

Dealing with Complex Management Problems

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The business and management landscape has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. With this change comes tremendous opportunities for sound decisions about products and services, and the people who consume them. Many of the opportunities were created by globalization, access to information, increased computing capabilities, and growing customer expectations. At the very center of these opportunities lies the need to refine our capabilities in handling complex organizational problems.

What is now clear is that every complex problem we have exceeds the scope and capacity of any one discipline or functional area. The notion that there is a human resources problem, an IT problem or an operations problem is simply misguided. Complex problems require both a multifunctional and a multidisciplinary approach to resolving them. Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the American statistician who was credited with educating the Japanese about quality and the importance of managing variations, wrote about the need to remove departmental barriers in organizations. Everyone in an organization is serving the customer or serving someone who is serving the customer. There is an indispensable link or connectedness among every unit of an organization. An organization's product or service carries with it a distinctive DNA that is inextricably linked to every unit, process, culture, and person who works for the organization. Some of the connections may be less obvious than others; some may in fact be completely invisible.

Another significant element of an organization's DNA lies in the backgrounds and disciplines represented by the personnel. One might be inclined to question the value that a person with a music, English or history degree brings to a manufacturing or service organization. Com-

plex problems rely extensively on the insight provided by various disciplines. At some point in the life of an organization, it discovers the gaps in some of its most important decisions. If the organization probes diligently, it might even discover that the gaps were the result of the failure to consider certain environmental variables that would only be visible to a person of a different discipline and mindset.

There are several emerging partnerships and collaborations that have become indispensable in achieving success in the face of complex organizational challenges. Collaborations between engineering and medicine have produced enormous outcomes with huge commercial and social implications. Similarly, collaborations between business and engineering, business and medicine, and production and sales/marketing have produced brilliant results.

It is therefore within the purview of good management to recognize and invoke the power of multifunctional and multidisciplinary disposition in addressing complex problems facing modern organizations. This posture will become increasingly critical as organizations strive to increase their global presence, deal with cultural variables, and manage an increasingly complex customer expectation. This editorial is not aimed at suggesting that every organization should hire people from every conceivable discipline out there. I hope this editorial makes the case for the need for a fairly diverse perspective when one of the attributes of an organization's problem is *complexity*. Approaches that reflect a narrow or parochial perspective to a complex problem will invariably produce a suboptimal solution.