Avoid the Complexity Creep

By *Harrison Barnes*

One of the most interesting things that happens as organizations grow, and as people grow, is something I call "complexity creep" that moves into the process of how things are done. What ends up happening is that everything gets more and more complex until, eventually, so much complexity creeps into the system that it hinders, stops, then reverses growth. As everything gets more and more complex, the person, business, or organization experiences more and more problems, and fewer and fewer rewards from the actions they perform. In many cases, it is complexity, I believe, that ends up killing many businesses. In addition, it is complexity that makes many people literally lose their minds and go crazy. It is complexity that holds many of us back in our careers and prevents us from reaching our full potential and being everything we possibly can be. It is complexity that destroys many careers.

An example of complexity creep is seen in General Motors. This is shown in what a May 9, 2005 article about General Motors discussed:

Normally a company in such straits contracts until it reaches equilibrium. What would a healthy GM look like? It might have five fewer assembly plants, building around 4 millions vehicles in North America instead of 5.1 million. That would slash U.S. market share by around 20 percent, but factories would hum with real demand, stoked less by rebate giveaways and cheapo rental-car sales. Workers would have a cost-competitive health care plan, but could fall back on government unemployment benefits when hard times demanded layoffs. Profitable auto sales and finance operations would fuel a richer research budget, tightly focused on four or five divisions instead of eight.

But for GM, shrinkage is not much of an option. Because of its union agreements, the automaker can't close plants or lay off workers without paying a stiff penalty, no matter how far its sales or profits fall. It must run plants at 80 percent capacity, minimum, whether they make money or not. Even if it halts assembly lines, GM must pay laid off workers, and foot their extraordinarily generous health care and pension costs. Unless GM scores major givebacks from the union, those costs are fixed, at least until the next round of contract talks in two years.

GM's payroll pumps $8.7 billion a year into its assembly workers' pockets. Directly or indirectly, it supports nearly 900,000 jobs---everyone from auto-parts workers to advertising writers, car sales people, and office-supply vendors. When GM shut down for 54 days during a 1998 labor action, it knocked a full percentage point off the U.S. economic growth rate that quarter. So what's bad for General Motors is still, undeniably, bad for America.

What is so powerful and compelling to me about this particular statement is the way that an incredible amount of complexity crept into this system. The more complex things get, and the more that is going on in the system, the more difficult it is for good results to come out of the system. The reason is that none of the variables that are contained in the system are "optimized" and instead there are numerous variables going in way too many directions at the same time.

For example, in the case of General Motors, instead of just making cars they have to:

- make a certain number of cars
- have a certain number of auto plants operating
- have a certain number of divisions making cars
- pay a certain number of workers, regardless of what's going on in the market
- honor union agreements
- pay health care costs
- pay pension costs

Instead of just manufacturing cars, GM finds itself in the business of doing multiple different things and being responsible for agreements and other matters that are indirectly connected with making automobiles. It is due to this "complexity creep" that GM finds itself paralyzed and unable to earn money. The more things GM finds itself dealing with, the less of an expert it is in anything. The less of an expert it is in its most important task of making cars, the more problems GM ends up having, because this is its core business. If GM's efforts are not concentrated on making cars, then the quality of the cars goes down. If the quality of the cars goes down, the entire business suffers. The entire process keeps building on itself over and over again.

What does this have to do with your life and career? This has just about everything to do with your life and career. In fact, learning to keep complexity out of what you do, and concentrate on doing just one thing can make a gigantic difference in everything you do. However, nowhere is it more important to keep complexity at bay than in your job. You need to do everything you can to keep complexity at bay in your job so you can do your work as well as possible.

One example of complexity is making friends and/or having romantic relationships at work. While there's nothing wrong with having friends at work, per se, when your co-workers start knowing the pluses and minuses of your personal life, making judgments about your personal life and having judgments made by you about their personal lives (which will upset them), your work life gets more complicated, and it happens quickly. At work, you should be known for the quality of the work you do, not things you may have done and said outside of work. However, this is a huge mistake that many people make. What ends up happening is when you go to work, your job ends up being more defined by what you were doing when you were outside of work, than when you were at work.

When I first started practicing law, I was out at a nightclub one evening and ran into a movie star who, at the time, was pretty well known, Judd Nelson. I was with a good friend of mine who also worked in the same law firm I was in. I'm not sure what the argument was about, but I was standing next to him at a bar and he had cut in front of me in line then said something

extremely rude that upset me and the two of us started arguing. I think I may have told him that being famous didn't give him the right to be an asshole or something along those lines.

The entire situation was really bizarre because we were both standing there at a bar exchanging one insult after another. I was in the nightclub for a few hours, and during the course of the evening, the two of us bumped into each other, threatened to kick one another's asses and so forth. This is not the sort of thing that usually happens when I go out; however, we both made a decision very early on that we disliked each other. The situation was compounded by the fact that he had a small entourage around him and was "backed up" by them, and I was basically on my own. My friend was a really nice guy, but he was not the sort of guy who was interested in taking on five bodyguards with me.

Later that evening as I was leaving the nightclub, he made a crude remark to me in front of my friend (something about being a chicken and leaving the club out of fear of him) and I let it slide. I then went to my car and started driving away. Then, I stopped my car and decided I needed to respond to the remark. I went back into the club and a small altercation ensued that I will not get into now, but it wasn't that big of a deal. I just felt it was important I stick up for myself because this guy seemed to think he was one of the most important people in the world, which I found really strange.

The next day at work, I became known as the guy who beat up Judd Nelson in a bar. In fact, I became somewhat of a celebrity, and all sorts of attorneys kept stopping by my office to hear one story or another about the altercation. People loved it, and everyone wanted to hear about it. However, this was something I simply refused to talk about. The last thing I wanted to be known for was beating up someone in a bar--despite the fact that the story was exaggerated beyond my wildest expectations. Instead, what I wanted to be known for was someone who did really good legal work, was a hard worker, and so forth. Incredibly, the law firm I was in thought the entire story that my friend spread around about it was very humorous and a good thing. But this had certainly complicated my life in terms of how I wanted to be seen.

Over the years, I've heard innumerable stories from people about personal lives becoming impossibly tangled with work lives and the problems this can cause. Your professional persona in most instances is different and needs to be different from your personal persona. It's very important that you don't complicate the two of them. If you start being judged in a negative way for things you have done outside of work, this can do you and your career long-term damage, and it is something that can complicate everything. Instead of being a place where you go to work, your job becomes too intertwined with who you are outside of work.

Another thing that people do to complicate their work lives is allow themselves to be concerned at work with what they want to do when they're done with work. This could involve a hobby, a sport, or socializing. People complicate their work lives by being somewhere else emotionally when they are working. This is extremely common.

Other methods of complexity creep include being involved in office politics, being involved in gossip, taking sides against the management, being concerned about the economy and not work, and worrying about things that aren't going to make you as efficient as possible during your time in the office. You need to be as focused as possible when you are in the office. Allowing yourself to be sidetracked by stuff that has nothing to do with the work in front of you is something that's extremely dangerous. However, it's also something that most of us do. Most of us needlessly complicate our jobs and our lives by allowing too many things to creep into our daily work lives. By allowing ourselves to be obsessively involved with things that have nothing to do with our jobs, we complicate our jobs and become less productive.

Many people cannot choose careers. They are confused about what they want to do and what they believe they should be doing. This confusion makes their lives needlessly complicated and their careers needlessly unfocused. They stay unfocused throughout their careers, and never choose what they are doing. This allows their minds to become and remain needlessly complicated with a choice about what they believe they should be doing, instead of what they are actually doing.

You need to understand and make sense of complexity, and make efforts to reduce complexity. If you don't control complexity and reduce it, complexity will control you, and you're going to be at a huge disadvantage compared to those who have learned to make sense of complexity.

During the summer between my third and fourth year of college I worked every single day as an asphalt worker for at least 12 to 14 hours per day. It was one of the most incredible exercises in work you can imagine, and I exhausted myself beyond measure. In addition, I had hordes of people I was working with in the business and many, many people who were assisting me in my venture of doing asphalt work. In addition, I had people in the field selling asphalt work for me, an accounting firm helping me make sense of the money coming in, and multiple trucks running around Detroit doing all of this asphalt work. The entire operation was crazy and had numerous moving pieces. The asphalt business had grown larger than I could ever have imagined. At one point, it had at least 30 people working for it and the business had multiplied itself with multiple trucks and equipment. In addition, the business did a great deal of work, and there was so much work going on in the asphalt business, it was difficult to believe. Every day we started the jobs before 7:00 am, and often, the work went on until late in the night and often through the entire evening.

At the end of the summer, after operating this business, I was actually in debt and had less money than I had at the beginning of the summer. The reason was that the business had gotten too complex, and in this complexity I had been unable to even reap a profit because too many things were going on, and in all of this activity I couldn't keep track of what was occurring.

You need to watch complexity in your life and career. Eliminate complexity as much as you can, and concentrate on the job and work in front of you. When you learn to concentrate on the work in front of you, and eliminate distraction, everything goes much easier. Businesses are better served by avoiding the complexity creep. Careers are better served by avoiding the complexity creep. Avoid the complexity creep.

THE LESSON

Complexity is the enemy of businesses and individuals, preventing people from reaching their maximum potential. You must control and minimize complexity before it controls you, and instead sharpen your focus on your career and life goals. Learn to concentrate on the task in front of you and minimize distractions, and you will better serve your career.