

The Problem with COMPLEXITY

What do you think? ... We have 30 seconds ¹

(part 1)

Charles Villanyi Bokor

The problem

“I just don’t understand it.” said Bob, looking at the latte he was holding in his hands.

“There are some things that I do not understand either.” I interrupted “How does the English language change Robert into Bob or William into Bill? Intellectually I know it is about hypocrisy, and showing affection or closeness, but I never managed to befriend this idea.”

“What do you not understand? I have not told you what I do not understand.” He was stern almost agitated. “What I do not understand is why do I still have all these problems, issues, misdirection and what seems to be general ineffective management of this project. With so many qualified people involved, we should be managing this project much better.” continued Bob. He took a few seconds then said: “I have a fairly simple project that is supposed to replace a legacy system. So why is it that after years in development, we are still discussing requirements? The project has been going on for three times the originally estimated length of time. It is now using twice the number of people we started out with and is now scheduled to take another year before we get to the end. By then, I suspect, the needs will have to be or should have been changed, if they have not already, and so the system will be much less valuable than originally expected. Yes, it will be the system we decided to build, but it will not be the application we will need. However, by the time it will be ready, we will accept it, just so we can gracefully put an end to the project.” The latte was extremely good from this coffee shop and the comfortable seats in our cars made the conversation seem like it was intimate.

“I have qualified people. PMPs.” Bob continued. I have a contractor that is a world wide leader and expert in the IM/IT [Information Management / Information Technology] field, my client has been using the legacy system for years so they know what they want, we have the most robust development methodology in the federal government, and this project is still going on and on.”

We had to stop talking for a while as a small sporty car with a loud ‘flow through’ muffler drove up to the parking lot where we were parked. As we both were sitting in our own cars talking through the half open window, we could not hear each other with the noise. We were working around Covid-19’s constraints of not having face-to-face in close proximity meetings.

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“What is going on? I now have another new estimate for the schedule. Will I be able to deliver as per this latest schedule? Will the application deliver the functionality that the business needs? Will there be new impediments or functionality missing? Is there anything I need to do differently?” Bob asked after the noise subsided.

We expect instant answers

“Bob, the answer to the last question is easy. You know what will happen if you keep on doing the same thing the same way, so I will consider that question rhetorical. As for the answers to the other questions, there are at least four problems with you asking them.” I tried to pace myself, lowered my voice and tried to be as instructive as I possible could be.

“The first problem with these questions is that, obviously, you want me to give you in two minutes a simple, easy to understand, clear, step by step, ‘off-the-cuff’ solution to what may be a complicated or complex [Nason, 2017] challenge. You have spent a long time trying to solve a problem and its related issues and failed. But, before your smart phone beeps again, you want an ‘elevator speech’ answer that you can go back and implement. You want an on-the-spot, educated answer that synthesizes everything I have learned in the past few decades, and put it into a format that you will agree with, will understand and will not second guess. I mean no disrespect, Bob, but in the short time you want me to respond, I will not be able to identify and evaluate all the variables and all their relationships, provide an educated solution and an adequate justification in terms that the average professional will understand. My answer may need to use many of the more controversial, uncommon concepts that are based on the many books and hours of research done on the subject.

It takes an SME (subject matter expert) time to elaborate a technical answer, and more time to reword it and make it easy for readers to understand without losing any of its value. Quick answers are for show, less valuable than necessary and do not eliminate the recurrence of the problem, are general rather than customized to specific cases and incorrectly imply that there is only one answer. They often attempt to solve what is urgent, not what is important, or solve the problem not its root cause, hence they attempt to solve yesterday’s problem not tomorrow’s. These solutions are readily available from many people especially those who are not SMEs in the subject.

The second problem with asking an SME for quick answers to complicated or complex questions, or for a clear and immediate solution to problems, is that you want these answers for free. Over the many decades in consulting, I have learned that advice is considered by the recipient to be worth what it cost. Consequently, recipients do not take responsibility for implementing free advice, so that even if the advice is valuable it will add no value to the outcome. People take expensive advice and benefit very little from one that an SME gives on the spot or for free. It is also true in this context, that when advice is given for free and ‘off-the-cuff’, the advisor has not committed to it, so the advice may only be worth its cost. While I should not, I will give you my advice for free, because I know you will neither accept it, value it, nor act on it. My advice, Bob,

is to acknowledge that you need an expert PM's advice, and find a way to pay a hefty sum for his or her customized solution.

The third problem with these questions in Plato's words, is that: "No one is more hated than the one who speaks the truth." I know you expect my best judgement, but can all your stakeholders accept the unvarnished version of the truth? We must have a reality check, meaning, you must decide if the priority is a solution that is PC [politically correct], non-confrontational and stated 'at a high level' or one that is fact-based, viable, requires change and may not gain stakeholders' support. Many environments in the past and in the future, have and will make people chose a path that even if not viable, is generally supported and non-confrontational. If the organization or project is unwilling to implement what may be uncomfortable advice, then the value of the advice is immaterial. Before you go back, you must decide how will you deal with a solution if it indicates that some people did not do their jobs, do not know how to do their jobs, know how to talk not do, are using the wrong approach, or that no one accepted accountability.

Finally, the fourth problem with these questions is that they expect answers based on a cursory understanding of a specific situation. This is not to say that Michael Masterson's 'ready, fire, aim' is a bad approach, but to say that it is not always the best approach. General solutions generally do not work when the project is complex. According to H. L. Mencken, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." Without evaluating the justifications for the business case and the client's requirements today, I cannot, Bob, confirm that you should continue spending more money and continue this project." This kind of summed up my feeling on the subject but did not answer the question in any way.

"Bob, if the answer was easy, you would not need to ask an SME. If the SME you ask gives you recommendations based on common sense rather than based on an analysis of a complex problem, then that recommendation may be useless when you try to implement it. You don't need an SME to tell you that: "You need to improve profit making." or "The solution needs to satisfy the stakeholders" and certainly not one who guarantees "110%". We all want the 'Aha' moment, the 'This will solve everything tomorrow' solution, the 'Step by step' implementation and the 'Clearly and precisely stated output' for executives' consumption. But predetermined, unchanging approaches that are possible for small, complicated, like a jigsaw puzzle projects is not possible for projects that are complex. As a final summary, your project evolved, became complex and needs to be led, but your PM kept on managing it as if it were complicated.

"Got it." Bob said in a manner that was most satisfying, because it made both of us feel that we understood that any easy, 'off-the-cuff' answer offered by an SME to a complex project's problems, is probably going to be insufficient to actually solving the problem. The ensuing silence indicated that he was after a more thought-out explanation of why his project was in trouble.

REFERENCES

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About the Author



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