

Wicked Problems: What can leaders do?

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Just over a year ago, I was spending countless hours (or at least it seemed that way) on a research project with Dr. Maureen Berner for the School of Government. That project eventually became a book in the [Board Builders](#) series entitled, "[Wicked Problems: What Can Local Governments Do?](#)" It was a big project for me and resulted in my first published writing. It took commitment, hard work, and a willingness to learn new skills to get the book from start to finish over the course of a year.

The book focused on entrenched, complex community problems and on how local government leaders can address them through three general principles:

- Working across boundaries,
- Using government as a convener, and
- Being willing to adapt over time.

Communities across the US still face a variety of wicked problems and the principles developed for the guidebook still apply. But a critical element for success in addressing wicked problems that we didn't discuss in our Board Builder is leadership commitment. Just as my efforts to finish the book would have floundered without deep commitment to my goal, without leadership commitment, any efforts to combat wicked problems will similarly fail.

I've seen this play out in my work at the [Center for Government Excellence at Johns Hopkins University](#) (or GovEx) with cities across the US through the [What Works Cities Initiative](#). The initiative is designed to accelerate cities' use of data and evidence to improve people's lives and combat wicked problems. The forms of government, size, demographics, and political parties of the leaders in each city we work with vary but their commitment to change binds them together. Cities from Anchorage, AK, to Cambridge, MA, and everywhere in between are committing to using data and evidence to help solve critical problems.

Public commitment to the goal allows staff in the cities we work with to know what the priorities are and drive toward them. This commitment starts at the top. For an initiative like What Works Cities to succeed, leadership must be committed. In my experience, it is critical for leaders to:

- **Commit** – Make the commitment clear, state goals publicly, and create plans to achieve them (see [Vaughn Upshaw's great post](#) on the value of strategic plans).
- **Recommit** – Review plans regularly, measure and take stock of progress, and reiterate

commitment to goals to employees and stakeholders.

- **Commit again** – Be accountable to commitments and even strategies change, continue to be open and public with the commitment to achieve goals.

Without commitment, even the most well-researched strategies are bound to fail. Leaders need tools and strategies like those in our Board Builder to help address wicked problems, but they first must be committed to change. By being open and public with commitment, leaders can inspire confidence, empower subordinates, and generate momentum across organizations. And maybe even begin to tackle some wicked problems.