

Wicked games: mapping a route to net zero

On 27 June 2019 the UK government committed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 100% by 2050 – a net zero target. The UK must end its contribution to global warming within 30 years. What does that mean in practice for UK organisations? What should we do over the coming days, weeks, months and years to address this challenge? Karthik Suresh explores the options



Some problems can be solved – like a puzzle – and have a ‘right’ answer. Other problems are harder to ‘solve’, perhaps even impossible, because requirements are unclear and the situation changeable. Many management problems fall into the ‘wicked’ category, as you try and balance the obligations and targets you have with the desires of stakeholders, the constraints and hurdles of finance and the limitations and risks of technology.

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a daunting challenge. Yet, this is exactly what managers across the country are being asked to do in order to meet the commitment.

In our conversations with managers who are taking on this challenge, we see themes emerging, among them the importance of using systems thinking, data quality and choice architecture.

Why is thinking systemically important?

At the core of a systems thinking approach is the idea that you can’t improve the performance of a whole by just improving the parts individually.

Let’s say you want to build the best car in the world that is also emissions free, adapting an example by

Russell Ackoff, a pioneering systems thinker. You could bring the best cars in the world into a warehouse and take them apart. From the collection, you could pick the best suspension unit, the best brakes, the best chassis and so on. You could also pick the best zero-emission engine, the best battery pack or the best fuel cell unit. Then, when

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you've got the best parts of the bunch, you can put them together and get the best car.

Except, obviously, you won't. Having the best parts is not enough. What also matters is how well those parts work together and the same thing applies to organisations



looking at systemic change.

A crucial first step, then, is enabling the conditions to have a dialogue across the organisation and take a multi- and trans-disciplinary approach to the challenge of net zero – by engaging in conversations that aim not just to 'solve' problems but 'dissolve' them altogether by redesigning the organisation or its environment.

Data quality

Every organisation grapples with the problem of collecting, processing, analysing and deriving insights from data. The UKAEE is running a

session on precisely this topic, looking at the way in which organisations can grapple with the day-to-day mechanics of data management (Energy Talks: Data; WeWork, Moorgate, London 29 Jan 2020; see this short link for details - bit.ly/2uq8ucM).

The key for organisations is figuring out what they need from their data – what is it for? We are being asked harder questions about the nature and quality of our data sets. Are you likely to pass a limited level assurance examination from a big four firm seeing if your numbers can be included in an annual report? Can you rely on these figures to purchase allowances or offsets, or trade them to a third party? Would you be happy to submit these figures as part of a carbon disclosure project report?

Net zero will create an obligation to report against targets for all of us. That leaves us with little choice – we must get our data collection systems in order.

Choice architecture

Choice architecture describes the way in which information is presented for decision making. Every organisation has a way of doing things that's evolved over time. There are processes to put in business cases, seek approvals, get funding and spend money.

Most of us know about the technical options we have and the kinds of paybacks on offer. The difficulty is getting projects approved because of existing approaches to valuing and assessing opportunities and managers find that most opportunities cannot be progressed because the existing choice

architecture leads to a dead end.

This means that they either need to look outside the organisation for solutions, using mechanisms such as Energy Performance Contracts or Power Purchase Agreements that shift the risk and responsibility to a third party for a price, or redesign the way in which their organisation makes decisions to clear a path to proceed. And, of course, there is always the opportunity to game the system by selecting 'greenwash' options, but no one reading this really wants to go down that road.

Find a route that works for you

The unsurprising conclusion from our discussions with managers across a range of organisations is that each one needs to plot a different approach – one that works for them. They may have the same target – to eliminate emissions entirely – but the way in which they do it depends on the circumstances they find themselves in, the options they have and the way in which they make decisions.

Getting to net zero is a wicked problem and, unfortunately, we have no easy answers for you. **te**

Karthik Suresh is a committee member at the UK Association of Energy Engineers (UKAEE) and is a director at Ameresco. UKAEE covers a range of expertise in the energy management and energy efficiency sectors. It delivers a range of technical focused seminars and offers excellent networking opportunities for energy and sustainability professionals. It offers Continued Professional Development opportunities for AEE certifications such as Certified Energy Manager, Certified Measurement and Verification Professional and Certified Energy Auditor. Membership to the UKAEE is currently free. For more information on UKAEE or how to join, please visit ukaee.org.uk