CLOCK PROBLEMS VS. CLOUD PROBLEMS: A PRIMER

In 1966, philosopher of science Karl Popper observed that some problems work more like clocks—mechanical, finite, predictable, controllable—while other problems work more like clouds—infinite, ever-changing, unpredictable, and hard to control.

The Clock World

With **clock problems** there is a low level of inter-connection between the problem and the broader context/environment.

Therefore, the "cause" of the problem is most likely to reside within the problem itself, and the fix lies in working directly on the problem, separate from the context around it.

The Cloud World

With **cloud problems** there is a high degree of inter-connection between the problem and its environment.

These problems generate a lot of conflict, they are hard to understand, and interventions often resist scaling, and they cause unintended consequences.

Because the problem has a complex set of "causes" and "impacts" that are themselves inter-connected and ever-changing, in these cases you can only address the problem by addressing its relationship with the surrounding context.

The Challenge

The most difficult challenges within our organizations and societies work like **clouds** (e.g., persistent inter-personal conflicts, political polarization, chronic patterns of discrimination, poverty, unemployment, violence, etc.)...

...BUT, the means that are most familiar and easy to use are **clock tools** (e.g., linear planning models, quick wins and countable deliverables, avoid errors, tight accountability to pre-set objectives, etc.).

Therefore, as family members, citizens, colleagues, and leaders, we need more sound approaches for understanding and navigating "cloud problems."
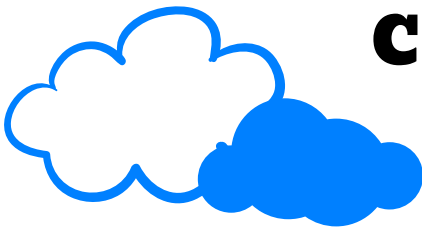
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THREE BASIC THEORIES OF ACTION
(based on Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961)

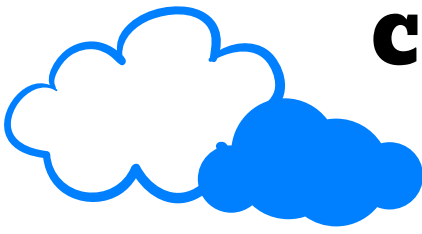| Mastery	Harmony	Submission
Based on the belief that we have the capacity and responsibility to attempt to control nature, society, and the world around us.	Based on the belief that humans can exercise partial but not total control of our world by living in sync with our surrounding social and environmental forces, cycles, and trends.	Based on the belief that the world is so immensely complex and mysterious that it is ultimately unknowable and unfixable.

THREE APPROACHES FOR RESPONDING IN THE FACE OF CLOUD PROBLEMS

Mastery	Get "In-Sync" with Cloud Problems	Harmony
GOAL: Fix the problem THE PROCESS: Analyze the clock problem. Take control. Execute your plan. Be the hero.	GOAL: Identify the "North Star": What does a healthy relationship / organization / society look like? What conditions would help foster the health of the broader system? THE PROCESS: See the multiplicity of forces giving rise to the problem. Work in sync with positive potentials and existing strengths. Fail and adapt.	GOAL: Do no harm. THE PROCESS: Avoid the chaos of a cloud problem. Relinquish control. Stay the course. Be the skeptic.

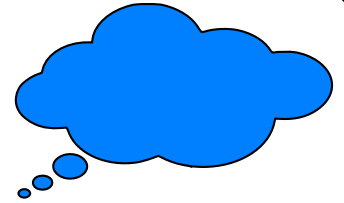# CLOCK PROBLEMS VS. CLOUD PROBLEMS CHECKLIST

CLOCK PROBLEM	CLOUD PROBLEM
☐ Any action taken in response to this problem would have exactly the same effect where ever it is implemented.	☐ An action taken in response to this might have different effects depending on contextual factors like where, when and with whom it is conducted.
☐ Thinking through the problem, it's pretty easy to identify the core issue.	☐ Thinking through the problem feels muddy, and identifying strategies feels like a game of pick-up-sticks— everything seems linked to everything else, and it's hard to know where to start.
☐ Even if the issue is complicated, with the right expertise or knowledge, there are solutions that can address the presenting problem.	☐ It is hard to determine what solution could be applied in this situation that won't have set-backs or negative consequences.
☐ It is likely that this problem can reach resolution—it's feasible that we can work towards a "fix" that will last.	☐ The problem is more related to how we can learn to manage it over time – there is no clear solution or fix.
☐ Past efforts at intervention have seemed to make some progress toward addressing the issue, even if progress has happened more slowly than expected.	☐ Past efforts to address the problem have led to unexpected consequences or unforeseen side effects.
☐ People with expertise generally agree on the nature of the challenge and how to address it.	☐ People understand the problem in radically different ways, and offer a variety of different solutions for addressing it.
☐ A single intervention or a narrow set of solutions can be employed to address the root cause of the issue.	☐ There are multiple, inter-related causes to this problem – for which there are no magic-bullet solutions.

CLOCK PROBLEMS VS. CLOUD PROBLEMS CHECKLIST

REFLECT

- Can you think of examples of "clock problems" from your own life? How does defining them as clock problems change how you think about fixing them?

- Can you think of examples of "cloud problems" from your own life? How does defining them as cloud problems change how you think about changing them?

- Is this a new concept for you? Do you find it useful? Why or why not?