

Why does simple work generate complex Problems over the years[†]

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It is of interest to have a look at some of our operations. We will observe that in performing the same work, at least at the mid and lower levels of organizations, the results obtained are not the same as, say, 20 years ago, e.g., the same type of crane unloads the same type of crates, gunnies or drums at Karachi port; for the crane driver, the recording clerk, etc. the work is much the same. The railways transport human beings from, say, Lahore to Karachi; for the ticket-clerk, the engine driver, the cashier etc. the work is much the same. Considering electricity distribution to a consumer; for the meter reader, the maintenance technician, the complaints clerk, etc. the work is much the same. Considering pension cases, the procedure for retiring employees is much the same. Yet in all the examples given above we are all very much aware of a general deterioration over the years. Why is this so, after all the basic work of shifting lever/gears, recording reading/salaries, cash receiving/disbursing, recording complaints/records has not altered at all, i.e., at the level where the physical transactions actually take place, which is also where the productive work gets done, which is also where the overall successes/failures of an organization are well and truly laid. To put it in another way, why is it that the methods used in the 1950s for solving problems are no longer delivering the goods today? Is this not shown up in many ways, ending up with frustration or even exasperation, e.g. even though the route mileage of the railways has not really increased but through much more intensive use of the facilities over the years new problems generated have been thrown up that have been so difficult to resolve. Also consider our internal revenue system, under the four heads – excise duty, sea customs, sales tax and income tax. The total annual turnover in 1948 was about Rs. 20 crores, today under, the same heads it amounts to over a 100 times the 1948 figure, and we are aware short term curative actions at least on three occasions were supposed to have set this system right. Has it? Consider our telephone bills, who does not have bitter experiences on that topic? Hardly a telephone subscriber does not have pungent views yet month after month one hopes for improvement And, of course, several other examples could be given.

An analogy might be of some assistance, as this is one way of approaching the unknown from the known. Supposing it is necessary to move stones from point A to point B and time is of no consideration. It could take 30, 40 or even 50 years. A contractor could employ 5, 10, 100, 200 or even 250 labourers to do the job. If the number of labourers were to exceed 250 he would find it very difficult to remember all their names. However, up to this number he would at a glance at all times know who was absent without leave, who was working very efficiently, who was malingering, who was a victim of domestic trouble. In dealing with up to 250 individuals, because of the small size of the effort, all

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problems could be fully and efficiently encompassed by a single brain which ensures perfect knowledge of all the physical transactions. Hence control is as efficient as could be. However, if the same stones have to be shifted in a few months, may be 100,000 labourers would be required, may be 50,000, may be 5,000. If the contractor attempted to use the same methods as he had previously used he would never be able to accomplish the task, in fact it doesn't take much to see that he would very quickly fall flat on his face. He may have to put up a temporary labour colony (with all that goes with it). He may have to run a transportation service (with all the workshop and maintenance complications). All the thousands of workers would have to clock in for work (which would require comparatively sophisticated arrangements), may be 3 shifts 7 days a week. Again, who would report to whom, additionally, there would be problems of hygiene, as also problems of feeding the workers.

In both the above cases the expected results required are exactly the same, i.e stones at point A must end up at point B, yet the problems thrown up in achieving the same results are of a totally different nature, if a qualitative shift has taken place in the nature of the difficulties doing exactly the same type of work in shifting the stones. At what stage this qualitative shift took place, as the size of the effort intensified, no one can say but most certainly it did. One can jump across a river and that too if one can't swim!

We have to accept that this qualitative shift has taken place in several organized activities in Pakistan and elsewhere. Therefore, it would be logical to assume that this shift would call for a corresponding shift in our methods/attitudes towards work, towards our methods of training, towards our methods of evaluation, towards our methods of coordination, towards our methods of control, towards our methods of planning, towards our methods of recruitment and above all towards our methods of acquiring information. The reader will readily note that all these activities are concerned with servicing the system to assist the mid and lower levels to take care of the physical transactions and this has not altered as brought out earlier And last but not least in understanding that the more that power (authority) is concentrated at the top of the pyramid the more self-defeating it becomes. The necessity for decentralization becomes paramount. With decentralization the requirements for control alter because no longer does one person in "carry it all in his head." It is here that only an understanding of the value of centralizing information can lead to confidence in delegation of authority. Information is thus singled out for special considerations because in all administrative/executive system officers are only handling information and making decisions and nothing but nothing else. Of course, the quality of a decision is directly dependent on the quality and time of receipt of the relevant information.

In an organization where the qualitative shift has not taken place, i.e., it must be a small organization, the top man can through personal contact keep tabs on all the activities. As such, his subordinates can funnel upwards information that the top man can check/countercheck/validate in good time so that corrective action is taken before the veritable horse bolts from the proverbial stable!

In large organizations, we are well aware, the top man has insufficient time to go into all problems in sufficient detail involving checking, etc. This has, over a period of time (because of a lack of understanding the qualitative shift leading to a lack of proper information system), led to subordinate units deciding in their wisdom what information should be funneled upwards to the boss, for him to make his decisions, to discharge his responsibility upwards. Even giving the subordinate units the best of intentions, it is unfair to expect them to do justice in pushing upwards what is really relevant information, i.e., information relevant to the requirements of the higher level. It is the top man in each organization who must decide what he requires and this has, under our existing conditions, become a veritably difficult job. Just as a heavyweight wrestler can lift weights well enough, his ability to design a crane would be suspect. Likewise a good decision maker's ability to design an efficient decision-making system could be equally suspect. The expertise required for each activity is different. If only our senior administrators understood this.

/simple work