



On why managers and citizens need to recognize that people design systems because

“What were they thinking?”
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“This Way It’s Easier for Us”

Did you ever wonder about the multitude of official rules, formal procedures, historical traditions, obligatory practices, and implicit behaviors that govern how an organization does its work? . . . How *your* organization does its work?

Did you ever ask (yourself or someone else) the obvious question: “Why? Why do we do it ‘that way’?”

What answer did you get?

There are, of course, a variety of traditional answers:

“The boss says we should do it ‘that way.’”

“The legislature directed us to do it ‘that way.’”

“The judiciary requires us to do it ‘that way.’”

“The lawyers told us that (to stay out of trouble) we must do it ‘that way.’”

Thus, wanting to stay out of trouble, everyone in the organization will certainly always do it “that way.”

These explanations all have one thing in common: Someone—or some collection of someones—issued a dictate: “Thou shalt do it ‘that way.’”

No analysis. No debate. No argument. End of discussion.

Of course, there also exists a traditional answer to the question—an answer that does not reflect a decision by some higher authority:

“Because we have always done it ‘that way.’”

This response is an all-purpose bureaucratic cliché. Anyone who offers it is also asserting that “I am not authorized to make a change. I certainly am not responsible for making a change:

Yes: *We* have always done it that way. But I’m only a small cog in today’s *“we.”* In fact, neither the *“we”* who originally designed “it,” nor the *“we”* who continue to insist that “we do it that way,” do not include *me*.

This all-purpose excuse comes, if only by default, with the obvious exculpation: “Hey, I’m not in charge.”

Indeed, the *“we”* who have always done it this way consists of people who—everyone knows—are not in the least bit in charge. They are doing it

the way it has always been done, because they have no authority to make any modifications.

When they first came to work, they were directed: “This is how we do it.” So they saluted.

They are in the same position as the cavalry in Tennyson’s *Charge of the Light Brigade*:

Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Fortunately, most of today’s public employees are not commanded to ride into a literal “valley of Death.”

How do organization’s design their work—their procedures, their systems—the way they do? It could be because they want to make it easier for the rest of the world to interact with the organization. Or, it could be because “this way it is easier for us.”

Nevertheless, their superiors may ask them to ride into some bureaucratic equivalent. They will, of course, recognize that someone has “blundered.” And although they will not physically die, by not making a reply, by not trying to publicly reason why, they will be professionally tainted by their participation in their organization’s infamous “blunder.”

Similarly, they don’t ask the obvious question: “Why are we doing it that way?” They don’t ask the even more fundamental question: “Why are we doing this at all?” They recognize the danger in either question.

Instead, they simply do it the way they have always done it.

Sometimes, however, people in an organization get to decide how they will do it. Maybe nobody cared. Maybe a few people did care, but they lacked the time or status to analyze the various possible ways to do it.

Still, there had to be “a way”—some consistent way that everyone

does it. Otherwise, not only would those in the organization be confused. Everyone that dealt with the organization would also be confused.

Individuals can’t choose how to file their tax returns. Individuals can’t choose what driver’s test they will take to get their license. There has to be some consistency—even if, as Emerson observed, “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

Of course, if the organization does get to choose—if superiors do *not* tell it how to its job—it will need to generate an explanation for *why* it does things one way rather than another.

A long time ago, in a college far, far away, a faculty member walked into the campus library, to check out the latest issues of several political science journals. To his surprise, he discovered that the arrangement of these journals on the shelves had been significantly changed.

Previously, the journals had been grouped alphabetically by academic discipline. The political science journals were all together and easy to find—located between the physics journals and the psychology journals.

The librarians had decided, however, to reorganize the shelves. No longer were they grouped by disciplines. Now they were *all* arranged alphabetically.

This faculty member pointed out that he found the previous system was easier for him. After all, now the *American Political Science Review* was located between *American Poetry Review* and *American Psychologist*.

This faculty member pointed out that, with the previous system, he found it much easier to locate the political science journals.

Yes, replied the librarian. “But this way it’s easier for us.” **B**

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