**Building Our Collective Problem Solving Capabilities**

Shura Development  1446 AH

# Building Our Collective Problem Solving Capabilities

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It is fundamentally important that we work toward improving our collective problem solving capabilities. This is because throughout the world we are faced with complex problems that require broad participation to address them.
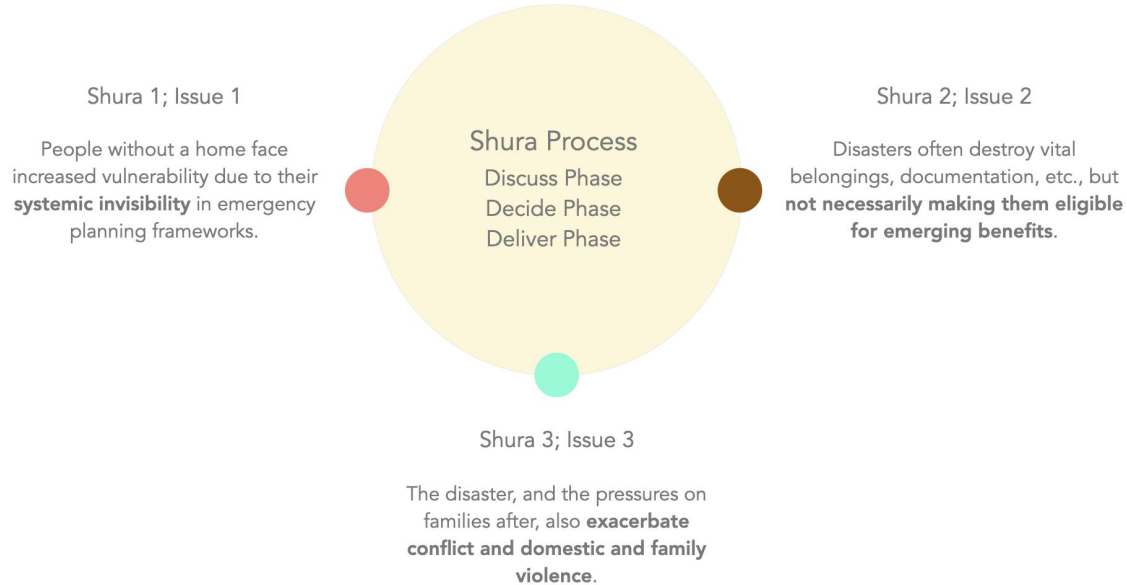
We're talking about big problems that stubbornly resist weak solution approaches. Inequities in housing, education, healthcare, finance, and the workforce serve as perennial examples. To counter this, we need to break these problems into smaller pieces that are within our reach to solve.

Even then, the shape shifting qualities of these problems take on different personalities at local, regional, national, and international levels. What is needed are solution approaches that actively engage people with diverse and complementary skills.

How might we achieve this? Using the ShuraForAll tool can help. The next slide illustrates multi-level shuras at work.

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Housing, Homelessness, and Disasters Issues in Australia*

Multiple shuras can be integrated to work on different parts of a complex problem.

**Shura 1; Issue 1**

People without a home face increased vulnerability due to their **systemic invisibility** in emergency planning frameworks.

**Shura Process**
Discuss Phase
Decide Phase
Deliver Phase

**Shura 2; Issue 2**

Disasters often destroy vital belongings, documentation, etc., but **not necessarily making them eligible for emerging benefits**.

**Shura 3; Issue 3**

The disaster, and the pressures on families after, also **exacerbate conflict and domestic and family violence**.

*Colvin, K. et al., 2024: Housing, homelessness and disasters: An Issues Paper for the Housing, Homelessness and Disaster National Symposium.

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ShuraForAll serves as a platform where many varied teams of people come together to decide on a course of action to take. They use it to work collaboratively and manage the effort to deliver the intended results.

To understand how this works, think in terms of many, many separate instances where people engage others who want to solve a particular problem or pursue a specific opportunity. Each instance is called a shura.

So, from time to time you may hear someone say, "Let's form a shura to work on this." Each shura consists of three distinct phases outlined as follows.

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### Shura set up

The person who starts the shura is responsible for explaining its context and providing a timeline for completing its phases of activities. Relevant documents are liberally uploaded. This information is captured in the Overview section.

### Discuss phase

Following the shura set up, all participants share their points of view on the issue as they recommend various courses of action to take. They are expected to provide evidence in the form of linked references or uploaded files to support their viewpoints. All of this information is entered and stored in the tool.

### Decide phase

After the discussion time period has ended, each person should select their preferred course of action based on their best judgment. The tool will compile selections and present the results to everyone. Once the course of action is agreed on, the shura effort moves to the next phase.

### Deliver phase

This is where participants try to put the selected course of action into motion by setting objectives and carrying out action steps. Each person either joins an existing team or starts a new team and then performs the work. ShuraForAll charts the progress along the way, letting everyone know how things are going.

Now that we have discussed the essential mechanics of how the tool works, let's turn our attention to five key practice areas that often impact the success of a shura. The first of these is cultivating trust.

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Imagine being the person who sets up the shura. You need to communicate clearly and completely the intent of the shura. At first, you may not realize that what you are also doing is revealing an important part of your character to shura participants.

It's hard for people to do the things you ask of them as a leader if they don't trust you. If you want people to trust you, then you must earn it.

A person's intentions are at the heart of their character. Since character is a very important component of trust, intentions are what attract or repel us and lead to shaping our sense of whether to trust someone.

To lead others you must make clear to them what your intentions are. This can be accomplished by consciously taking deliberate steps to reveal your motives when you ask people to do things. First, talk openly about your intentions. Explain to people the objectives you are striving for and why, and include an explanation of the values that guide your actions.

Then you have to follow through on what you say. It is easy for people to doubt your sincerity and not trust you when they see the difference between what you claim your intentions are and what you do.

Just as significant, you need to frequently explain to people why carrying out certain action steps are so important. A consistent message delivered in this way reinforces the reasons provided for performing these actions and not some alternative ones.

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Yet, we don't trust people just because their intentions are good. They also need to demonstrate to us their ability to do what they say they will do at a sufficiently high performance level. You can build this component of trust by inviting others to participate in making decisions and involving them in determining how to implement these decisions. Using the ShuraForAll tool will help with this.

You should regularly ask questions to increase your understanding of things and show your willingness to learn. By doing these things, you will be demonstrating that you know that you don't know everything. That you trust your people and depend on them to trust you.

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Sometimes it is not easy to achieve active involvement by many shura participants. This could be because the right people were not invited. But often it happens as a result of how people feel about the way they are being treated during the Discuss phase.

As the shura initiator, you want to create room for participants to share their views and the evidence to support them. Doing this can help open up opportunities for understanding to develop and the empathy that grows from it. Honest dialogue is at the heart of every successful shura.

What about the behavior of some people who prefer to point out the negatives of an idea and give reasons why it will not work? How do you avoid hurt feelings that might come from this to increase to the point where diverse views are thought to be unwanted?

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One way to address this situation is to make it clear at the very beginning of a shura that anyone who thinks an idea or a recommended course of action will not work must offer one that they think is better. Let everyone know that it is not enough to point out what they think are weaknesses in an idea. A more beneficial shura is one where each idea is given due consideration such that the merit of an idea rises to the top.

Most of us make lots of bad decisions as we individually or collectively work through a process of considering alternative courses of action. Some of this happens because of the way our minds process and understand the world. We tend to filter out information that does not conform to our way thinking, and this might lead to our rejecting what turns out to be essential to better understanding a problem.

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To help keep us from falling into this trap, each shura participant should remind each other to challenge our assumptions and test our conclusions. Doing this is fundamentally different from criticizing an idea. Challenging is about encouraging someone to provide evidence or to better explain how the evidence supports the recommended course of action.

We are more likely to be actively involved in a shura where each of us feel that our participation is valued as much as that of everyone else. Including the shura initiator, it is everyone's responsibility to establish and maintain a shura environment where this behavior prevails.

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Although the primary objective of every shura is to determine the best course of action to solve a problem or address an issue, a shura is incomplete if the selected course of action is not implemented. To accomplish this, use the Deliver phase of the ShuraForAll tool.

This phase of the work begins by forming teams. We use teams because we can solve problems best when we interchange ideas, challenge each other's facts and conclusions, and cross-check judgments. In this setting we develop a questioning approach. Rather than assuming that we are on a path that leads to the desired outcome, we constantly test our findings and make revisions where needed.

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Roles and Responsibilities of Team Members

Each team is made up of at least three participants with one person designated as the team lead. This person is responsible for the overall performance of the work of the team, coaches other team members, and makes the final decision on all matters requiring team input.

The formation of a team does not have to go through a formal process. The ShuraForAll tool allows teams to form "on demand" according to the situation. Any shura participant can start a team. Other participants join a team by selecting the team from the list of existing teams, and then entering an action step description that they want to carry out. Each team member is responsible for completing the action steps that are self-assigned in this way.

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We refer to teams that are formed in this way as self-organizing teams. They hold each other mutually accountable for performing the work. In a classroom context, teachers may determine what students are on teams and who are the team leaders. Students then follow these instructions as they start working in the Deliver phase. Regardless of how teams form, the work remains the same.

What is different in the case of self-organizing teams is how the work gets done and how learning takes place. This especially applies to situations where knowledge about how to produce a desired result is either largely unknown, or is still developing, or is in a state of significant change.
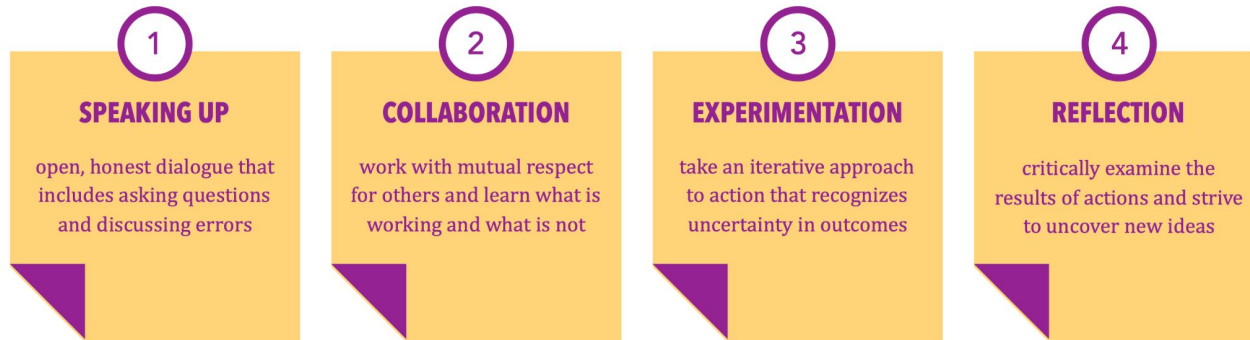
Knowledge of how to solve complex problems facing many communities throughout the world can be described like this. To grow our knowledge base for these problems we are likely to need to engage many self-organizing teams in working toward addressing the various associated external and internal disruptions.

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These disruptions stem from many years of deliberately harmful institutional behaviors that persist today. Examples include government enforced slavery and racism, economic systems based on interest, and government enforced policies in health care, housing, and education that favor selected segments of the world population.

To optimize the potential of self–organizing teams, consider using an approach described by Amy Edmondson's book *Teaming*, John Wiley & Sons, 2012. In it she describes a method for engaging what she refers to as a Leadership Coordination Team that communicates with other teams as they perform their work. This approach is enhanced by using ShuraForAll. See the description on the next slide.

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Leadership Coordination Team

This team is responsible for engaging with other teams as they perform their work so that their efforts reinforce each other. It promotes and facilitates the adoption of four key behaviors*.

**1**

**SPEAKING UP**

open, honest dialogue that includes asking questions and discussing errors

**2**

**COLLABORATION**

work with mutual respect for others and learn what is working and what is not

**3**

**EXPERIMENTATION**

take an iterative approach to action that recognizes uncertainty in outcomes

**4**

**REFLECTION**

critically examine the results of actions and strive to uncover new ideas

* Adapted from Amy Edmondson's book *Teaming*, John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

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Made up of a balanced mix of internal and external team members, the team brings in people with expertise and resources as needed.

An effective way to engage with other teams is to place a member of the leadership coordination team on each of the other teams. This person is an active participant in performing the work of the team while also helping to coordinate their efforts with other teams, as shown below.

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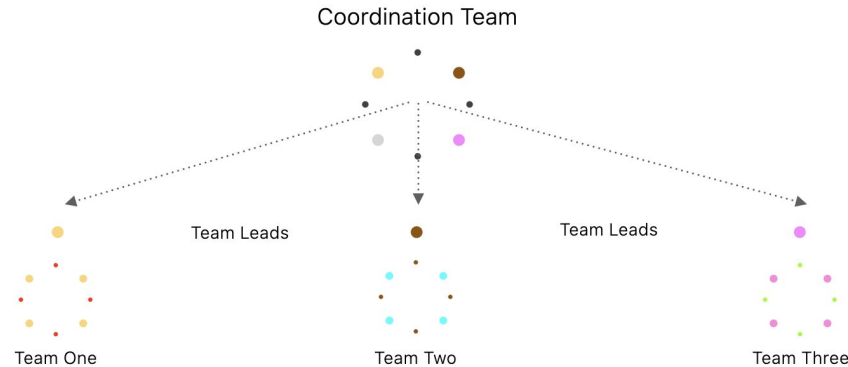
Some problems are very hard to solve. Especially those that stem from complex social issues. Take something like trying to figure out how to provide a water delivery service that supplies clean drinking water in a remote area.

How would you build the trust needed for people to accept the water as being safe? What security measures would you put in place to protect those that delivered the water? If the majority of users who need the service had little money to pay for it, how would you financially sustain the effort?

Tough problems like this call for a different kind of approach than what most of us tend to use. To solve them we need to design experiments, prototypes, interactions, and then test them in repetitive cycles. So, we understand that not all of the tests are going to work. Some will fail. But failure is an incredibly powerful tool for learning.

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When we test our ideas by taking an iterative approach, we need to get feedback from the people we are trying to serve, which of course includes all the participants in a shura. This feedback is captured during the Discuss phase and especially during the Deliver phase. For the problem described above, we might make a small scale model consisting of toy people, trucks, and houses that we show to some of the people we want to serve.

We would use this prototype to explain to them how the service might work and ask for their feedback. Once we understood what could work better, we would make the necessary changes and then go back to them to learn if the improvements were made correctly. Where more changes are needed we would repeat the process until we get a successful solution. This is what is meant by learning from failure.

Without making too big of an investment in time and money, we could use this approach to solve tough problems. We need to be willing to adopt a mindset where we accept that we might not know what the answer is and we are willing to try to find it. And that includes failing along the way.

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Many of us have difficulty giving control to others, especially when we are in a leadership position. We might reason that we feel responsible for the outcome and want to make sure that the work gets done "right." So, we end up focusing on the short-term results rather than the long-term goal of developing the capabilities of others to lead.

One of the key responsibilities of leaders is to develop new leaders. An effective way to accomplish this is to use the approach of "leading from behind." This phrase was used by Nelson Mandela. In his autobiography he equated a great leader with a shepherd: "He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind."

The idea of leading from behind does not mean doing away with your leadership responsibilities. The shepherd, after all, makes sure that the flock stays together, nudging and prodding to prevent straying too far off course or into danger. When leading people we need to provide opportunities for them to interact and problem solve together. This is the essence of a shura.

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Another important activity of leaders is to guide the work of crafting strategies to respond to specific challenges and opportunities. We view the essential components of strategy* to be:

**A diagnosis:** much like the work of a physician, after the real problem is recognized, there is the need to identify the aspects of the situation that are the most important ones to address.

**A guiding policy:** an overall approach that is selected to overcome the obstacles identified in the diagnosis.

**Coherent actions:** steps that are coordinated with each other to support the implementation of the guiding policy.

*Richard Rumelt (2011). *Good Strategy Bad Strategy*. Crown Business.

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The combined functions of the Discuss, Decide, and Deliver phases of the ShuraForAll tool supports strategy formulation and implementation. More on this is presented in a separate "Overview Tips" topic on the tool's Home page.

A shura is basically about building community. In these communities, people are valued for who they are and what they bring to the collective effort of solving a problem. Those who are selected as leaders help identify a shared purpose that brings people together to address matters of importance to them.

In this context, leaders work to build individual and community capabilities to solve their own problems in consultation with others. These capabilities include the ability to generate ideas through discussion and information sharing; the ability to test and refine ideas; and the ability to make decisions in an integrative manner.