# What's Magic About the Magic 21?

**Use the "Magic 21" to see, understand, and influence the patterns in your system.**

1. Looking at all the patterns relative to your wicked issue, choose three that stand out most powerfully. Reflect on what you see and begin to fill in a grid like the one below.

2. Fill out the first row of the grid:

    a. Name the container that bounds the first of your patterns.
    b. Identify three significant differences that shape your pattern.
    c. Identify three exchanges that are contributing to the wicked issue.

3. Repeat for the other two rows, identifying additional containers and the significant differences and exchanges within each of those.

**When you are finished, you will have named 21 conditions that shape or contribute to the wickedness of your issue. Then all you have to do is take action to shift one of those conditions, knowing that will bring about shifts in the overall pattern.**

| Container (C) | Difference (D) | Exchange (E) |
|---|---|---|
| 1st container | 1. difference<br>2. difference<br>3. difference | 1. exchange<br>2. exchange<br>3. exchange |
| 2nd container | 1. difference<br>2. difference<br>3. difference | 1. exchange<br>2. exchange<br>3. exchange |
| 3rd container | 1. difference<br>2. difference<br>3. difference | 1. exchange<br>2. exchange<br>3. exchange |

*Example: You recognize a pattern that in your organization, people are "meetinged-out". They complain about too many meetings that accomplish nothing, and tie up precious time.*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *1ˢᵗ Container - Agenda* | *1. types of items on the agenda*<br>*2. perspectives about what the meeting is for*<br>*3. positional power of people in the meetings* | *1. people talk about things that are irrelevant*<br>*2. too many people talk at once*<br>*3. decisions never get made* |
| *2ᴺᴰ Container - Expectations about the purpose of the meeting* | *1. hidden and personal agendas*<br>*2. interests and values about the discussion*<br>*3. intentions for final decisions* | *1. people drop out of conversations that don't address their needs*<br>*2. people come to the meeting unprepared for the discussion*<br>*3. people bring up un-scheduled topics* |
| *3ʳᵈ Container - Expectations about meeting norms* | *1. arrivals and exits at different times in the meeting*<br>*2. levels of participation and contribution*<br>*3. informal power balance* | *1. people are rude to each other*<br>*2. people engage in paper work during the meeting*<br>*3. cell phones go off at all times in the meeting* |

**So how do you know what actions to take? As you reflect on the conditions you have named, ask yourself:**

- Where does the system seem to be over-constrained? under-constrained?
- In what ways do the conditions constraining the system and contributing to the wicked issue?
- What level of constraint might be best fit?
- What actions might shift constraints in the system?

| Low | Constraints | Tight |
|---|---|---|
| Large | CONTAINERS | Small |
| Many | DIFFERENCES | Few |
| Loose | EXCHANGES | Tight |

*Examples:*

- *Containers*

    o *In the Agenda:* Low constraint (general descriptions of agenda items, loose facilitation) allows for broad discussion, deep sharing. High constraint (specific agenda items, tight facilitation) allows for quick decisions; concise, clear conversation.

    o *In Expectations of the Purpose of the Meeting:* Low constraint (general guidelines, little direct supervision) allows for individual decision making, autonomy. High constraint (specific expectations, frequent reporting) allows for quick learning, high levels of compliance.

    o *In Meeting Norms:* Low constraint (loose or nonexistent norms) allows for freedom and personal choice. High constraint (clearly stated and agreed-upon norms) allows for predictability, compliance.

- *Differences*

    o *In the Agenda:* Low constraint (high diversity, lots of ideas) allows for exploration on a broad scale, multiple possibilities. High constraint (high similarity, clear expectations) allows for compliance and consistency,

    o *In Expectations of the Purpose of the Meeting:* Low constraint (unclear expectations, multiple intentions and interests) allows for ranging exploration with little or no progress toward closure. High constraint (clear and tight expectations,

    o *In Meeting Norms:* Low constraint (unclear or competing norms, uneven use of the norms) allows for personal expressed and varying participation. High constraint (strict adherence, high agreement) allows for consistency across meetings, predictability.

- *Exchanges*

    o *In the Agenda:* Low constraint (multiple people talking at once, irrelevant topics) allows for broad exploration and personal expression. High constraint (people talk one at a time, people stick to the topic) allows for deep exploration and shared meaning

    o *In Expectations of the Purpose of the Meeting:* Low constraint (broad expectations, multiple perspectives) allows for exploration and experimentation. High constraint (clear, coherent expectations) allows for consistency and quick progress.

- o ***In Meeting Norms:*** *Low constraint (no norms or unenforced norms) allows for unpredictability and surprise. High constraint (adherence to the norms) allow for speed and clarity.*

**So how do you choose which condition to shift? As you reflect on the possible actions, ask yourself:**

- Which one(s) are within the scope of what you can do?
- Which one(s) will move you and your colleagues toward best fit at any given time, keeping mind that each situation is unique, and fitness depends on the context.
- Which one(s) is the easiest?
- Which one(s) might have the greatest impact on the whole?
- Which one(s) might draw others into collaboration?

*Example:*

*You decide you need a common set of norms that set expectations, while allowing for difference in purpose from one meeting to the next. You have the authority to ask for that and you believe others will agree with you and take action to engage in developing and implementing a set of norms.*

**Just choose.**

- Decide who will do what.
- Determine how you will see and judge the degree or success of the change you create.
- Set your timelines.

*Example:*

*You engage others in helping you, making sure all standing meetings are accounted for and that people will take the responsibility for setting norms in their ad hoc meetings as well. You agree to come back to the question in 3 months to see if people are less disgruntled by the meetings they attend and if more gets accomplished in the meetings that occur.*

**Then take action.**

- Watch the system to see what happens.
- When you are at the end of the timeline, or when you see a shift in the pattern, go back to the original matrix and adapt it according to the current reality.
- Identify your next challenge.

*Example:*

*At the end of the three months, you find that people are feeling better about the meetings, but they realize people have varying degrees of skill at facilitating meetings and in managing the logistics and planning for meetings. Returning to the Magic 21, you recognize that while the same containers may apply, there may be aspects of the differences and exchanges that may not still hold true.*

**Start again.**

*Example:*

*So you return gather colleagues together and reflect on the challenges of varying skills, using a new Magic 21 matrix to identify the conditions that contribute to that pattern*.

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