

From Wicked Problems to Adaptive Solutions

Why complex organisational challenges require more than technical fixes

Many of the hardest challenges facing organisations are not purely technical. They are not solved simply by introducing a new system, rewriting a policy, changing a structure, or assigning responsibility to a specialist team. They involve competing priorities, fragmented ownership, institutional constraints, human behaviour, legacy practices, and uncertainty about what the real problem actually is. In the planning literature, these are often described as wicked problems: issues that are difficult to define clearly and not amenable to a single, definitive solution.

In practice, wicked problems often present as adaptive challenges. They may contain technical elements, but they cannot be resolved by technical expertise alone. They require leaders and organisations to diagnose more carefully, confront realities that may be uncomfortable, rethink assumptions, and adapt the way people work together. Adaptive leadership distinguishes between technical problems, which can be addressed through existing know-how, and adaptive challenges, which require learning, adjustment, and changes in behaviour, priorities, and relationships.

This distinction matters because many organisations respond to complex problems as though they were simple ones. They search for an immediate fix before they have properly identified the underlying issue. They may be responding to a symptom rather than the real cause. They may be solving one part of the problem while leaving the system around it unchanged. When that happens, even good initiatives underperform. The technical work may be completed, but the organisation still struggles because the deeper challenge was never fully addressed.

Adaptive solutions begin with a different discipline. They start by asking better questions. What is the real problem here? What are we assuming? What part of this challenge is technical, and what part requires adaptation by leaders, teams, systems, or institutions? What must change in practice, not just on paper? What needs to be aligned across governance, process, capability, accountability, behaviour, and delivery for progress to be sustained? This is not about slowing progress. It is about improving the quality of it.

This is where Integrity Solve works. We help organisations identify when the presenting issue is only part of the story. We bring structure to ambiguity, test whether the problem has been framed correctly, and help translate complex challenges into a practical path forward. Sometimes that path includes technology.



Sometimes it includes governance reform, role clarity, assurance, process redesign, capability uplift, or a more disciplined decision-making framework. Often it includes several of these at once. The point is not to resist technical solutions. It is to ensure they sit within a response that is broader, more coherent, and more likely to work.

The **Integrity Assurance Cycle** is the practical expression of this thinking. It provides a disciplined method for moving from initial problem identification through to strategic definition, business requirements, solution fit, implementation, and ongoing assurance. In that sense, the cycle is not just about delivery. It is about helping organisations move from a poorly framed challenge to an adaptive solution that can hold in the real world.

Integrity Solve helps organisations recognise when a problem is not just technical, but adaptive — and then build the governance, operating and assurance response needed to make progress possible.



¹ Rittel, H.W.J. and Webber, M.M. 1973, 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning', *Policy Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 155–169, doi:10.1007/BF01405730.

² Heifetz, R.A., Linsky, M. and Grashow, A. 2009, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Harvard Business Press, Boston.

³ Heifetz, R.A. 2009, 'Making Decisions Outside Your Repertoire', *Business Week Online*, 18 June, p. 8.