"But We Have Always Done It This Way!"

One of the Most Dangerous Phrases in Business

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"The greatest risk in an organisation isn't what's broken. It's what hasn't been questioned in years."

There are few phrases in business more dangerous than "we've always done it this way". It's the corporate equivalent of putting your foot on the brake while believing you're accelerating.

On face value, it sounds reassuring, sensible and experience based. But, in reality it's often a sign that critical thinking stopped some time ago. It's also a phrase frequently used to shut down challenge, defend habit, and avoid scrutiny - but rarely ever to justify excellence.

However, there's one business truism, and that's markets, customers, and technology are constantly evolving. Whereas, too often, processes and practices don't.

Over time, what might have originally been sensible decisions quietly become ingrained as fast as they become outdated, and because the system still 'functions', nobody feels any urgency and the status quo is tolerated.

Systems Alone Are Not the Solution

Many organisations recognise that something feels outdated and respond by investing in systems such as ERP upgrades, CRM implementations, and AI tools.

Yet systems alone don't solve stagnation, and without the courage to challenge underlying assumptions, even the best of these platforms will simply automate yesterday's logic.

In one business I reviewed, dozens of inbound RFPs were being deleted daily due to internal capacity constraints. Sales and marketing were investing heavily to generate demand, while their receiving team was quietly filtering it out. In this example, the ERP system was old, and reporting was limited. But the deeper issue was that no one had ever questioned the process.

Technology didn't fail them, but complacency did.

Forecasting Without Challenge

I once assessed a multi-million-pound sales forecast built almost entirely on "last year plus escalation."

- No product-level breakdown.
- No demand-based logic.
- Half the historical data misclassified.

When the market shifted, the organisation was blindsided.

The information required to build a robust forecast already existed within the organisation. It simply had never been structured, managed, or interrogated

properly. Instead, assumptions had been allowed to become the accepted truth.

In many organisations forecasting becomes a calendar ritual rather than an operational tool.

Often the cadence is driven less by commercial decision-making than by financial reporting cycles. At fixed points in the year, the organisation pauses, gathers numbers, rebuilds projections and sends the results upwards.

For a short period, everyone becomes intensely focused on "the forecast". Sales teams revisit accounts, managers reconstruct pipelines, and the finance dept consolidates spreadsheets. Then the exercise ends and attention returns to the day job.

The process consumes significant time from the very people responsible for generating revenue and supporting customers, yet the forecast itself often remains built on outdated assumptions.

By the time the forecast is completed, new information has already accumulated across sales teams, customer conversations, and operational activity. None of it has been systematically captured or reflected.

What should be a continuously evolving view of commercial reality becomes a periodic exercise in documenting assumptions that may already be wrong.

And outdated assumptions can be very expensive.

The Hidden Cost of Legacy Decisions

Legacy thinking doesn't just live in systems either. It also lives in the structure.

In one organisation, product warranty decisions were handled exclusively by the commercial team. This had been the arrangement for years, and no one had questioned it.

When responsibility was eventually shifted closer to technical expertise, the impact was immediate and measurable. The question for any organisation is: how many other structural misalignments exist that have similarly gone unquestioned?

Nothing about the product had changed, only the decision structure. So, while unintended outcomes may be 'accidental', they're definitely produced by the structures that support them.

It's also worth stressing that not every legacy process is wrong. It's simply that very few are re-validated.

Training for Tomorrow - or Preparing for Yesterday?

Many organisations rely heavily on on-the-job training. It has certainly been proven to have value, but it also focuses on how things are done today, and not tomorrow.

Consequently, if the underlying process is already outdated, that training simply embeds the problem deeper.

True capability development requires asking a harder question:

Are we equipping people for the way the business needs to operate in two years' time - or just reinforcing how it operated two years ago?

Without periodic challenge, even well-intentioned development becomes institutional reinforcement.

Leadership Sets the Ceiling

When leaders tolerate "that's how we do it here," they unintentionally suppress challenge.

Over time:

• Initiative declines
• Critical thinking narrows
• Strong people disengage
• Risk tolerance becomes distorted

The organisation appears stable. But stability built on untested assumptions is fragile.

Additionally, when after-sales activity is managed primarily as cost control rather than as a value engine, inertia becomes embedded in budgeting, KPIs and talent allocation. Over time, that mindset quietly erodes competitiveness in a market that's anything but static.

The greatest risk isn't that your processes are imperfect. It's that they're permitted to operate unchallenged.

What Goes Unchecked Becomes Normalised

Look closely at your own operation.

Are there:

- Forecast models no one fully understands?
- KPIs inherited from prior strategies?
- Reporting cycles designed around hierarchy rather than insight?
- Decision rights based on legacy structure instead of proximity to expertise?
- Customer feedback gathered inconsistently or superficially?

Each item on its own is defensible, but collectively, they reveal something deeper.

Structural inertia.

And inertia isn't something that is ever celebrated. Instead, it accumulates in the background until the environment changes faster than the organisation can respond.

The Real Question

Most leadership teams believe they're adaptable, but very few will have ever formally assessed whether that belief is justified.

If an independent party mapped your:

- Forecast methodology
- KPI architecture
- Decision authorities
- Customer feedback loops
- System utilisation

Would the conclusion be that your operation is engineered for tomorrow, or optimised for yesterday?

The reality is that you can't improve what you haven't exposed, and you can't expose what you've normalised.

A Structured Way to Test It

A concise Legacy Thinking Diagnostic has been designed specifically for leadership teams operating in complex B2B and after-sales environments.

It doesn't provide quick fixes, but it does highlight:

- Where legacy assumptions are embedded
- Where forecasting and KPI structures may be fragile
- Where process inheritance creates drag
- Where cultural norms suppress adaptability

Unfortunately, most organisations never conduct this kind of structured review. But that doesn't mean they're safe.

If the phrase "we've always done it this way" appears anywhere inside your operation, it may be worth formally assessing what that's costing you.

Because the renewal transition can only begin after exposure of the issues.

For organisations looking to challenge the status quo and renew their service operations, visit Aftermarket Advisory Consulting.
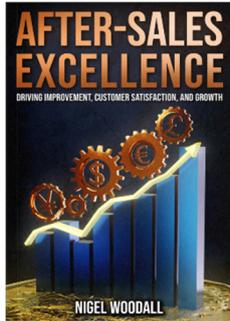
These insights draw on my work across multiple business sectors and the principles explored in greater depth in *After-sales Excellence: Driving Improvement, Customer Satisfaction, and Growth by Nigel Woodall.*

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