Five problems with managing complexity

by Gianni Anchois

Tip: you don't have to.

The main issue with managing complexity of course is that you should not have to! Hence, the aim of a true leader should be to eliminate complexity in everything we do.

LESS IS ALWAYS MORE

Undeniably, modern life has become incredibly busy, and with that also very complex. Technology and modernisation have certainly helped speed up a great number of our daily activities, but, it seems, only to give us more time to squeeze even more new ones in. It all adds up to complexity, in terms of behaviours, processes and relationships.
In a business context, the moment you accept to manage high complexity, you're doomed.

Firstly, complexity is a beast that feeds upon itself (or a self-fulfilling prophecy if you will). The more complexity you get used to manage, the more complexity you will end up with. The problem with someone who's very good at managing complexity is that they will always be able to manage more, hence will not really feel the urge or the need to help

eliminate it. Don't assume that complexity mainly comes from external factors, in fact it mostly comes from within your company.

Additionally, if you are good at managing complexity, you will not only effortlessly take on more, but you will constantly generate more. Rather than thinking "let's try to make my point in three slides rather than thirty" you will go "it wasn't too difficult for me to develop fifty slides, so maybe

I can just add a few to provide more background information". You revel in your complex world, you feel empowered and that power goes to your head. By the time you cycle through this reasoning a few times, you will not really feel much difference, but your colleagues and your audience in general will. You will drive everybody else crazy, and your company too.

SHORT AND SWEET

To be short, concise and simple is a hell lot more difficult than to be long, verbose and complex. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French philosopher and mathematician, famously once wrote to a friend *"Apologies for sending you this long letter, I just did not have the time to write you a short one"*.

He was right of course. It's much easier to be long and convoluted, hence complex, than short, sharp, direct and to the point. Any blogger or writer knows this very well. Unfortunately, business managers and leaders don't necessarily seem to know.

Complexity is also darn expensive. Compute the time that you spend, on average, trying to make sense of any business material. Or product brochure. Or even email. Add to that the time spent in meetings where most of the discussion is around the interpretation of some data points, or reports. All money that could be better spent somewhere else. Huge expense caused by pervasive complexity.

MUDDY WATERS

Finally, complexity can lead to the *"if you cannot convince them, confuse them"* syndrome. This is very common in business.

It's the behaviour adopted by someone unable to get his point through. Seeing you staring in a vacuum, he decides to add even more complexity to his formula. The principle is that if he's not able to make you understand his pitch, then he can at least fill your head with confusion and doubt.

In other words, it is complexity as a smokescreen and a declaration of superiority.

You, the receiver, should feel at least a little ashamed for not being able to understand and digest complexity like your counterpart. This is also known as *"pitching by bullshitting"*, a practice extremely common in most business environments, at all levels (arguably, the closer you get to the top, the more of it you get...).

THERE IS NO OTHER WAY

So my heartfelt suggestion is this: if you are good at managing complexity, stop now. Maybe you don't realise it, but you are turning from an asset to a liability very quickly.

You are using complexity to resist change, as a cheap device to hide things, or to murk them. Granted, sometimes you do it unconsciously, but still you do it. Not to mention the fact that you will eventually choke your organisation.

In a way, you're behaving like those IT managers resisting outsourcing for fear of ending up out of a job. Carry on like that, and you will be the next one in line to be fired. You've been warned...

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Gianni Anchois is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.

<p align="center">http://twitter.com/giannianchois</p>

<p align="center">https://www.linkedin.com/in/giannianchois</p>

<p align="center">https://medium.com/@giannianchois</p>