the Wicked World as it exists now (like his lithographs): vivid, idiosyncratic, hyper-complex, and as unlimited as your imagination.

Questions

for reflection

- 1** What are your initial thoughts and feelings about the concept of the “Wicked World” as described in the text?
- 2** Reflect on a time in your professional life when you felt like you were straddling two different worlds, similar to the experiences described in the text. What was that situation like? How did you navigate it?
- 3** How do you currently perceive and respond to rapid changes in technology, economics, politics, and society?
- 4** What are some examples of how you or your organisation have attempted to address challenges using the VUCA framework? Reflect on the effectiveness of these approaches.
- 5** Consider the characteristics of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) and how they differ from the characteristics of the Wicked World as described in the text. In what ways do you see these concepts playing out in your own experiences?

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LEADING IN A WICKED WORLD

How to unravel, explore & make sustainable impact

Are you ready to tackle the complexities of today's business world? Look no further: *Leading in a Wicked World* will guide you on your journey.

This book is an essential read for those looking for success in today's rapidly changing world. We offer you a wealth of knowledge and practical leadership strategies for leading in the Wicked World we live in, illustrated by real-world examples that bring these concepts to life.

We explore:

- ◆ The key trends shaping today's business landscape and what leading really means in a Wicked World – a world of upheaval, growing complexity, digitisation, and where old paradigms continue to crash.
- ◆ How personal scripts and patterns affect leadership, plus how to shift your leadership style to better align with your organisation's needs.
- ◆ A new framework that helps leaders make sense of organisations in a Wicked World.
- ◆ Inspiration and suggestions of how you can dance with the Wicked World.

The authors of *Leading in a Wicked World* have first-hand experience leading and coaching international leaders in how to handle the Wicked World. They understand the challenges accompanying this type of leadership and wrote this book to give you the best tools and strategies needed to navigate this new terrain successfully.

