



CLOCKS AND CLOUDS: EMERGENT ISSUES REQUIRE EMERGENT THINKING

The great philosopher of science, Karl Popper helped us understand that all problems are either like clocks or clouds. To understand a clock you only need to take it apart. It is mechanical, you can remove each small part and study it. You can count the teeth on the gears, you can measure the size of its parts and by studying the pieces you can understand how it works. In fact, it is predictable by design. If it breaks you can find the problem and fix it. Cloud type problems, on the other hand, are complex and dynamic. You cannot take apart a cloud the same way you can a clock. Cloud type problems are more difficult to understand, they are unpredictable and constantly changing. Since you cannot break it down to look at each piece, you have to study it as a whole. In fact, you have to look beyond the cloud itself to understand the weather patterns, seasons, and factors that created the cloud in the first place.

Poverty is a cloud type of problem. It is complex and dynamic. There are no simple solutions and there are numerous contributing factors. We cannot mistake poverty with a clock type of problem and think we can solve it. We will not find the magic lever that when pulled will fix the poverty. We cannot disassemble it in order to replace one gear. We cannot just focus on one part of the issue such as homelessness or jobs. There is no single broken piece. Unlike a broken part that can be replaced, the system is not considered broken because it is producing the result it was designed to produce. So, if it is producing increasing rates of poverty then we need to treat it as a whole. We need to understand how the complex issues of poverty interrelate and interact over time.

What type of cloud type program does your organization face?

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