Blog number 8

Quick Fixes: the Fastest Way to a Slow Death

The majority of all products manufactured are the result of many years, perhaps even decades, of development work. Over the years, almost all large technical systems and computer programs have therefore become unnecessarily large and complex because many quick fixes have become permanent solutions.

It may sound something like this:

Verse one
• The electronics in a control system generate so much heat that they break down. No problem for the organization, which immediately develops and adds a cooling flange.
• The cooling flange helps, but doesn't solve the problem completely. No problem for the organization, which immediately adds a small fan above the cooling flange.
• The fan, however, makes so much noise that the customers complain. No problem for the organization, which quickly constructs a ventilated, sound-absorbing box to fit over the control system, fan, and cooling flange.
• The customers think the ventilated sound-absorbing box is ugly and complain. No problem… You get the picture.

Verse two
• The control system has now become too expensive, and the company is starting to lose market share. No problem for the organization, which now launches a cost-cutting program, sourcing cheaper components and even some of lower quality. They end up with a cheaper but also poorer product.
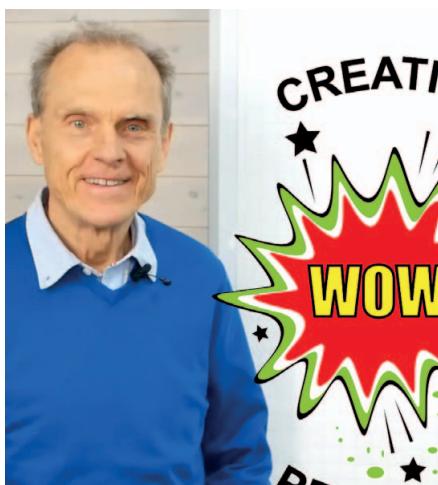
Verse three
• The employees pack up and go home because the company has gone bankrupt. Customers are now buying their control systems from a competitor whose electronics generate no heat.

When I share this story at different trainings or seminars, it's not uncommon for someone to get up and say, "That's exactly what we did! Are you talking about our company?"

You might think I'm being unfair to the organization in our tale. However, this is not a unique case. The phenomenon can manifest itself in various forms that are hard to detect, such as sensors, feedback loops, logic gates, warning lights, fuses, subroutines, backup servers, gold-plated contacts, and tight tolerances, to mention a few.

When an organization follows this development path, it often creates specialists, and sometimes even entire departments, who become experts on cooling flanges, fans, and sound-absorbing boxes.

It doesn't take long before the organization starts boasting about having the world's best cooling flange and files a bunch of patents. The only problem is that customers aren't the slightest bit interested in cooling flanges. Customers want electronics that don't generate heat.

There is nothing wrong with quick fixes; sometimes they are necessary. The problem is that the organization in the tale has weak value-based thinking (functional and cost-based). They lost grip on the main, additional, unwanted, and support functions in their product. They lost grip on where value is created and where it is lost. And that was the root cause of the slow death.

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