

## Interview: Professor Keith Grint

### ***Leadership, Management and Command: Rethinking D-Day***



<b>TT</b>	Hello, my name is Toby Thompson. I am in conversation today with Keith Grint, Professor of Defence Leadership. Keith, we are looking at your book <i>Leadership: Management Command, Rethinking D-Day</i> . Tell me, where did the book come from?
<b>KG</b>	<p>Originally, as the final chapter for my <i>Arts of Leadership</i> book. So I was looking for a particularly complex example that would allow me to draw all of the bits of the book together and the most complex example I could think of that would work, the first single composite example, was D-Day. I don't quite know why I came to that conclusion, but I did, so I began to investigate how I could relate that book to the D-Day example and I wrote the chapter and at 38,000 words long it was too long to be the chapter, so then I could either cut it by three quarters and chuck most of it out and keep it or use something else. So in the end I used it for something else and it just kind of grew from there.</p> <p>I was involved in a trip round Normandy led, for General Electric, by the then American military historian – they have an official historian. And it was just fascinating to go around it, so I thought I would actually do some more research on this and turn it into a book. It sat on my floor for around four years, so I had all the details, all the numbers, though I couldn't quite work out how to patch it all together and it wasn't until I had gone through my problem approach, my typologies of problems – tame, wicked and critical – that I thought this might be a way to go back through that material and try to bring it to light in a different kind of way. So that is the origins of the book.</p>
<b>TT</b>	So what is it about D-Day that you can't get from similar World War II operations like Barbarossa or North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Japan?
<b>KG</b>	<p>I think it runs back to the issue of complexity. I couldn't find an equivalently complex operation or phenomenon or organisation. So what you have got on D-Day, even though there are many other military operations that are larger, they don't contain all forms of transport, they don't contain as many people, they don't contain getting people across a patch of water, they don't do it in 24 hours. So all of those things mean that this is a once off. It's the equivalent – as it says in the text – of getting Birmingham across the Channel and keeping it moving to Berlin. How do you get an organisation that big – the same size as the City of Birmingham – across the Channel and keep it moving under attack.</p> <p>So it was the complexity that made me first interested in it and then</p>

	<p>when I had been round Normandy I think it kind of hooks you into it. When you see the beaches and when you see the labels, Easy Green, then you suddenly realise that there is something quite significant about this. I had met several veterans on different trips who had talked about different aspects of it and several of my students had had grandparents who were involved and the more I looked into it, the more interested I became in trying to work out just how you did this and why we did it and why it worked.</p>
<p><b>TT</b></p>	<p>So, we have all seen <i>Band of Brothers</i>, the TV show, which covers tame, wicked and critical problems. What is a wicked problem?</p>
<p><b>KG</b></p>	<p>Wicked problems are problems that you have either never faced before or never been able to resolve. Tame problems are problems which we spend all our day doing because we know how to do them, and so the application of standard procedures is how we deal with tame problems. And critical problems are problems that are basically a crisis, where you don't have time to worry about standard procedures, nor do you have time to do what you would do with a wicked problem, which is to ask lots of questions and to engage collaboration. You have to make the decisions there and then and you have to do something decisive.</p> <p>So what I have done, is I have tried to use that typology to look at different aspects of the campaign, to think about why did various people respond or various countries respond in particular kinds of ways and what that did for subsequent events.</p> <p>The issue is one of a temporal separation. So the original wicked problem is the strategy by which you get back to Europe because we haven't done this before, no one knows how to do it, so that is why you need collaboration to ask the right questions – to think about where they are going to do this. Having done that, it then shifts into a tame problem: how do we train all these people, how do we get all this stuff across the Channel under fire to be able to make this work. And then when you get to the landing, it then shifts from what appears to be a tame problem – how do we get all these people off the beach? It becomes a crisis. So things are going completely screwy and stuff is not where it should be – what do we do now?</p> <p>What you see is a different response by the different sides to how you cope with this kind of crisis. Conventionally the German side were much more decentralised in their decision making categories, so they operated on the basis of if you are in command on the front line, you take the decision. You know what needs to be done. And that had done them extremely well for the first part of the First World War and the first part of the Second World War.</p> <p>Then what Hitler does is he takes overall control and it undermines that flexibility – that ability to decentralise decision making. So when you get to the actual landings, the German commanders on</p>

	<p>the ground know what to do. They know that they should be moving off to the coast and mobilising people, but they chose not to, they chose to wait for formal permission from Hitler. So what they actually do is they treat this as a tame problem, and it isn't a tame problem. It becomes a crisis for them. Whereas on the Allied side, even though they – and this is particularly so for the American side – the application of scientific procedures imply that everything is tame and if you apply science properly you will get to the right resolution of the problem. But actually you can't apply science in these kinds of conditions because it all goes haywire. So at that point there has to be some decision making at a very low level to be able to compensate for the absence of the plan, the plan is not working properly.</p> <p>My understanding is that it is the Allied side who take decision making to a different level on the beach. This is not something they had practised for in many ways. And they in some ways embody what was originally a German advantage and the Germans take on the disadvantage of the Allied side. So the Germans treat it as a tame problem – don't do anything until it becomes a crisis and it becomes too late, whereas the Allies, having started out assuming a tame problem, realise it isn't, it's a crisis and therefore you have to take different kinds of decisions and you have to decentralise at that point. So it becomes an effect of the situation more than anything else. They haven't trained for this decentralised decision making, but they actually realise the only way off the beach is to decentralise decision making.</p> <p>So sometimes you can get issues of tame or wicked problems; they can shift very quickly from being one to the other. So there are people on the beach facing what is a wicked problem – how do we get out of here? No one knows how to get out of here, we haven't done this before. Then you get people realising that if we can collectively do X or Y maybe that will work and they try it and sometimes it works and then it becomes a procedure by which you learn how to tame this wicked problem.</p>
<b>TT</b>	<p>So were you viewing the problems first: the tame, wicked and critical problems first? Or is it some sort of retrospective perspective on D-Day?</p>
<b>KG</b>	<p>I think the issue would be you can't know what the answer is to a wicked problem, otherwise it isn't a wicked problem. So there might be a process by which you get some purchase on the problem. So the process is you need to ask questions and you need to collaborate with other people who may have expertise that you don't have and that way, having gone through that process and realised this is the way off the beach, then there is a period of reflection to think about this actually works.</p> <p>There is something about even when the next problem comes</p>

	<p>along, it won't be the same problem, but if you have reflected on the process by which you have got a resolution to the first problem then that might be the mechanism by which you get a resolution to the second problem. So it's about asking questions and engaging collaboration. There is a nice example when they get into – or certainly when the Americans get into Normandy proper – they are faced by what is called the 'bocage' which are these very high hedges and very low roads which have built up over centuries. They can't get their tanks off the road, they can't get them through the hedges – which of course makes it very good for defensive positions, but very poor for attacking positions. Now the consequence of that is eventually one particular sergeant has worked in one particular part of the States beforehand and has built what he has called a Rhinoceros, so he begins to make certain kinds of frontages for the tanks which will enable them to burrow through the hedges.</p> <p>So what you have there is very decentralised learning and understanding and then that is replicated. So here is an issue of if you simply apply science and wait for someone above you to come out with the answer, it's never going to come. So who amongst us might have the skill to have faced this before and can we find that person or those people, and can they in some sense experiment their way through this issue. But it's that learning through experimentation and learning through decentralised decision making which enables them to get off the beaches.</p>
<p><b>TT</b></p>	<p>I know you say in the book that the Wehrmacht realise that shooting the officer first in the Allies, would then leave the troops, the division leaderless and they wouldn't know what to do. What sort of issue is that?</p>
<p><b>KG</b></p>	<p>There is something of a training mechanism which is involved here. So, much of the training of the Allied side, both American and British is built around only the officer really knowing what is going on. The rest don't need to know and they probably wouldn't understand it anyway. That is the kind of philosophy that underlines this.</p> <p>Now the problem with that is if the plan works perfectly, it's fine. But the plan doesn't work perfectly, plus the first person off all the small landing craft is the only officer on the landing craft, so he gets off, he gets shot, there is nobody else who knows what the plan is. So if they are not following the plan, they don't know where to go.</p> <p>What you do is you actually begin to develop a very impoverished followership, an irresponsible followership, as a consequence of putting all the authority in the single position of the officer or sometimes the sergeants as well. So what you do is, through portraying a mechanism, you treat what is going to be a wicked problem – what do we do if it all goes wrong? – as a tame problem. We put all the information and all the knowledge into the head of</p>

	<p>one person who happens to have a white stripe on the front of his helmet, so everybody knows who he is – including the other side – so that person is eliminated and the whole thing falls to a halt. You can see that in the numbers of the proportion of officers to troops on all the sides: the Germans have a proportion of something like high twenties to one, twenty eight to one, in the German army in the Second World War. Very few officers, lots of troops. On the Allied side it goes from fourteen to one, to eight to one depending on which army we are looking at. So the implication of that is you actually need lots of officers for the Allied armies to work, which is really problematic because you are basically inhibiting decentralised decision making here and if the officers die, there is no one to take over.</p> <p>This is the opposite of the German approach, but the difference would be on the German side they have a very strong commitment to fighting, so of those twenty eight soldiers probably twenty six of them would actually be fighting. Whereas on the Allied side, probably two thirds of the people involved in the army are never going to fight, but they are involved in munitions, they are involved in transport, they are involved in cooking. So you have a massive tail on the Allied side and a very narrow tail on the German side and the problem for the Germans is that they run out of tail because they are all engaged so many times there is no one else to back up, to bring the munitions up or to bring all of the resources up because they are all getting killed fighting.</p> <p>On the Allied side they had this huge proportion of people who are supporting the fighting troops. So when, for example, the mechanised units are traipsing across Europe, what you actually see is a huge number of people who are traipsing behind the tanks repairing them over night. The Germans don't have anybody repairing the tanks over night because they are all fighting so they don't have a big body of engineers who run round fixing gearbox problems because there is no one left. So, on the one hand what you get through the training mechanism and the proportion of troops – the German side is full of fighting troops and the Allied side is not, but that actually makes sense in terms of the longevity of the War – enables the Allies to keep going because they have thought through what do you actually need to make this work? And what you want is a lot of people who are not engaged in combat to be able to make this work properly.</p>
<b>TT</b>	But isn't that part of military doctrine which has been decided years hence in the twenties and thirties in the build up to the War.
<b>KG</b>	I think that is absolutely right and you can see that in the very first part of the war in North Africa – the Allies do terribly poorly – and the very first part of Normandy. It's not looking good in particular areas, but I think they learn very quickly. They learn that the system they have come up with doesn't work and therefore you

	<p>have to adapt. So it's that learning mechanism that makes the big difference. It's not so much you have trained for this because they have, but they haven't trained for the thing that you can't possibly predict that's the problem – you can't train for that.</p> <p>It's the notion that if you know what the strategy is, if you know what the goal is, you don't need to ask permission – you are just going to do it. So the German philosophy Mission Commander Auftragstaktik tactic has for a long time known that you can't possibly control the front from the back. You can't control the front line from some place in Berlin, so you have to be able to devolve control under those circumstances. So what you do is you train people – what would happen if things didn't work out right.</p> <p>Now on the Allied side at the very beginning of the War, Montgomery realises that the British in particular have a very amateur gentleman approach to this. So the officer core is full of amateur gentlemen and what we don't have is any doctrine. There is no one way to fight because clearly if you have come from the public school side you would know what to do. So the consequence of that is there is no pattern at all and Montgomery realises very quickly that there has to be some learning of patterns here to be able to take. But the consequence of the absence of pattern is that it enforces 'these are the three ways to take a bunker' and they trained religiously their three ways to take a bunker. But what happens if none of the three ways works? Whereas the Germans' approach is much more based upon let's find a way to sort this problem out. So the Germans are actually much more effective as a field army, but it is undermined by their political strategists, by Hitler and their senior commanders, whereas the Allied side is the reverse. The ground commanders go round the problems set for them by their political strategists and just work their way through the problems.</p>
<p><b>TT</b></p>	<p>Brilliant book – if you get a chance read it. I was left at the end with a sense of exhaustion. I had been overwhelmed by the size of the initiative, by the size of the invasion, by the logistics of the invasions and the number of casualties. Also walking around this summer in the graveyards of St Laurent. What has this got to do with Joe Schmo who is trying to operate in a leadership command or management situation inside of an organisation?</p>
<p><b>KG</b></p>	<p>I think there are lots of lessons for thinking about how you deal with complexity. In the first instance, since you can't predict it, it's about how you cope with complexity. How do you cope when things don't go right? That is the first issue. The second thing is to think about how important is this kind of centralised understanding of what the goal is here – what is the purpose of us doing this?</p> <p>And then we think about the issue of change. How do you get an organisation to change? So you trained – the Allies had trained for</p>

	<p>two years to do this and almost instantly all their training has gone, it's pointless. But you can learn, you can adapt very quickly under certain kinds of conditions because if you don't change you are finished. There is something about how you generate a compelling need to change: no point in having wonderful ideas if the compulsion to change is not there. So the compulsion for these people is if we don't change we are finished. There is an issue for that compulsion.</p> <p>I think overall it is a question of trying to understand what kind of a problem are we facing and to sit back and not to be too determined to make an instant decision. To think about this kind of problem won't be resolved by doing what we have been doing for the last two years and that could be whether you are in an organisation or whether you are on the beaches – it's the same issue. What have you learnt to do? Is that working? If it isn't let's rethink what is going on here because this is not going to carry on like this, something else has to be tried. I think it is that understanding. There are some issues which you can't predict.</p> <p>So most of us live most of our lives solving tame problems, that is what we do, that is easy and we know how to do it and these are the procedures which we know will probably work. The problem is not that. The problem is what happens when things don't go right, don't go as planned and then it's a question of how do we address this particular kind of problem – what do we need to do? What I have tried to do in the book is to use these contemporary organisational frames of understanding to rethink what it would have been like to go through this procedure: to have gone through the training, to have thought out the strategy and to be on the beach and to think this isn't working, what needs to be done? So I think that 'this isn't working, what needs to be done' is a very common phenomenon as we are currently seeing in the financial crisis. If we knew what to do, I am sure people would be doing it. The fact is, no one is quite sure what to do. So I think that notion of this is what we want to think about with a wicked problem like this – if it happens to be D-Day or the financial crisis, it's a similar kind of phenomenon. We haven't been here before, what do we need to do? And if you can't ask the question, you can never get to the answer.</p>
<p><b>TT</b></p>	<p>Keith Grint, thank you very much.</p>



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