
Explaining Complexity: You Just Don't Understand Our Business

Mike Roberts

If I have to explain it, you couldn't possibly understand.

Harley Davidson T-shirt

I heard a good story about complexity once at an oil exploration company, where a roughneck who wanted to order a replacement wrench had to provide a 120-digit account number. When I questioned the Controller about the requirement for a 120-digit account number, his explanation was simple: "You just don't understand our business." These words are among the most common excuses you will ever hear for why business processes simply cannot be improved. They fit right in with another common expression: "our business is unique." Both of these expressions are essentially code for "we are not really willing to think about improving the way we do business."

To be completely honest, if you are trying to help improve a business, expressions like these must be some of the most painful words ever spoken. Not only do they normally indicate that the organization is opposed to change, which is bad enough, but they also suggest a lack of intelligence on the part of the listener. Insult and injury!

I've seen similar examples in a variety of businesses and, as far as I can tell, it exists everywhere. On assignment for a major metropolitan hospital, I found that registered nurses were involved in the mundane activity of making patients beds. Normally, one would expect this activity to be performed by either housekeeping or a nurse's aid. It seemed obvious that by having less-skilled personnel change the bedding, the registered nurses would have more time to address the clinical needs of the patients. In discussing this with the vice-president of nursing, who held a master's degree and was working on her doctorate, she explained to me that only a registered nurse could reliably know when a patient's bed should be changed. Specifically, she said, "if the patient has dry skin, it's best not to change the bed frequently, as this will worsen the skin condition. However, if the patient has been perspiring heavily or has oily skin, it is important to change the bed frequently for the patient's comfort."

I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help but question her reasoning, so I tore in. "Wait a minute, Martha, are you telling me that only a registered nurse can determine if someone has dry or oily skin? If this is true, how do people know when to change their beds at home? Further, are you saying that because I don't have a nursing degree that you wouldn't at least be able to show me how to tell when the bed needs to be changed." Confronted, Martha finally admitted that because I was reasonably bright, I might be capable of being trained to perform the function of changing a bed. However, she was certain that the function could not be entrusted to a nurse's aid or, heaven forbid, the housekeeping staff.

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Once again, the message here was really “I’m not willing to consider changing the way we perform our work.” It also means that there is little hope for improving the processes.

One of my earliest mentors was Max Lund, an accountant at Texas Instruments, who had a ruler—an important tool in the days of manual 13-column spreadsheets—that I always admired. On Max’s ruler were inscribed these words:

*We can have change without improvement,
but we cannot have improvement without change.*

And so it is: Those organizations that believe their environment is too complex, or “too unique,” or “too whatever” are essentially unwilling to investigate new approaches and ideas—and they have little chance of improvement. Moreover, in today’s competitive environment, they have little chance of survival. I try to waste as little of my time as possible with these individuals and groups.