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The Complexity Killer

The world is much more complex than it was when I was a teenager 30 years ago. We had one rotary dial telephone and a television that received 3 channels. We lived in a rural area that was “primitive” compared to modern time. My parents still live in the same house. They now have cell phones, a PC, fax machine, 3 printers, satellite television, receive their internet via Verizon’s broadband cellular network and even have an iPad.

Humankind has always sought ways to improve their lives - fire, the wheel, stone tools then copper, bronze, iron and finally steel. Local mail to the Pony Express, telegraph, telephone, e-mail and finally text messaging. Improvements in technology were the key to all of these advances. These technology-driven improvements created a better but more complex world for the inhabitants of each era.

The pressures to cope with all of this complexity can be overwhelming. I would like to share some concepts I have found useful for breaking down complex issues into smaller and resolvable portions when working in a group environment.

Concepts

1. Simple for you may not be for others
2. Look at the whole of the desired product and deconstruct
3. Seek to understand all portions of the work
4. Seek to understand how parties interact

Starting with the first point, do not tell anyone it is a simple problem to solve - even if it is for you. This can (and probably will) be interpreted as an insult. While we do not want to go through a project, or life, worrying about not offending others, there are limits to what are acceptable in a civil society.

The group you are working with may not have the years of experience or insight that allows you to see it as an easy problem to resolve. Coach them to look at the problem in various ways and at its multiple aspects. Guide them to the right path and give them encouragement so they can solve it themselves. Failing fast is the best education they can receive. The project deadline will affect how hard you “nudge” them down the path. Secondly, I like to approach a problem by creating a vision in my mind of what I want the end product to look, sound, feel and sometimes even smell like. I then begin a step-by-step deconstruction of the vision or idea. I then define and label each piece so I can

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rebuild the idea. I like to think of a problem as a brick house that I am tearing down one brick at a time. These “bricks” are the pieces of the project that become the individual tasks of the project.

Now that the project has been broken into manageable parts and assigned to competency groups, it is time to look at the third concept and begin interacting with each of these groups. Your goal should be to understand some of the details of each portion, why it is important and how it works with the other parts. This gives you the knowledge to make sure the “bricks” are being assembled into the desired “house”. Also, the interaction with the various teams will help you guide all of them.

The last item to consider when consulting with or leading a team is to understand how they work together and does this interaction provide the desired results. If the project is a short-term, one-time affair for the company and these members, then this step may be minimized. This is not the normal case. Successful teams should be “recycled and reused” for the next project. If we can understand why they were successful, then we can make them more successful on the next project and take those lessons to another team and improve their performance too.

We live in a complex world and there are many problems to solve everyday. Some simple -- many are not. The concept described above may help you and your teams achieve greater results.

Remember:

- Do not offend by over simplification
- Look at the whole
- Deconstruct it
- Seek to understand everyone’s portion
- Seek to understand team dynamics
- Recycle and reuse successful teams when possible

[Doug Ringer](http://www.dougringer.com) is currently a product manager for a Fortune 500 Tier 1 automotive firm. Doug has held senior, global roles in marketing, manufacturing and R&D at General Electric, Ericsson and Honeywell and in a small private firm. He also served on the board of directors and president of the board of a civil rights organization based in Kentucky. Doug lives with his family near Louisville, Kentucky. Follow him at <http://www.dougringer.com>.