Showing UP

Wicked *environments*

A practical toolkit for consultants working where feedback is rare and judgement is hard

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When to use this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be used at the start of a project, before decisions become harder to reverse. Its purpose is simple: to assess how wicked the environment is and to put structure in where feedback is missing.

Not every project operates in a wicked environment. Some offer clear feedback, fast learning, and predictable cause and effect. Others do not. The more wicked the environment, the higher the risk of inaccurate decisions, unless you introduce structure to test and discipline your thinking.

Use this toolkit to pause and ask three questions. How reliable is the feedback in this system? How clearly can we trace cause and effect? How much of our confidence is based on evidence rather than habit?

This toolkit is designed for individual use. If you are working in a group, share your answers at each exercise and compare what emerges.

"Where feedback is rare. Where judgement is hard to calibrate."

Use this toolkit whenever you want to:

- Start a strategic project with clear eyes
- Name where confidence may be outrunning evidence
- Introduce structure that compensates for missing feedback
- Review an engagement and extract lessons for the next one

What makes an environment wicked

"Where feedback is rare, and it is hard to tell whether our decisions are actually good."

A wicked environment is one where feedback is scarce, delayed, or distorted. You make a decision, but the outcome only becomes visible months or years later. By the time results appear, the context may have changed, the people involved may have moved on, and cause and effect are difficult to trace.

Outcomes can mislead. A sound decision can still produce a bad result because of timing, politics, or randomness. A poor decision can get rewarded because nothing obvious went wrong. Over time, this trains confidence rather than accuracy.

Because feedback is weak, learning loops are unclear. Experience accumulates, but judgement is not properly calibrated. It is like trying to learn to cook without ever tasting the food. You may cook for years and still not improve.

EXAMPLES

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Wicked environments in the wild

Wickedness is not a label for incompetence. Each of these systems was run by smart, experienced people. The environment, not the talent, is what made the decisions hard.

Nuclear power

FUKUSHIMA

Highly trained engineers operating in a system where warning signals were complex and ambiguous. Small design decisions could trigger irreversible consequences. Feedback on whether prevention was sufficient only arrived in a crisis.

Banking risk

2008 FINANCIAL CRISIS

Risk models appeared stable. Short-term returns reinforced confidence. Complex products interacted in ways few fully understood. The fragility of the system only became visible when it came under stress, far too late to act.

Public policy

LONG-TERM REFORM

Decisions on housing, immigration, or pensions take years to surface. Multiple variables interact at once. Political cycles distort incentives. By the time consequences appear, the decision-makers may have moved on.

Transformation programmes

LARGE ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Early enthusiasm masks structural fragility. Metrics lag real behavioural change. Political interests influence reporting. Success or failure may only become clear after staff turnover, market shifts, or integration challenges.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR CONSULTANTS

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Most consulting work sits in wicked territory

Consultancy is unusual in how often it operates inside wicked environments. Four reasons stand out, and most engagements involve at least three of them.

Data is incomplete	You make decisions before the picture is clear. Customer data is partial. Forecasts rely on assumptions. Systems have not been fully tested. You move forward knowing important variables are still unknown.
Outcomes unfold slowly	A pricing change may take months to affect revenue. A transformation programme may take a year before behaviour shifts. A strategic decision may only show its consequences after multiple reporting cycles.
Politics shape judgement	Leaders want visible progress before the next board update. Departments protect budgets and status. No one wants a project publicly labelled a failure. Decisions are shaped by optics as much as by evidence.
Cause and effect blur	Sales decline. Was it the new strategy, the market, the competition, or the timing? A system fails. Was it design, implementation, integration, or human error? Multiple forces operate at once and rarely sort themselves out cleanly.

THE FRAMEWORK

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Diagnose, reduce, learn

Your job in a wicked environment is to recognise when you are inside one and design a way of working that compensates for what the environment fails to teach you. The nine steps below sit in three phases. Work through them in order.

01	Diagnose the environment	Tick the signs. Are you in a wicked environment?	DIAGNOSE
02	Identify the feedback gaps	Where, specifically, is signal absent, delayed, or distorted?	
03	Name your likely errors	Which gaps would hurt most if your judgement were wrong?	
04	Watch for overconfidence	Where might certainty be running ahead of evidence?	
05	Decide where structure is needed	Where would earlier feedback materially reduce risk?	REDUCE
06	Choose the structure	What single intervention will most directly close the gap?	
07	Take it to the client	How will you make the structure real in the engagement?	
08	Review what changed	Have we actually reduced wickedness, or just felt better?	LEARN
09	Extract the learning	What do you carry into the next engagement?	

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01

Diagnose the environment

Are you in a wicked environment?

Not every project is wicked. Some offer clear feedback, short cause-and-effect loops, and predictable outcomes. The first move is to ask honestly which kind of environment you are sitting in. The answer shapes everything that follows.

The signs are often subtle. Outcomes that take months or years to surface. Success that is hard to measure. Cause and effect that are difficult to trace. Political pressure shaping decisions. Mistakes that are rarely discussed. Confidence that grows without a way to check whether judgement is improving.

Common trap: assuming experience inoculates against wickedness. Experience without calibration is precisely the problem.

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Tick the signs that match your current engagement. If three or more apply, you are in a wicked environment.

1 *Outcomes take months or years to become visible*

2 *Cause and effect are hard to trace*

3 *Success is hard to measure objectively*

4 *Political or reputational pressure shapes decisions*

5 *Mistakes are rarely discussed openly*

6 *What specifically makes this environment wicked, in your own words*

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Once you know the environment is wicked, the next step is to locate where learning is breaking down. The problem is rarely intelligence or effort. The problem is that the system is not telling the team what it needs to know in time to use it.

Be specific. Avoid abstract answers like “strategy” or “leadership.” Identify concrete decisions, processes, or parts of the system where feedback is absent, delayed, or noisy. The sharper the gap, the easier it is to put structure around it.

Common trap: naming the symptom rather than the gap. “We are missing our forecasts” is a symptom. “We lack early signal on customer churn” is the gap.

02

Identify the feedback gaps

Where, exactly, is the signal weak?

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Name the most significant feedback gap, what makes it dangerous, and what you currently are not seeing clearly.

1. *The most significant feedback gap on this project*
2. *Why this gap is dangerous if left unaddressed*
3. *Where short-term success may be masking long-term risk*
4. *Where we are relying heavily on intuition without clear evidence*
5. *Where political pressure may be shaping how outcomes get reported*
6. *What information we are currently not seeing clearly*

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03

Name your likely errors

Where would being wrong hurt most?

Not every feedback gap creates the same danger. Some produce inconvenience. Others produce cascading failure. Your task now is to locate where a wrong call would do the most damage and how quickly you would know.

For each gap, ask four questions. How serious would the consequences be if we are wrong? How quickly would we discover the mistake? How reversible is the decision? How exposed are we politically? Risks that score badly on all four are where discipline must be strongest.

Common trap: treating every risk as equal. Concentrate your attention where speed of discovery is slow and reversibility is poor.

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Score the gaps and pick the area where being wrong would hurt most.

1. *The area where we are most likely to be wrong*
2. *How quickly we would discover the mistake*
3. *How reversible the decision is*
4. *How politically exposed this area is*
5. *If we misjudge this, the consequence would be*
6. *Why this is the area where discipline must be strongest*

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04

Watch for overconfidence

Certainty without evidence is the quiet failure mode.

Wicked environments let confidence grow without improving accuracy. You have seen similar situations before. The plan looks solid. Early signals are encouraging. Senior leaders sound aligned. None of these are evidence. They are patterns your brain has decided to trust, and in a wicked environment they can mislead.

Notice where your confidence is growing faster than your evidence. Where you are relying on past experience in a context that may not be identical. Where agreement around the table has replaced argument. Where the absence of bad news is being read as good news.

The aim is to notice where confidence could quietly distort judgement, without tipping into doubting everything.

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Map where your own confidence is growing faster than the evidence underneath it.

1. *The area where confidence may be running ahead of evidence*
2. *What our confidence here is currently based on*
3. *What hard evidence we actually have*
4. *What assumptions we are making*
5. *Where past experience may not transfer to this context*
6. *What would genuinely shake our confidence in this view*

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05

Decide where structure is needed

Structure goes where feedback is weakest.

Structure becomes important when feedback is rare or poor. Done well, it does not mean adding bureaucracy. It means deliberately designing a way to test your thinking, so risks that would otherwise surface later are exposed earlier.

Return to the area where confidence may be running ahead of evidence. Ask: where would earlier feedback materially reduce risk? Where are we currently making decisions without a clear testing mechanism? Where are assumptions going unchallenged? Where would slowing the pace improve judgement?

Common trap: spreading structure thinly across the project. Concentrate it where the gap is biggest and the cost of being wrong is greatest.

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Pick the single area where additional structure would make the biggest difference, and name what changes if you put it in.

1. *The area where we most need additional structure*
2. *Why this area is the priority*
3. *Where decisions are currently made without a clear testing mechanism*
4. *Where assumptions are going unchallenged*
5. *Without structure, the risk we are running is*
6. *If we introduced structure here, it would let us see*

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06

Choose the structure

Pick one intervention. Be concrete.

You have identified where structure is needed. Now decide what it will be. Choose one intervention that will most directly address the feedback gap and reduce the risk you identified.

Useful forms of structure include clear measurement criteria agreed in advance, a simple decision rule or checklist, a pre-mortem to surface hidden risks, a scoring model with defined thresholds, a phased rollout or pilot, explicit review checkpoints, or independent challenge from a peer or external reviewer.

Common trap: choosing the most sophisticated option because it sounds rigorous. The best structure is the one that the team will actually use, not the most elegant one on paper.

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Pick one structure. Decide what it will test, who owns it, and when it goes live.

1. *The structure we will introduce*
2. *What this structure will test or measure*
3. *What it would prevent the team skipping over*
4. *What it would create a pause around before irreversible decisions*
5. *Who will implement it*
6. *By what date it will be in use*

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Take it to the client

Structure only works when the client owns it too.

Structure introduced in isolation does not survive contact with a real engagement. Before you implement, decide what needs to be shared with the client and frame it in their language. The risk. Why it matters. The structure you propose. What it will change.

Most clients welcome a thoughtful early surfacing of risk. What they will resist is a list of concerns dropped at the door without a proposed move. Your job is to bring both, clearly and neutrally.

Common trap: softening the risk to protect the relationship. The strongest advisors do the opposite. They name the risk plainly and earn trust by being the person who did.

WORK ON IT

Draft the conversation you will have with the client. Keep it clear and neutral.

1. *The risk we need to surface, in one sentence*
2. *Why it matters, in client terms*
3. *The adjustment we are proposing*
4. *What this will change in how we work*
5. *The trade-off we will be open about*
6. *What we want the client to own with us*

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Once the structure is in place, do not wait for the project to end to check whether it helped. Review in motion. The best moments for review are when enough time has passed for new signal to arrive, but not so much that the team has moved on to the next thing.

Ask practical questions. Have we improved the quality of feedback in this system? Have we made errors easier to spot? Have we reduced reliance on intuition where it was weakest? If we were wrong next month, would we know sooner than we would have before?

Common trap: declaring success because the structure feels rigorous. Test it against what the team can now see that it could not see before.

08

Review what changed

Did the structure actually reduce risk, or did it just feel like it did?

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Honestly assess whether wickedness has been reduced, and what remains.

1 *What the structure now lets us see sooner*

2 *Where errors are now easier to spot*

3 *Where we have reduced reliance on intuition*

4 *Where we have clarified ownership and timing*

5 *The biggest remaining risk in this environment*

6 *When the next review of this structure will happen*

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09

Extract the learning

Carry the lesson into the next engagement.

The exercise is more powerful when it becomes a habit than a single event. Before moving on, capture what you have learned about this environment, about your own thinking, and about the discipline that helped most.

These insights are the asset you carry from one engagement to the next. They are how good judgement compounds across a career, rather than starting from scratch on every project.

Common trap: treating this step as a wrap-up tick box. Spend ten honest minutes on it. The notes you write here are the ones you will return to in six months when something feels familiar.

WORK ON IT

Capture three insights, one about each level (the environment, your thinking, the discipline that helped).

1. *What made this environment wicked, in one sentence*
2. *Where we were most vulnerable to misplaced confidence*
3. *What surprised us most*
4. *One insight about this environment*
5. *One insight about how we think and decide*
6. *One discipline we will carry into the next project*

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Diagnose, reduce, learn. Then do it again.

Working well in wicked environments is a practice. Each engagement is another pass at the same skill. The advisors known for good judgement in complex work are not naturally wiser than anyone else. They have simply chosen, project after project, to name the wickedness, introduce the structure, and review what changed. Pick the next engagement and start.

01 *The engagement I will apply this to next:*

02 *The step I most want to practice this quarter:*

03 *Who I will bring into this thinking so I can test my view:*

04 *When I will sit down to review what changed at the halfway point:*

GO FURTHER

- ☐ Critical Thinking – Pre-Mortem Method (the companion toolkit)
- ☐ Thinking, Fast and Slow, by Daniel Kahneman
- ☐ The Signal and the Noise, by Nate Silver