

What is this?

The Little Book of Social Messes

The two pages to the right are from Chapter 3 of my book "The Little Book of Social Messes."

The concept of Social Messes

Russell Ackoff, of the Wharton School, originated the concept of the mess. He describes messes as collections of inter-related problems, suggesting that "no problem ever exists in complete isolation. Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems." In this mess map, the problems are highlighted in yellow boxes.

At MacroVU, we think of social messes as having these characteristics:

- complicated, complex, and ambiguous
- much uncertainty – even as to what the problems are, let alone what the solutions might be
- great constraints
- tightly interconnected, economically, socially, politically, technologically
- seen differently from different points of view, and quite different world views
- contain many value conflicts
- are often a-logical or illogical.

Helping Task Force in Alameda County

In 2003, we helped a task force focused on improving the delivery of services to the elderly and disabled in Alameda County California.

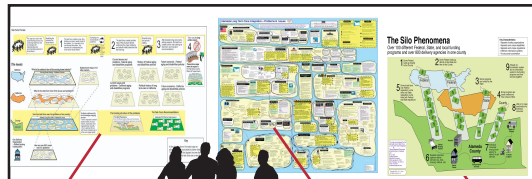
Mess Mapping Process

The Mess Mapping™ process is a general method for groups working on complex problems. In the Alameda context, we used it to capture and synthesize stakeholder expertise and create organizational alignment. It was based on the assumption that multidisciplinary task groups need special forms of group interactions in order to effectively use the expertise assembled. Nearly every expert in such a group has come to the table with their pet "solutions" to the "problem." This interferes with deeper exploration of the complexity of the mess as well as offer preventing creative exchange.

The use of the concept of a "mess" as a systemically inter-related set of problems breaks that initial mental set of the experts and challenges them to work together to produce an analysis they would not have produced by themselves or in a conventional group process. This changes their motivation from displaying their expertise to involvement in exploring new territory together.

The use of the physical metaphor of a "map" also intrigues them. It draws on their experiences of navigating in new territory as well as in the process of constructing the map which changes significantly over several sessions.

During the process, a large version (24 x 36 inches) of a "seed" mess map or template was placed on each table. An even larger, mural size version hung on the wall. The different tables contributed their understandings of the various interlocking problems and dilemmas. The MacroVU team worked together with the task



This panel shows how the organizations are viewed from five different levels of the bureaucracy from federal through state, county, and local levels to individual private organizations.

This panel shows how the task force saw the unique set of funding sources complicated the lives of both the agency delivering help and the recipients.

This panel shows how the task force saw the tangled mess of problems and multiple causal loops that cross the boundaries of many organizations. (See detailed version on right.)

Who participated in the process?

It is always important to have relevant representation from all stakeholder sectors for a successful mess mapping process. In this case, we had key participants from about 15 organization all of whom had some involvement in delivery of services. This enabled the description of the mess to come from the deep understandings of these participants, and also began to prime them for a more holistic look at the inter-related set of problems and dilemmas from multiple points of view

Unique process AFTER mapping the mess

In the Alameda task force case, we did an unusual "next step." Instead of the usual solve-one-problem-at-a-time that many groups try to make work, we recognized that the Board of Supervisors could authorize many changes all at once, if we recommended solving them all at once. So we set about to do that. At the right is the recommendations report map that indicated to the Supervisors how to change many of the problems in the system of inter-related problems we call a mess.

How do I get updates & revisions and other info-maps in the series?

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Alameda LTC Plan for Improvement

These recommendations are presented by the Alameda County Department of Adult and Aging Services, Linda Kretz, Director and the Alameda County Task Force on Long Term Care Integration.

