

Take Management Back to Basics



Success with Simplicity

David Brewster

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David Brewster



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*To managers everywhere who are doing their best
to get things done.*

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Introduction

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication”

—Leonardo da Vinci

“The simple things in life are often the best”

—Kellogg’s Corn Flakes slogan

When preparing for a recent business trip, it struck me that I was spending more time making sure I had a full set of batteries and power cords than making sure I had enough clothes! But as I arrived at the airport without a paper ticket to lose or forget, it struck me that all is not lost in the pursuit of simplicity.

Simplicity. A beautiful word. A word which, by its mention alone, creates a sense of relief in this increasingly complex world. Simplicity is a value most would agree is something worth striving for. But so often it seems all too hard - if indeed we have time to think about it at all.

And that’s where the problem starts. For simplicity doesn’t just ‘happen’. In fact without conscious effort the opposite – increased complexity - is almost certain to happen.

Our modern world generates complexity at the speed of thought (to paraphrase Bill Gates). Where once we communicated with the outside world by fixed phone or mail, we now have to deal with

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phone, mobile phone, fax, email, voice-mail, SMS, instant messaging, internet telephony – the list goes on. Where once we had a filing cabinet we now have a desktop, laptop, PDA and mobile to coordinate.

And these examples only relate to technology. Complexity is imposed on us by the surfeit of choices available to us at every turn. By bureaucracy and regulation. By the speed of the market place and the even greater speed of change. By an ever-rising flood of information.

Modern evolution almost requires complexity as a matter of course. It certainly doesn't encourage simplicity. Did you ever see anyone advertising a television 'now with less features'? Or a software vendor offering a product 'downgrade'?

We ultimately have two choices: We can be swept along on this wave of complexity, working harder, faster and with less control as we try to fit everything in. Or we can make a conscious decision to simplify our businesses and our lives, to start peeling away the unnecessary and getting back to basics.

Save 'jumping ship' and hiding ourselves in a forest somewhere (which introduces a new set of complexities), achieving absolute simplicity is something none of us will ever achieve. But if we don't make some effort, if we don't look for ways to simplify, we can guarantee our lives will become more complex, more busy, less efficient and more stressful.

This Book is for Every Manager

This book is written for all managers. No matter what size your organisation, what industry you're in, what level you operate at or

Introduction

what role you play. My aim is that you will find the inspiration in these pages to take a fresh, 'back-to-basics' look at the challenge of management.

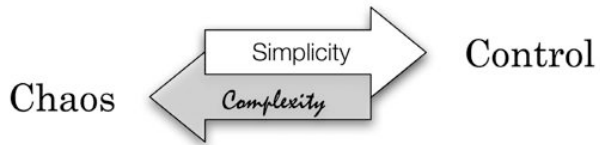
Perhaps, like many of the managers I speak to, you are overwhelmed and no longer enjoy your job. I hope that here you will find some light at the end of that long tunnel. Perhaps that light will bring your challenges into sharper relief and put you in a better position to overcome them.

Alternatively, you may be right on top of the job but looking for ways to take your role or your business to the next level. Building simplicity into your products, services and communications can be a powerful way to differentiate your business. My wish is that this book will act as a catalyst to help you do that.

This not a 'how-to' book. Nor is it a book which needs to be read from cover to cover. It is a collection of self-contained articles designed to provoke thought and motivate. Some articles will be more relevant to your unique situation than others.

Which brings me to my challenge to you. I hope that you will take the messages from this book and apply those which have relevance to your own circumstances, in ways which will work under those circumstances. There are few right answers in this world, but there are many better ones.

SIMPLICITY FOR MANAGEMENT



The Manager finds Simplicity

“As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler”

—Henry David Thoreau

How often have you felt totally in control as a manager? I remember the first time it happened to me. I remember it felt really good but didn't last long. I remember thinking that at least now I knew what I was aiming for. I was wrong. It took me another ten years to work out what I had to do to get that control.

That first time, I was working as a production manager. I had a small group of people working for me and we were turning out packaged gourmet cheese for the supermarkets. Fresh food, fast moving. The pressure was always on. Keeping my people focused, keeping sales sated, keeping the boss at bay.

I would finish most weeks feeling wrung out. Drained. Flat as a brand new torch battery after someone leaves it on all night (“I didn't mean to, Daddy”). It took me Saturday to discharge and Sunday to recharge before starting all over again.

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And then, suddenly, it stopped. I started to feel on top of it. In control. In the zone. Yes, ‘in the zone’ is the best way to describe the feeling.

I was coming home from work with a feeling of accomplishment. I was running the job, rather than it running me. I had become a conductor, rather than a firefighter. A manager, rather than a managee.

So what was the secret? What did I do to get into ‘the zone’?

Although it didn’t feel like it at the time, it was pretty simple. Slowly but surely, my team and I had achieved three things:

- knowing what we needed to do (clarity),
- having the ability to do it (capability), and
- being able to do it over and over again (consistency)

It was nothing more than that. As hard as it was to get there, bringing these three things into alignment was what gave me the feeling of being ‘in the zone’. When any one of them fell out of place, it was back to stress and reactivity.

Now this is a relatively small-scale example. However, in the last few years I’ve worked with many managers at various levels and in all sorts of companies. And the essence of their challenges always seems to come back to this: When clarity, capability and consistency are in place, all at once, life feels controlled – even simple. Lose any one of them and the feeling is gone.

Of course, under each of these headings is a plethora of smaller things which need to be brought under control. However, keeping just these three things in mind as an ultimate goal will be a good first step on your journey towards simplicity.

PUT SIMPLY:

Management will feel simpler when you have three things in place: clarity, capability and consistency.

What it Means to be Simple

I've never been so insulted. All I wanted was some reassurance that the path I have chosen – the pursuit of simplicity in the workplace – was a valid and noble one. And what did I get back? A tirade the likes of which I haven't experienced in all the time I've been writing about simplicity.

The vilification was started by a companion I have had for over 20 years. I asked my old friend to tell me what it means to be simple. "Weak in intellect," came the reply, bluntly. "Unworldly, unsophisticated; feeble-minded, ignorant, uneducated."

Stunned, I decided that my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* must have become sullen and stodgy in its old age. I sought support from someone a bit younger. The *Macquarie Dictionary* shares my Australian heritage; surely it might be more encouraging. And initially it seemed to be more diplomatic, at least. "Unassuming, unpretentious, sincere and true," it said.

But then my local mate seemed to take sides with its English counterpart. "Lacking mental acuteness or sense," it went on. "Not highly developed; lowly, insignificant, trifling; devoid of subtlety,"

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(which, I could hear Oxford thinking, was a bit rich coming from an Australian).

My Thesaurus was no more courteous. I've known Roget for years too but, alas, his view of simplicity wasn't any nicer: "Foolish, artless, plebeian." He did start to give me some hope when he later came back with 'home-spun', though this hardly bolstered the role of simplicity in business.

Perhaps, I thought, technology might be my friend. Unfortunately, the internet dictionaries simply chose a different form of abuse. They aligned simplicity with words I found less than simple to understand: prosaic, not abstruse or enigmatical, not sagacious, not given to artifice.

At this point, somewhat jaded, I took some time out. I wondered how a word as apparently simple as 'simple' could bring on such an onslaught of invective. Especially when, in its every day use, simplicity usually carries with it a very positive image. It is increasingly becoming a favourite of advertisers, so there must be a positive spin there somewhere.

Later, while saying goodnight to my kids, I noticed my daughters' lexical friend: *My First Macquarie Dictionary*. Now, my daughter only hangs out with pleasant people (or so I believe) so surely here I might find some stronger support for simplicity. And sure enough, there it was.

Simple (adj.): easy to understand, do or use.

Here, at last, was the endorsement I was looking for. What could

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be nobler – or ultimately more beneficial for everyone involved – than making an organisation easier to understand, its work easier to do and its products or services easier to use? Not much, in my view. And that's what simplicity is all about.

PUT SIMPLY:

Simplify your business: make it easier to understand, do and use.

Recognising Complexity

About once a year I take on the daunting task of cleaning out my shed. Inspiration usually comes after incurring some sort of injury as I clamber over bikes, bags of compost and various boxes trying to reach for the hammer on the back shelf.

The task of cleaning up requires a major exercise and a fine day. The contents of the shed are pulled out and laid on the grass. I need to be able to see what it is that is contributing to the complex mess I have made.

The rubbish is then sorted out from the ‘good-stuff’ (trying to be as ruthless as I can!) and then the ‘good-stuff’ is reinstalled in the shed in some sort of order. I then enjoy six months or so of knowing where everything is and being able to reach it all without risk of injury.

A similar exercise is an important early step when we want to introduce a level of simplicity to a business. Complexity in business typically builds up over time and becomes a thick fog through which we might occasionally glimpse the ‘simple’ business we once had. Complexity manifests itself in:

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- over-complicated processes,
- misused or inappropriate technology,
- paperwork, via reports, memos, etc.,
- gradually increasing product ranges,
- endless checks and balances,
- trying to be all things to all people,

and in numerous other ways.

Like the shed, we keep throwing ‘one more thing’ into the corner and don’t recognise the mess until we eventually fall over it. The first signs in business are often struggling customer service or sales and increasing workloads and stress.

In business, sorting out the rubbish from the good-stuff – understanding the complexity – can be extremely difficult, which in turn makes achieving simplicity difficult. What’s more, in the shed we can effectively ‘stop the world’ for an afternoon while we sort things out, but we can’t do this in business.

In a nutshell, we need to start with detailed understanding. “In order to make something simple, you need to know your subject very well indeed,” says Edward de Bono. We need to lay our business out on the grass so we can stand back and take a fresh look at it.

How well do you and your people understand the business you work in? Most people understand their JOB pretty well, but surprisingly few understand their business from end to end.

If you have chosen an area to simplify, how well do you understand that area – in detail? How do you plan to gain that understanding: can you do it yourself or do you need outside help?

Most importantly, if this has struck a chord with you, what

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action are you going to take today to start simplifying one aspect of your life – business or otherwise?

PUT SIMPLY:

You won't see complexity unless you look for it.

The Price of Perfection

To err is human. Or at least it was 300 years ago when Cardinal Melchior De Polignac made this well-known statement. I'm not so sure anymore. Those of us with weeds in our garden used to be able to ignore them, but things have changed. We are in the midst of a cult of perfection in which flawless turf rules. And we are paying a price.

In the good old days, perfection was something for the elite. The perfect cake would win a pennant at the country show. The perfect race would be rewarded with a gold medal. And just as the perfect body would grace the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, the perfect lawn had its place on the cover of *Vogue Living*.

Then along came so-called 'reality' television. Suddenly perfect lawns in 'ordinary' gardens were a nightly event. They were paraded as something everyone could have, indeed should have. The same applied to houses and holidays – not to mention ears, eyes, noses and chins. Perfection was only a phone call, and the swipe of a credit card, away.

Things went further. With all these individual bits of perfection so readily available, a perfect life became a common expectation.

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Pick up the newspaper and you'll see examples of this expectation in action. Everything that goes wrong now has to have a blame-ee. Fate, chance and acts-of-God don't cut it in the 21st century.

Perfection is no longer an optional extra: it comes standard.

But the pursuit of perfection comes at a cost – a cost greater than what you'll see on your Visa account. That cost is more complexity. Let me explain why.

First, by putting more emphasis on perfection we become much less adept at dealing with (inevitable) imperfection. When we put all our time and effort into weed prevention, we lose the ability to just pull them out, at a much lower cost, as they come up.

You will find numerous examples of this phenomenon if you look at how governments now respond to things going wrong. Every time a negative story breaks, they simply add another layer of bureaucracy. Another form, another check, another regulation. Meanwhile, new things just keep going wrong as they always did and always will.

Second, this new form of perfection lacks clarity. Perfection is just reality aligned with expectation. New perfection is characterised by higher expectations, but those expectations are frequently fuzzy. The perfect lawn might be only a nip and tuck away, but one program tells me to cut it weekly to 1.5cm, another tells me to trim it daily regardless and another says to leave it alone in winter. Arrgh!

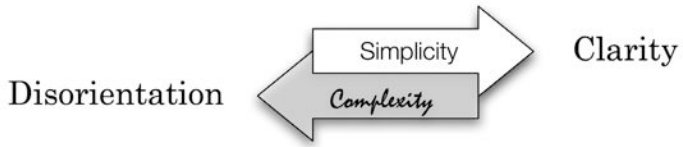
Perfection is a valuable ideal but it might be simpler to aim lower and accept that weeds are plants too. As long as they don't take over, perhaps we should learn to live with them.

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PUT SIMPLY:

*If your pursuit of perfection adds complexity,
you're going the wrong way.*

SIMPLICITY FOR STRATEGY



Clarity: Simplicity's Foundation

*"Simplicity is an acquired taste. Mankind, left free,
instinctively complicates life."*

—Katherine F. Gerould

‘Clarity’ is one of those rare words in the English language that is so basic, so fundamental, it virtually defines itself. We know when we have it but it can be very elusive. It is something we need – in our lives and our businesses – if we wish to move forward. And it is a critical prerequisite for simplicity.

Clarity is essential to progress on a number of levels:

- We need enough *clarity of ‘now’* in order to afford ourselves the luxury of looking forward. Not understanding where we are is like remaining in idle while we try to work out what that rattle is coming from the engine.
- We need enough *clarity of ‘where’* in order to move confidently in the right direction. ‘Where’ doesn’t need to be a sharply defined beacon, clearly visible down the road, but it does need to be bright enough to distinguish itself in a fog.

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- We need enough *clarity of 'how'* to be able to judge which side-routes will take us forward and which won't. We will be tempted by numerous attractive detours along the way; we need to make sure that those we take also move us forward.

There is a nice paradox about clarity. On the one hand, crystal-clear clarity has a habit of replacing long-standing angst, puzzlement or confusion instantly and without warning. Remember trying to get your head around some maths or science concept at school, when suddenly the penny drops and you wonder how you ever missed the point in the first place!

On the other hand, clarity about 'real world' situations is seldom absolute. The world is too complex. It is all humanity mixed with systems mixed with uncertainty. Just when we think the picture is becoming clear, someone moves the antenna and we find ourselves snowed in again.

Despite this, there are many things you can do to improve your level of clarity, though none of these will work unless you are prepared to do two things:

First, you need to be *prepared to be honest with yourself*. It can be very convenient to kid yourself that you have clarity – that you have all the answers – when really you are simply tired of trying.

The histories of science and business are littered with examples of evidence being selectively gathered – and ignored – to support a preconceived notion, rather than to truly understand. Take the various large business collapses of recent years as cases in point. 'Experts' are always at risk of doing this when they start to filter all new ideas through their own glasses.

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Secondly, remember that we always have lived and *always will live in uncertain times* and *we will always be busy*. I found the following in a business book recently: “Most easily is the necessity for personal stock-taking overlooked in the rush and the routine of earning a living”. It was written in 1876.

So it pays to bring a level of pragmatism to the table when we are seeking clarity. We need to pursue it, but we also need to satisfy ourselves that things are unlikely ever to be crystal clear. Such is our lot.

SIMPLY PUT:

Life is uncertain, but that's no excuse for not seeking clarity.

Clarity: For Each his Own

Cooking didn't come naturally to me. My first attempts in the kitchen were more Dr. Frankenstein than Jamie Oliver. Curdled custards, clumpy couscous and charcoaled casseroles were standard fare. These days I'm pleased to report things have improved. And it was one of simplicity's key ingredients which turned things around.

Back in those early days, my girlfriend used to laugh at the way I would approach each meal with the precision of a chemist. If a recipe called for organic Arborio rice from the west side of Lake Como, I would travel to the other side of the city to get it. Or I'd find another recipe. Certainly not use another Arborio.

Later, that same girlfriend – by then my wife (the food can't have been too bad) – bought me a cookbook by English writer Delia Smith. The book was generously seasoned with pictures and included a healthy ration of reassuring statements like “if it looks lumpy at this stage, don't worry”.

With the virtual hand of Delia held firmly in mine, I was led through the joys of breads and scones, pastries and puddings, risottos and ratatouilles.

Simplicity for Strategy

Over time, I graduated from these step-by-step, painfully explicit instructions to recipe books without pictures. I even started using recipes that called for a ‘dollop’ of this and a ‘handful’ of that.

These days I substitute ingredients with the reckless abandon of a ten-year old while my ten year old approaches her first cooking efforts with my old chemist-like precision. These days my recipes nearly always work because they know I expect them too. Rise, soufflé, or be damned!

I credit much of this transition to that wonderful book. What that book had which others lacked at the time was an understanding that a beginner cook needs step-by-step clarity – not just a picture of the finished product.

In these pages, you will read often about the important relationship between clarity and simplicity. My point here is that efforts to achieve clarity need to be pitched at a level appropriate to the person and the circumstances.

When someone joins your business, or your part of it, you could show her the best vision statement in the world but it wouldn't help her do her job. What they need is the clarity which comes from being led through ‘what goes on’ by someone who already does the job. Someone who can offer the small insights that Delia's reassuring words provided me.

Later, when they've settled in, you might be able to encourage them to look further forward. You've a much better chance of inspiring them with your grand vision when you they can make the link between what they currently do already and where they might be going next.

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Unfortunately Delia never wrote a book on management, so you'll have to work out your particular recipe for yourself.

SIMPLY PUT:

Just because you have clarity and understanding doesn't mean everyone else does.

Beware the Shortcuts

I love a good shortcut. Put me in heavy traffic and I will greedily dive down the first side street in search of a faster way through. A similar temptation is shared by many CEOs and managers. As time becomes more compressed, bosses increasingly take their businesses through corporate rat-runs in pursuit of the quick win. But at what cost?

In the car, shortcuts pay off more often when you know the local territory. When you don't, you can easily become hopelessly lost. Seems to me that similar rules apply to in business. Let me take you on a tour of some of the popular shortcuts which run off Business Boulevard.

Cost-Cut Crescent is a well-worn shortcut off our main road. It was designed by former Sunbeam chief Al 'Chainsaw' Dunlap. Taking this side street is a great way to lighten your load in a hurry. It's a rough track though, so be careful. There is a tendency to shake off too much, making staying on the road quite difficult.

Restructure Road is another popular side street, particularly for newcomers. This shortcut can give a vehicle a new lease of life. As you travel down this road you'll need to replace or reorganise the

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worn parts on your vehicle. Be sure to use genuine replacements only: the wrong part in the wrong place can slow you down considerably.

Technology Terrace is perhaps the most attractive shortcut off our route. This well-lit street has it all. There are shops touting countless gadgets and gauges, programs and productivity tools – all promising to speed your journey. A warning though: choose hastily and you may end up going backwards.

Product Parade has been widened considerably to accommodate increased traffic volume in the last few years. This shortcut aims to make your vehicle more attractive by giving your customers endless choices. The risk down this street is that you will become distracted trying to manage them all and take your eyes off the road.

If none of these shortcuts sound attractive to you – or if they take you longer to navigate than you planned – fear not. Just around the next bend you will see the turnoff to Fad Freeway. This bypass moves very quickly and holds a lot of traffic. It is hard to get off, however, and has a tendency to take the unwary driver in continuous circles.

As you can see, the side streets off Business Boulevard are very tempting. Each offers that irresistible offer of ‘something for nothing’. But before turning off, you would be wise to consider the risks. Sometimes, putting up with the traffic on the main road for just a bit longer will be the better choice.

After all, if everyone leaves in search of shortcuts, you’ll have the main highway all to yourself!

SIMPLY PUT:

Shortcuts might be attractive, but understand the risks. In the long run it might be quicker to stay on the main path.

Less is More: Lesson from a Pinball Parlour

Whizzzzzz .. Ding .. Ding .. Flash .. Ding Plop! Many of you mightn't recognise these sounds. But for me they are memories of long lost school holidays. Many hours (and dollars) were spent playing pinball machines or Space Invaders. I was no pinball wizard – but I learnt a life lesson or two as my pocket money disappeared.

You see, life is a bit like an arcade game. We start each game – as each year - with fresh enthusiasm. Then we quickly get caught in frantic efforts just to keep the ball in play – to keep our busy lives on track. Finally, no matter how good we are, our turn runs out and we are left to reflect on how much we've achieved. Then we start all over again.

As each year ends, you may feel you've achieved a high score, having reached most of the goals you set yourself that year. More likely, perhaps, you will feel frustrated that you weren't able to get more done (as I was at the end of most of those games).

So what can pinball teach us?

For a start: it isn't all about rushing. I had some mates who were real arcade artists; they could make their 20 cents last for ages.

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While they always scored much more than me, they never seemed to work as hard as I did.

Similarly, I'm sure you know at least one of those people who seem to always get an awful lot done, but never seem to be over-extended in the process.

The secret of achieving more while building up less of a sweat is hard to pin down. Somehow it's a combination of having control, the confidence to pace yourself and the ability to anticipate and be proactive.

Control comes largely from being selective. It's about staying focused on the things that really matter – whether they be the high scoring targets in an arcade game or the 'important' things on our to do lists.

Overriding all of this is an approach of 'less is more'. This, of course, has been the central tenet of the 'simple living' movement for years. But it doesn't mean that we all need to don caftans, light candles and eat chick-pea curry in order to simplify.

You can achieve a lot by the way you set about goal setting and resolution making in the first place. Be honest about ranking your goals by importance – real, personal, deep-down importance – and you will already be introducing selectivity.

Then, by committing not to punish yourself if some of the lower items don't get a look in, you might spend less time rushing and more time on those things that matter.

My pinball playing days are a distant memory. But I still remember that success had more to do with simplicity than complexity. Remember this as you prepare for your next game.

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SIMPLY PUT:

Less is More.

Setting the Simplest Goal

Several years ago, I hated my job. I was constantly stressed. I was feeling unrewarded and unappreciated. Going to work was a chore and was basically something I did to get through to the next weekend.

As I write this now, I can honestly say that I now love what I do and the future looks even better. Reflecting on how this turnaround has come about has forced me to rethink the whole 'goal setting' thing.

My main conclusion is that goal setting has become too scientific and complex. I think the idea of the 'dream' has become lost.

The books tell us that, as individuals, we should be making detailed plans in order to achieve our goals - the step-by-step approach. This is still important (and I'll address it in the next section), but the orderly approach needs a context.

In business, the focus is on 'key performance indicators' and 'balanced scorecards' and 'triple bottom lines'. Meanwhile, 'vision' and 'mission' statements have become just another part of the business plan. They frequently come across as mechanical - even generic.

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Back in those old times, I didn't set any real goals for myself. At least I didn't think I did. I remember being encouraged to write my goals down. To plan out 1 year, 3 year and 10 year goals. I couldn't do it. I felt so trapped in this job I disliked - and so unclear about what I wanted to do as an alternative - that setting specific and measurable goals was impossible.

But I did have a dream, albeit a very blurry one. For many years - since very early in my career - I had felt that I wanted to make a difference. To be in a situation to have a positive influence on peoples' lives. I also knew I wanted more variety (I hate routine). And I had always admired genuine 'experts': those who not only knew their specialty really well but also knew how to put it into practice.

Deep inside I knew these were things I wanted. It was hardly enough to build a detailed plan on. But with the benefit of hindsight, I now realise that this dream was fundamental to giving me the fortitude to break out of the bind I was in.

It was the dream that helped me see opportunities when they came my way. And it was the dream that gave me the courage to take risks and actually pursue these opportunities.

There have been twists and turns along the way, and I still have a long way to go. Plenty more dreams to pursue and goals to achieve. I feel, however, that I am now working from a solid foundation. As the dream has gained sharper focus, I can more readily work with more concrete, step-by-step goals. I can set 'key performance indicators' for my business.

Goals are important - both for you as an individual and for your business. But goals are like the frame of a house. They need to be

Simplicity for Strategy

built on a solid foundation. *Your dream is that foundation.* Your dream is the simplest goal.

SIMPLY PUT:

You can't 'make up' a vision. It must start with your dream.

Getting Clarity in Motion

When I learned to drive a car, I was lucky enough to have a really good instructor. Ron was interested in teaching me how to drive - not just how to pass the test. He was one of those uncompromising sorts - very hard to please. But his lessons remain with me still: in particular his constant emphasis on the need for clarity while driving.

Ron wasn't too concerned with destination. I guess it's something we take for granted when we drive. While 'where we are heading' is very important in business, we need to limit the amount of time and effort we devote to getting our goals 'just right'.

Ron's hobbyhorse was what might be called 'clarity-in-motion'. He was always reminding me to keep looking around as I drove along. Keep checking the mirrors. Watch the side streets for traffic. Look down the road - not just at the car in front. Keep an eye on the gauges - especially the speedometer. Expect the unexpected.

The message was that if you don't work constantly at maintaining clarity as you drive, you could get into complex - and dangerous - situations without warning.

Simplicity for Strategy

The business equivalent of ‘clarity-in-motion’ is maintaining clarity on a day-to-day basis. How were sales yesterday? How are your receivables looking? What work do you have on now, and will it be finished on time? What’s in the pipeline? How are stock levels? Are your people happy? Do you – and your team – know what they are expected to do? The list is endless.

The trick is knowing which critical aspects of your business you need to be clear about - and having systems in place to provide you that clarity. It doesn’t mean burying yourself in all the detail.

Ron taught me to watch my speed constantly. Speed is critically important when motoring and it is something the driver has direct control over.

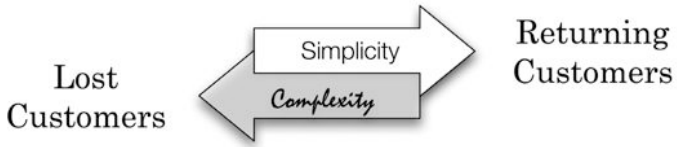
When it came to engine temperature, Ron told me to check it once in a while. Cars have built in systems to keep temperature under control automatically. I only needed to worry about it if it got out of hand. (Imagine how complicated driving would be if we didn’t have those systems in place!)

If you want to minimise the complexity in your business, you need clarity of direction. But just as importantly, you need to maintain ‘clarity-in-motion’. To create an environment in which clarity exists on a ‘day-to-day’ level. It requires constant work - but it has to be better than going to sleep at the wheel.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Knowing **where** you’re going is only the start.
You need to know **how** you’re going as well.*

SIMPLICITY FOR GETTING AND KEEPING CUSTOMERS



An Important Trend

“Real simplicity means that which gives the very best service and is the most convenient in use.”

—Henry Ford

I admit it. I’m a sucker for techno-toys. Just give me a kilobyte of an excuse and I’ll buy a gigabyte of gizmo before you can say MP3. But now there is hope for those less digitally enthusiastic. After a decade of feature frenzy, the wired-worm is turning. Simple is in. And the shift has significance for every business – digital or otherwise.

Just look at what’s happening:

In 2003, Canon launched a new marketing message: ‘Advanced Simplicity’. “At Canon, we believe there’s no point to new technology if it doesn’t make life simpler”. Our new Canon scanner (the family needed it) does a good job of living up to this talk.

Mobile phone maker Kyocera ran an internal ‘Simple Rules’ campaign in 2004 with a focus on making their mobile phones easy to use. “People are complicated; their phones don’t need to be”.

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And electronics giant Philips announced its new direction in 2004: 'Sense and Simplicity'. "The promise of the digital revolution to make our lives easier, simpler, better is not being delivered. ... At Philips, we believe that technology should be as simple as the box it comes in."

Meanwhile, others are letting their products speak for themselves.

The newest Nikon digital camera in our house (my wife's film camera was broken) is very easy to use. The software that came with it is less so, but Google's Picasa picture manager (free – no excuse needed) could hardly be simpler.

Apple's iPod, which brings simplicity of both style and function to new levels, has destroyed Sony's dominance of the portable music market. And its accompanying cost (and excuse) free music software, iTunes is by far the easiest to use in its class.

Finally, my USB flash drive and Bluetooth handsfree headset (both essential productivity tools) are perfect examples of no-frills, built for purpose technology.

So what of the implications? Well, if the simplicity centime has dropped for all these big players, with their terabyte-sized market research budgets, then isn't it time it did for you too?

It's not just about technology. To paraphrase the Philips CEO: "The world is already complicated enough; everyone wants simplicity". It's about making your organisation's products and services – or your part of them – easier to use. It's about finding novel ways of doing so.

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Rest assured: a newer, simpler bandwagon is gathering momentum. There's an awful long way to go. But the time has come to get on board – or get left behind.

SIMPLY PUT:

Simplicity Sells.

Clarity of Purpose: Lessons of the Telephone

What could be simpler than the telephone?

At its most basic level, the telephone works in exactly the same way today as it did 100 years ago. In fact, you could plug an antique telephone into a modern wall socket and it would function perfectly.

Of course the modern telephone looks very different from its antique counterpart. The telephone on my desk has 45 buttons on it, a little display screen and countless electronic components inside. It includes a whole raft of features, including memory dialing, hands-free, call diversion, caller ID, last-number redial, access to message bank and even a clock.

But it is still a telephone. Its purpose is clear: the making and receiving of telephone calls. And, despite all the features, few people would need to be ‘taught’ how to use my telephone for this purpose. We might say its complexity is ‘optional’.

What’s more, if I don’t want the fancy features, I can still buy a simple, no-frills telephone for around \$20, plug it in and start making calls.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of the majority of today’s com-

Simplicity for Getting and Keeping Customers

puterized 'productivity tools'. The software industry has spawned a whole new approach to product design which shuns the concept of 'clarity of purpose' that we see in the telephone.

Many will remember the first word-processing programs (WordPerfect was one). These programs were very simple and aimed to do not much more than emulate the typewriter they were trying to replace.

Over time, features were added to make these programs more 'sophisticated'. Menus, buttons and toolbars were developed in an attempt to make these features more accessible. While all these features and navigation tools make modern word processing software more functional for those of us who love to fiddle, first-time or infrequent users could be forgiven for giving up and searching out the old Olympus.

With each new upgrade, the original purpose of many software programs becomes lost under an increasingly jumbled pile of features. Meanwhile, most users use the same handful of features they have always used - usually a tiny fraction of those available.

As for the software equivalent of the \$20 telephone? Few of the major players in the software game are interested. There are, in fact, a number around but ironically you need to be fairly proficient at searching the internet to find them - in which case you probably don't need them!

Ultimately it is purpose, not features, that we buy software for and, more and more, consumers are realizing this. In future, concepts like 'optional complexity' and 'clarity of purpose' will become more important for your own products and services.

Success with Simplicity

SIMPLY PUT:

*Please two sets of customers:
make complexity optional.*

Don't Dress Complexity up as Choice

What happens when a company who claim to be “making life easier” make the task of comparing their service offerings a truly *Einsteinian effort*? A perfect example of complexity disguised as choice to the unsuspecting customer? You bet! Read on...

Serge doesn't like being ripped off. He will happily spend hours comparing telephony rates in search of a saving. On one such review recently, Serge became confused by the offers of his current supplier, a large telephony company. He decided to call and get some clarification.

After negotiating the dreaded voice activated menu, Serge was greeted by Toby as if he were a long lost friend - in that modern call-centre way. Serge explained his need for clarity and Toby got straight to the point.

“Serge, ‘Making Life Easier’ is our motto, and that’s what I’m here to do for you. Let me help you by outlining the options we have structured to help you get the most from your home phone.

“The first decision you need to make is what you wish to spend on your monthly line rental. You have four options. The more

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rental you pay, the cheaper your local calls will be. If you know roughly how many calls you make each month, a simple spreadsheet will help you work out your most cost effective option.

“However, before you finalize your monthly rental option, you have a couple of other things to consider.

“Your choice of monthly rental option will also affect what you pay for long distance calls, international calls and calls to mobile phones.

“For each of these, you need to know how many calls you will make, to where, how long for, at what time and on what days of the week. For calls to mobiles you will also need to know whether the phone you are calling is with our company or another company.

“All in all, there are 10 ‘sub-options’ available to cover all of these. You need to choose four of these ‘sub-options’, bearing in mind that the cost of each of these varies with your choice of the four monthly rental options. Also, not all sub-options are available with each main option.

“Finally, for each set of options, subtract the value of our rewards scheme (which depends on your monthly rental and other factors) and add the cost of our credit card payment processing fee (which depends on the card you use).

“To conclude your calculation, all you need to do is add to your spreadsheet the 10 sub-options I have described, along with the 20 or so variables which determine the cost of those options. With a small amount of linear programming you should be able to identify your optimum set of options and sub-options in no time.”

At this point, Serge thanked Toby for his help. He put down the

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phone, poured himself a long drink and gave this conversation some thought. He figured that, not having a degree in mathematics, making a true assessment of all these options would be practically impossible. Serge felt that the easiest thing to do would be to leave things as they were.

But then he realized that this would be to let the phone company off the hook. No company, Serge thought, should be able to abuse their customers' intelligence with such a quagmire of complexity dressed up as choice.

Serge got onto the internet and, within ten minutes, had found two alternate companies offering far more simple choices and he quickly made his move. He thought that, perhaps, he might end up paying a few cents more (though he couldn't be sure).

However, Serge also figured that simplicity, in this case characterized by ease of understanding and ease of use, was perhaps worth more to him than he had previously recognized.

SIMPLY PUT:

Make it easy for your customers to deal with you. They'll love you for it.

Be the Tiger Woods of your Market

When you're a hack golfer like I am, it is easy to appreciate the awesome talent of a champion like Tiger Woods. Tiger has skill, flair and a feel for the game which most of us can only dream of. He has something else too: something which equally separates champion golfers from 'also-rans' and well run businesses from their competition.

Now, having admitted I'm a hack golfer it wouldn't be right if I didn't mention in passing the time I chipped one in from 20 yards. Or the other time I was only 6 inches from a hole-in-one. Or the... Sorry. I digress.

Yes. I've done all these things. Once. Tiger's done them too but he does them all the time - even when he is playing for real money, under intense pressure. He does so because he's got the 'something' I haven't: *consistency*.

Consistency is simply fundamental to good golf. Professional golfers dedicate enormous amounts of time and effort to building a consistent swing because their livelihood depends on it. A consistent swing leads to consistently landing the ball on target. Doing that more often than their competitors leads to a good income.

Simplicity for Getting and Keeping Customers

It's exactly the same in business. Your target is a consistently happy customer – whether that customer is inside or outside your organisation. Your 'swing' is made up of the various activities which you and your team do to deliver your service or product to that customer. If your swing isn't consistent, your shot will, from time to time, miss the mark. Your customers will be disappointed and may not return, which leads to a poor income.

Achieving consistency in your business requires the same commitment, clarity of purpose, focus and practice that characterise champion golfers.

Consistency comes from coordination. All the parts of your business need to work independently but together – just as Tiger Wood's head, arms, hips and legs do.

Consistency comes with a measured approach. Tiger operates his swing at about 70% of full power because he values consistency over power. (One of the joys of weekend golf is being beaten by someone twice your age and with only half a swing; someone whose ball doesn't go far but goes dead straight every time.)

Consistency comes from routines and systems – even for the easy parts. Watch a few professional golfers hit a round and you'll notice each has a unique, routine approach to addressing the ball. Making the preparatory steps routine increases the chance of the swing being 'routine' too.

And *consistency comes from doing what you're good at.* Tiger Woods knew from the age of four that he was good at golf. I'm sure he has other interests, but his time and energy is focused, even today, on further perfecting his golf swing – and its consistency – all the time.

Success with Simplicity

Consistency is a classic win-win. It will make your customers happy and it will drastically simplify your business. It's got to be better than the pain I go through on the golf course.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Make your customers' lives more simple by
being consistent.*

Simplicity is a Satisfied Customer

Customer service is everywhere. It seems everyone we deal with now is a ‘customer service representative’. Remember when they were bank tellers, flight attendants or just the person behind the enquiries desk? So why is the experience of fantastic, ‘blow-your-mind’ service still so rare?

My family recently had one of those rare experiences in a small family restaurant. The food was good value, but that’s not what made it memorable. What really made this meal was the combination of decent food with a bright, clean environment, friendly, attentive, knowledgeable staff and timely service.

Our feeling of being well looked after – of receiving fantastic service - was not delivered by one ‘knock-out blow’. Rather it resulted from the coming together of a whole range of small things, each delivered really well.

And that is secret ingredient in fantastic customer service: *getting the delivery right*.

No matter how good the food on the plate, if it had taken an hour to get to us we would not have enjoyed it. And our feeling about this restaurant would have been tarnished.

Success with Simplicity

All too often businesses forget this. Larger organisations in particular seem to think customer service is about having a customer charter. Or running a public relations campaign. Or telling us “your call is important to us”. Or giving their staff the title of ‘customer service assistant’.

The reality is that, as consumers, we don’t care what the title is of the person we are dealing with. We only want them to be courteous, to give us their full attention and to know what they are talking about (as they did at our restaurant). And we want the product or service we are buying delivered with minimum fuss.

The same applies to every business – including yours. Regardless of how good your products or services are. If you can’t consistently deliver them in an efficient manner and with minimum hassle for the customer, your customers will eventually drift off and try someone else.

On the other hand, you will stand out from the crowd if you focus effort on getting the delivery right.

What does this mean? It means focusing on the detail of how you and your staff interact with customers. It means creating systems so that orders never, ever get lost or misplaced. It means having sufficient control so that when you make a promise to a customer, you can deliver on that promise.

And it means having the systems in place so that all these things happen consistently.

Having a great product is one thing, but if you want to really impress your customers: get the delivery right – every time.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Don't overlook the simple relationship
between good 'old-fashioned' service
and a happy customer.*

Getting it Right more Often

Open any book on the subject of building effective business systems and you are sure to find McDonald's used as a prime example. Now their food mightn't to everyone's liking, but it has one outstanding characteristic: it is entirely predictable. And few could argue that they haven't been successful.

Consider this: in less than fifty years, McDonald's have built over 29,000 stores based on a very robust system. If you enjoyed the Big Mac you had in Moscow, you can be sure you would also like the Big Macs you might have in Madrid, Melbourne or Manila.

Of course, McDonald's have it easy. Their business model has never really centred on their product - their food. It has always centred on their systems. It is the sameness of their food, rather than its originality, which is what their customers expect. So it is sameness that they deliver.

Which is hardly what most businesses are looking to provide, is it? Your business is selling a product or a service - not a 'system'. Your creativity, your unique approach, your flexibility to customer needs - these are what you are selling. The McDonald's approach seems anathema.

Simplicity for Getting and Keeping Customers

But no matter what business we are in, our customers want us to provide them with a level of consistency. They want to know that dealing with us will give them what they expect – which is usually what they got last time.

The reality is that systems have a place in every business because, used properly, they can help us achieve something that every business wants: happy customers with minimum effort.

Take your average plumber. He is selling his skills - certainly not a system. The plumber loves to plumb - he hates administration. But we still expect him to return our calls, to keep appointments and to provide us with accurate invoices.

So the plumber has a choice. He can forget to return calls, turn up late and get increasingly bogged down in paperwork (all of which happen all too often). Or he can put in place a basic time management and bookkeeping system.

Either way he'll still be a good plumber, but the system will provide him with more, happier customers and greater peace-of-mind.

What your plumber can't systemise is the art of plumbing. His experience and his apparently innate ability to diagnose a problem: these can only be passed on properly over time. Becoming the plumbing equivalent of Ronald McDonald is unrealistic.

Somewhere between McDonald's and your plumber lie most other businesses. Systems have a place in every business - it is simply a matter of degree. But we need to make a conscious effort to identify those parts of our business that can be 'systemised'.

In the long run, we will be rewarded with a simpler business and happier customers.

Success with Simplicity

SIMPLY PUT:

Systemise where it makes sense to systemise...

A Proven Way to Get Things Wrong

And so we had that sinking feeling again. We had been promised simplicity. A simple desk, at a bargain price, ordered by phone and delivered to our door. It even came with free assembly – no need for me to break out either screwdriver or sweat. What could be easier? Alas, the reality didn't match the promise.

It wasn't until after the man had come and put the thing together that we realised the problem. They'd delivered the wrong desk. Hence the sinking feeling: the realisation that we would have to enter the 'labyrinth of undoing' in which we all find ourselves when trying to right a supplier wrong.

So what did go wrong? No doubt, back at the warehouse, this is the question in everyone's inbox. Somewhere along the road between our original request and the product being dropped off, our order took a misguided shortcut.

The details are likely to remain foggy, but the future is predictable. After much finger pointing, backside protecting and buck-passing, attention will focus on 'the procedure'. The procedure will be 'fixed' by the addition of another check. Perhaps the

Success with Simplicity

creation of another form. Another vain attempt to block off the offending shortcut.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Since early in the 20th century we've been trying to eliminate human error in this way. We've put emphasis on documented procedures and rigid processes in order to build 'think-proof' systems. The theory goes that if the need to think is removed, it becomes impossible for the wrong thing to be thunk.

Yet this approach doesn't work. 100 years on, the most basic mistakes – like delivering the wrong desk – are still being made by even the most sophisticated companies.

The problem is this. Getting a job done – delivering our desk, for instance – requires navigating a process much like navigating a city. The checks and balances which characterise 'think-proofed' processes act like speed humps, chicanes and roadside barriers along the route. They keep things on track - but too many make the going awfully slow.

Meanwhile, those wending their way along this route are under pressure: time pressure. (A frazzled driver delivered our desk at 8.00pm, ending what had clearly been a very busy day.) Sometimes, the only way to get the job done on time is to find shortcuts. Most times these shortcuts work, but occasionally they don't.

It is much more productive to design procedures like a well-made road. Nice and wide with a minimum of barriers, thereby making the job easy to do. And replete with big, clear signs showing the way, thereby making the job easy to get right, with, dare I say it, just a little thinking.

Simplicity for Getting and Keeping Customers

It's not that you don't need systems. But your systems need to be simple. And if they don't work, they aren't really a system at all.

SIMPLY PUT:

...but don't take all the thinking out.

Don't Simplify the Wrong Things

Back in the 1990s, cereal company Kellogg's advertised their 'Corn Flakes' product with the tag "The Simple Things in Life are often the Best". The slogan rang so true that it became part of our language. But we do need to be careful. Simplifying the wrong things can have negative effects on our customers.

For me, one of life's simple pleasures is a really good espresso coffee. Intense aroma, strong - but not bitter - flavour and a pleasant lingering aftertaste. Heaven! In too many cafés, unfortunately, the simple experience I am looking for is replaced by a bitter, distasteful one.

Recently, in order to better understand the secrets of the 'perfect' espresso, I did a short course on coffee making. I was amazed at how many things need to go right in order to produce that perfect cup.

Even before the coffee beans reach the café, their quality can be affected by the way were grown, harvested, cleaned, blended, roasted, packed, transported or stored.

At the café, the beans need to be ground, to just the right size.

Simplicity for Getting and Keeping Customers

For each cup, 6.5 grams of grounds are needed. No more, no less. The coffee needs to be made using a clean machine with which water, at just the right temperature, is forced through the grounds under pressure. The cup or glass should have been pre-warmed on top of the machine.

On top of all of these things, according to my teacher, a café can only serve great coffee consistently if it has properly trained staff who are passionate about what they are doing.

Clearly, producing a really good coffee is no simple task! There are so many opportunities for things to go wrong, any one of which can change a simple pleasure into a bitter experience.

Wouldn't it be better for a café to simplify the process and reduce the risk of mistakes? It can be done, of course. They could use an automatic machine. They could forgo the fancy espresso machine and just use one of the various filtering methods instead. They could use pre-ground beans. They could even use instant coffee.

But removing complexity from the process in this case creates a new problem. The more simple the process, the less the product resembles a 'perfect coffee'. Instant coffee might be more consistent, but it also bears few of the hallmarks of a good espresso.

Coffee is a classic example of a simple customer experience which requires a level of complexity on the part of the producer. But it is not the only one. When making efforts to simplify our work, we all need to keep in mind the impact on our customers.

Albert Einstein once said: "Things should be made as simple as possible – but not simpler". Smart cafés don't try to reduce the

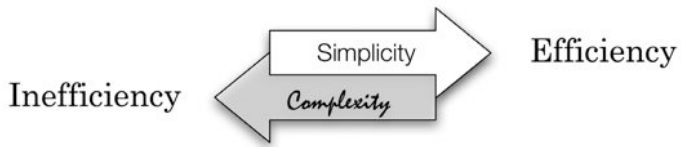
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complexity of the coffee-making process. Rather, they try to simplify their management of the process. In that way, simplification doesn't take away from the experience of their customers.

SIMPLY PUT:

Don't simplify at your customers' expense.

SIMPLICITY FOR PRODUCTIVITY



Lesson from an Unwelcome Teacher

“Complexity means distracted effort. Simplicity means focused effort.”

—Edward de Bono

Extraordinary events can be unwelcome teachers. They teach by brutal exaggeration. The tragedy of the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster exaggerated our insignificance and inadequacy as individuals. By contrast, it also exaggerated our potential to fight back as mankind. We should take heed of its lessons.

As the enormity of the tsunami’s aftermath became increasingly apparent, the world’s focus on the plight of the victims became ever more intense. As the intensity grew, so did the scale of the response.

Early on, there was talk of bureaucracy getting in the way of action. But focus overcame bureaucracy and assistance started to flow.

The waves seriously affected two countries entrenched in long running civil wars. Focus overcame rivalries: cease-fires were called and help was allowed through.

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Fundraisers always find it hard to raise money to help the constant stream of sufferers all over the world. Focus overcame this 'disaster fatigue' and led to record levels of financial commitment from individuals, corporations and governments.

In Melbourne, a fund-raising cricket match brought together the game's most prominent players from all over the globe. Focus made possible in less than two weeks what would normally have taken years of planning.

Numerous other initiatives have been organised with similar urgency: music concerts and recordings, fund-raising barbeques and auctions, goods-gathering projects and so on. They've all been given momentum by focus.

Focus simplifies. It removes hurdles, trashes trivialities and generally makes difficult things easier to do. Because of this, people love to be a part of a focused effort. And a lesson from this unwelcome teacher would therefore appear to be straightforward: if you want something done, find a way to give it focus.

But it's not straightforward. Focus also has its downsides.

Focus comes at a price. By its nature, focus can lead us to overlook other issues which may be just as important. Who would want to have been raising money for the victims of war in Sudan, the typhoons in the Philippines or the bushfires in South Australia which were all causing trouble at the same time as the tsunami?

And focus seldom lasts. Within days – with the survivors years from recovery – the tsunami fell from the pages of our newspapers and took up few if any of those precious minutes on the evening news. Very quickly, bureaucracy and national antagonisms started to re-establish themselves.

Simplicity for Productivity

So perhaps the real lessons are these: Use focus to your advantage. But always be clear about what's really important. Don't allow external pressures to determine what you focus on. Don't allow bureaucracy or other forms of unnecessary complexity to hinder getting things done.

And keep everything in perspective. Our hearts go out to all those for whom the lessons of this and other unwelcome teachers will never be important.

PUT SIMPLY:

*Want something done? Give it focus.
But don't lose sight of what's important.*

Digging Yourself out of a Rut

What do my daughters' bedroom, London's Strand and the personal computer have in common? The answer might help you dig yourself out of that common management rut: the feeling that no matter what you do, nothing is going to improve.

My girls' bedroom is, I guess, like that of most young girls. Beds made in abstract, rather than classical, style. Drawers left half open, having been rifled through for that must-wear pair of Barbie underpants. Floor dotted with discarded, dishevelled looking dolls.

After much hounding to improve standards of tidiness, we have finally realised that standards are unlikely to improve in the next 15 years. So we've reached a sort of unspoken truce. The kids have a sense of just how much mess they can get away with. And we've come to the point I call 'resigned acceptance'.

'Resigned acceptance' is that state of mind we reach when we put a persistent problem into the 'too hard' basket. We realise that, while things aren't the way we would like them, correcting the situation is probably not possible. Or at least not worth the effort required.

Simplicity for Productivity

Another, quite different example of ‘resigned acceptance’ is the way most of us tend to cope with the inequities of city life. In the Strand in London, the homeless make shelter in the doorways of some of the world’s most exclusive stores. For a while I walked down that street every morning. I freely admit that resigned acceptance is the only way I could rationalise this pathetic irony and get on with my day.

Back in the office, ‘resigned acceptance’ is the way we deal with many of those things which complicate our lives every day. A great example is the way we have come to terms with that productivity tool on our desk: the personal computer (PC).

The PC is now over 20 years old. Yet still we accept, with resignation, the dreaded frozen screen. We accept that to turn a PC off, we have to go to the ‘Start’ button first. That help files seldom help. That PCs outlive their usefulness long before they actually wear out.

The big problem with resigned acceptance, particularly in business, is that it often occurs because we haven’t found a better way - not because there isn’t a better way.

I’ve known people to spend hundreds of hours maintaining complex spreadsheets because they didn’t know there were simpler options. I’ve known managers who accept difficult and time-consuming procedures because they don’t know how to identify and remove complexity. I’ve known whole departments who accept ridiculous bureaucracy imposed on them because they don’t know how to challenge the status quo.

Have a look at your workplace. What examples of ‘resigned

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acceptance' can you find? If you want to get out of a rut, it's time to stop tripping over the office equivalent of the child's toy. Time to tidy up your room and set a new standard for the future.

SIMPLY PUT:

*“The way we do it around here” is probably not
the best way to do it.*

Changing Habits

It is amazing how much wasted effort goes on in the modern workplace. People at all levels regularly perform unnecessary tasks on paper, on computers and even manually. Why? Paradoxically it is because we all have a strong preference for doing things the easy way even if it is less efficient. We tend to follow the ‘path of least resistance’.

In nature, the ‘path of least resistance’ explains why rivers wind their way across the landscape, rather than take a straighter, shorter route. Water flowing down the river simply follows the easiest path available to it. The water doesn’t care that it is taking the long way home. The energy of the river simply follows the path of least resistance.

The path of least resistance affects our behaviour in the same way, but with a twist. Rather than minimise just the expense of energy at any given moment, we tend to give preference to minimising our level of thought.

So we accumulate piles of papers rather than continuously sorting, acting and filing. We under-use our software rather than pause

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to look up the help file and learn a quicker way. We persist with out-dated forms or procedures rather than take stock of their current relevance. We keep doing things ourselves because its easier than training someone else and risking a mistake.

In short, we build bends into our own information rivers which enable us to work more easily on any one part of a process, even if the overall effort required is more than it need be.

The challenge in changing this situation is that it is counter-intuitive to do something the ‘hard way’ – even in the short term – when an ‘easy way’ is already at hand.

It requires concerted effort to change a habit – in the same way that it requires a flood to break the banks of a river and forge a new, more efficient, direction.

On the other hand, the principle of the ‘path of least resistance’ means that once a new process is successfully established, it is almost impossible to find the old one again. The banks of the river, once broken, will never be the same again because water will continue to take the new - easier - route.

So if you’re trying to forge new habits, you need to destroy the old riverbanks which exist in your workplace. Make it easier to do it the new way, harder to do it the old way. There will be no turning back.

SIMPLY PUT:

To entrench new ways of doing things, make them easier to do than the old ways.

Simplicity and Hard Work: Together as One

“**Y**ou’re nuts!” I said. My friend agreed, but he did it anyway. I thought riding a bicycle up one of Victoria’s most massive mountains had to be madness. Four years on, however, I found myself attempting the same daft deed. This difficult but rewarding ride got me thinking about when hard work is worthwhile and when it isn’t.

As I travel about the place preaching the gospel of simplicity, I place a lot of emphasis on making business easier. Easier to do – internally. Easier to use – for the customer. Easier to understand – for everyone.

Occasionally, my message misses the mark. Someone argues that making things easier might make business boring. Or that focussing on ‘easy’ undermines the value of a strong work ethic. Or that I’m advocating an unattainable utopia in which a business can be operated from a sunlounge by the pool.

My trudge up the hill (can you trudge on a bike?) helped me realise that these arguments miss the point. Making things easier doesn’t mean robbing the bank to pay the bills. It means ensuring that your efforts are an investment in your growth.

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In a simple business, hard work is focused on getting the job done – on achieving the business' vision or purpose. By contrast, complexity leads to a loss of clarity. This creates businesses in which a lot of energy is spent being busy but not getting anywhere.

In a simple business, getting the job done involves no more effort than necessary. By contrast, on the odd occasion when a complex business is actually moving forward, it does so in a more laboured fashion.

(Although my ride was hard work, I made it as easy as I could. I rode a modern, lightweight road bike. I made sure the bike was well maintained. I didn't carry any unnecessary weight. I made sure I was reasonably fit to start with.)

In a simple business, the customer's effort is valued. The business is quick and easy to deal with; its products work first time. A complex business tends to make its customers jump through hoops.

In summary, simple businesses tend to move onwards and upwards while their complex counterparts are running around in circles.

My ride was hard work. It took over two hours to cover a distance I would normally cover in 45 minutes on the flat. But I was well prepared, as I mentioned. And the hard work had a purpose. Every laboured pedal stroke moved me forward.

I could, of course, have burned off as many calories on an exercise bike in the comfort of my own living room. But would the hard work have felt worthwhile? Certainly not to the same extent. As it is, the next time I look up at that big hill I'll be revelling in the

Simplicity for Productivity

memory of my hard work and the view which was its reward.
Wouldn't you like to look back at your efforts in the same way?

SIMPLY PUT:

*Having a simple business doesn't mean no
hard work. It means hard work with a purpose.*

Reducing Distractions and Getting Things Done

Have you ever worked hard all day only to look back with wonder at how little you achieved? Or set up a foolproof new system only to find no one – not even you - sticks to it? Or had a great idea that never saw the light of day? There is a simple yet powerful idea which can help you overcome all of these problems.

I call this concept the ‘trigger’. Triggers initiate nearly everything we do during a typical workday. Anything that causes you to pause, stop what you are doing and move onto something else is a trigger.

Triggers come in a whole range of forms. The phone ringing, an interruption by a colleague, mail arriving on your desk, a computerised alarm or email notification – these can all be triggers. A sudden thought or idea can also be a trigger.

Our routines and habits act as powerful triggers. If you are in the habit of having a coffee at 10 o'clock every morning, that habit is a trigger: it pulls you away from what you were doing.

Some triggers set us on the path towards getting something done while others keep sending us off on a detour. We might say triggers can act for ‘good’ as well as ‘evil’.

Simplicity for Productivity

On the ‘evil’ side, a whole host of triggers constantly conspire to remove our focus. In fact, an effective way of tackling procrastination is to identify and remove the triggers that distract you. For example, turn off that prompt that pops up to tell you “New mail has arrived. Do you want to read it now?”.

On the ‘good’ side, triggers are the essential link between your documents – diaries, to-do lists, written procedures, etc. – and action. For example, items on your to-do list won’t get done unless you have some sort of trigger which causes you to refer to the list on a regular basis. The best quality manual in the world is useless without some form of trigger which forces people to read it and put it into practice.

Triggers are critical to getting less regular tasks done. In Australia, most small businesses used to do their accounts only annually because there was no trigger to do otherwise. Then the government introduced a ‘trigger’ called the Business Activity Statement which forces us to do our accounts at least quarterly. (Whether this is more ‘good’ than ‘evil’ is debatable!)

You can use triggers – diary entries, for example – to prompt things like a regular review of your plans, or a review of your price lists or sales statistics. Similarly, creating deadlines – particularly ‘public’ ones (as distinct from self-imposed ones) – forces the creation of triggers.

Triggers are as important for teams as they are for individuals. Regular meetings can be triggered simply by their being regular: same time, same place. And of course the minutes of these meetings should be a powerful trigger for everyone who gets an action against his or her name.

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Try focusing on your triggers for a day. Every time you ‘change course’ during the day, consider what it was that caused you to do so. Write these things down. Conversely, when you think about that job which you never seem to get around to, think about developing a trigger to make it happen.

SIMPLY PUT:

Control the triggers and you’ll have more time.

Coping with Information Overload

It must be one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. How do we make the most of the enormous potential of the information age - while at the same time avoid being overwhelmed by its sheer volume? The answer may be simpler than you think.

Some years ago my wife and I travelled to London. As many Australians do, we planned to find some work - probably in a pub - and do some travelling.

I clearly remember those early days in London. We were knocked out by the noise, the activity, the history, the endless number of things to do. We spent days just wandering around, soaking up the real life incarnations of a thousand picture book images.

Although we've lived most of our lives in cities ourselves, London gave 'city' a whole new meaning. We felt like the boy from the bush who encounters the city lights for the first time. Overwhelmed. Not knowing where to look. Vulnerable to temptation. At once wanting to do everything yet too scared to do anything.

The information age is having a similar effect on the developed

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world. It has left us stunned by its scale, its unlimited choice and its phenomenal growth. The 'Information City' has quickly become a very crowded place. It offers opportunity, exciting places to visit, tempting shops and entertainment. But, like London, it has a seedy side too: beggars, brothels and bandits abound.

So what's the trick to coping with life in the Information City? Just as my wife and I had to do in London, we have to come to terms with it. We need to adapt ourselves to it rather than expect the opposite. We have to define our own individual 'space' within this new environment. We have to:

Learn to filter out the 'noise'

In the city we do this by avoiding engagement with strangers and being hard-nosed when dealing with uninvited interruptions. We learn not to take the ugly side of the big city personally, just as we had to do with the homeless in London.

Business equivalents of this filtering include unsubscribing from e-newsletters that you never read, or have lost interest in, and being ruthless at deleting, filtering or bouncing back unsolicited emails.

Develop the skills needed to get around

In London, if you can't read a map and negotiate the Underground, you will be lost. By contrast, there are many safe shortcuts to be found if you take the time to find them.

At work, not learning how to use search engines properly is like never bothering to learn how to read a city map. It is the essential skill for making the most of the Information City's opportunities.

Find comfort in communities

We make our place in the ‘real world’ city by centring ourselves around school communities, associations, our circles of friends and so on. We need to carve a similar niche for ourselves in the virtual world.

Find forums, blogs and chat rooms relevant to your specific interests and use them to find the best and most relevant websites. Word-of-mouth is a terrific resource on the internet, just as it is in real life.

Make deliberate choices

I decided in London that I wanted to get to know the National Gallery really well. So, ignoring all other ‘opportunities’, I spent every lunch break for a number of weeks at the gallery. I was left feeling I had conquered a part of the city, rather than beaten by its charms.

Directionless browsing was something we all did a lot of when we first discovered the central suburb of WorldWideWeb in the Information City. But it can be an enormously time wasting habit if it gets out of control. A directionless stroll every now and then can lead to unexpected finds – but not if it’s at the expense of your real focus.

Develop a ‘sixth sense’ for security

Look ahead and anticipate threats. London in the early ‘90s was an IRA terrorist target. Everyone in the city developed a knack for seeing an unaccompanied bag from a distance.

In the virtual world there is no excuse for not having up-to-date

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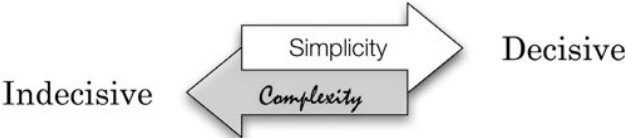
virus protection and firewalls. Not doing so is like having no locks on the door of your house - obviously something a city dweller would never do. There are numerous products on the market, most of them pretty easy to use and update these days.

If we do these things, coping with life in the Information City will get simpler with time - just as it did for us in London. We will grow to enjoy the excitement and opportunity of this new city, rather than feel overloaded by it.

SIMPLY PUT:

Trying to 'defeat' Information Overload is like trying to control a large city. To win you have to find your own way.

SIMPLICITY FOR DECISION MAKING



Easier Decision Making Starts Here

“When the solution is simple, God is answering.”

—Albert Einstein

Ever noticed how little decisions can take just as long as big ones? How it can take just as much effort to decide what colour to paint your bedroom as it does to decide which model of car to buy?

At first this doesn't make sense. Surely we should take a lot longer over a decision to spend \$40,000 on a car than \$40 on a tin of paint? But often we don't - and there is a simple reason why.

Let's explore these two examples.

The hardest thing about deciding on a paint colour for any purpose is that we can't actually see the result until we have made the investment (in time and/or money) and finished the job.

Those of us with an untrained eye know only too well that, despite test-pots and computer simulations, initial perceptions can be very different from the reality which strikes as the last few roller strokes are made.

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Contrast the car. This is easy to visualise. A test-drive puts us behind the wheel of a brand new vehicle. A car which is clean, shiny and devoid of crumbs and wrappers all over the floor. A car without rattles. A car with that characteristic ‘new car’ smell.

The perception created by advertising becomes reality, our emotions kick in and we just want to keep on driving. Before we know it we are signing the papers!

The key difference between these two examples is not the relative size of the decisions, nor differing levels of emotional investment.

The key difference is the contrasting degree of clarity about the ultimate outcome at the time the decision is made. In the case of the car, the test-drive experience provides almost surreal clarity well before we need to make a decision, hence an ‘easy’ decision. In the case of colour choice, clarity is not achieved until well after the decision has been made, so it is a ‘hard’ decision.

Business decisions can, of course, be much more complex than these examples. To be made effectively, business decisions can require considerable analysis, review and consultation. A host of decision-making tools have been developed to assist this process.

But business is also characterised by numerous small, day-to-day decisions. These can be just as taxing on the resources of decision makers if there is not clarity of purpose or direction.

Well-run businesses know this. They make significant investment up-front in clarifying and communicating their purpose. They establish systems and processes, rules and guidelines which give people at all levels the clarity and confidence to make good,

Simplicity for Decision Making

quick decisions themselves. As a result, routine decisions get made more quickly, leaving more time for proper consideration of the truly big ones.

SIMPLY PUT:

If making a decision is difficult, you probably don't have enough clarity.

Decisions without Nasty Surprises

Conducting business in the 21st century often requires quick decisions. This often leads to sound data being replaced by perception as the basis for making important resolutions. The risks in this approach are clear: business decisions made without a solid grounding in reality can lead to disaster.

After the collapse of HIH, Australia's largest insurer, in 2001, its former head made a startling admission. He said that 'gut feel' had formed the basis of HIH's decision to takeover its smaller competitor, FAI. The takeover turned out to be a grave mistake - and a significant contributor to the demise of HIH.

Now this was a Big Decision with Big Consequences. But smaller examples abound and while they might not send businesses broke, they can easily result in nasty surprises and wasted money.

Equipment purchases, hiring of extra staff, advertising campaigns, moving to bigger premises, etc. etc. Decisions to do any of these are often based purely on perception, impulse or 'gut feel', completely unsupported by even the simplest analysis.

This should not be surprising. On one hand, we make personal

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buying decisions every day based on perceptions enhanced by marketing. It is part of our modern conditioning.

On the other hand, despite the fact we live in an age of abundant information, only a selected few have learnt how to use that information effectively. For most, doing even the most rudimentary analysis seems all too hard. Perception wins out – and another riskier-than-necessary decision is made.

There is a relatively simple solution to this problem though it will take a little effort. You need to learn the mystical art of analysis.

“That sounds way too complicated!” I hear you cry. It needn’t be. Chances are most of the basic analysis you need can already be done using software already on your computer. As a consultant, I do this with my clients’ information all the time.

For example, most modern management information systems allow you to download pre-made and ad-hoc reports to a spreadsheet with a couple of clicks. Once you have the spreadsheet, you can build charts, do “what-if” analysis and easily slice and dice the information for a better view.

Armed with this simple information you might revisit your approach to marketing (how can we attract more of the bigger customers?), to customer service (are we looking after the right people?), to product/service range (is the effort needed to manage the small products worth it?), and so on.

Do it often enough, and you will start to build a better picture of how your business is travelling - and reduce the chance of an unwelcome surprise.

This sort of simple analysis is best learnt by doing. With prac-

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tice, you will start to ask yourself “what information could help me with this decision?” and get quicker at finding that information.

You will gain a better understanding, and more control, of your business (or your part of your business). You will shun perception in favour of facts. And you will have fewer expensive surprises.

SIMPLY PUT:

*The simplest analysis can reduce the risk of
unwelcome surprises ...*

Give Instinct a Chance

Forget your million dollar babies. A boxing bout only lasts an hour or so. The real battles happen in the world of management where ideas and concepts are in constant combat for years. The current Big Idea is king. But in the shadows, old concepts conjure their comebacks.

Our underdog is ‘instinct’: allowing gut-feel or intuition to have a bearing on one’s decision making. In the weight division of knowledge, instinct has been on the back foot against information for over twenty years.

Information has delivered blow after blow as it has become easier to store in great quantity and much easier to share. Information, we are led to believe, can provide the cure for all manner of cultural and corporate complaints. In fact it is now widely assumed that information can provide all knowledge.

Information in books – particularly how-to guides – offers itself as an elixir to everything from stagnant sales to unstable staff to soaring costs. “We write it, you read it: problem solved.”

Information management tools like intranets, ERP systems,

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CRM databases and their kind are presented as the ultimate business solution. “Capture the data, do the analysis: your crystal ball awaits.”

Information, in the form of documented regulations and procedures, promises to remove all risk. (And if it doesn't, the cure is yet more documentation).

Information has also delivered powerful punches in education. Witness the decline of apprentice-style on-the-job training and its replacement by classroom-based and even on-line education.

Against this onslaught, instinct could only stay on the ropes and try to run down the clock.

But then came the knockout blows. The collapse of large organisations like Enron and Worldcom in the U.S., and HIH and Ansett in Australia, all seemed to be characterized by over-reliance on decision-making based on instinct. True, there may have been more laziness and corruption than true gut-feel at play, but instinct was left down for the count.

Yet, despite this pummelling, it seems there's life in the old boy yet.

Canadian studies have found that most MIS systems still fail to deliver managers the information they really need. So most decisions (two-thirds, according to one study) are still made on instinct anyway.

Meanwhile the release of *Blink*, by Malcolm Gladwell, is forcing us to look at instinct and gut-feel in a whole new light. A central argument of this book is that a lot of apparent instinct is actually based on real but rapid processing within our brains – not our guts.

Simplicity for Decision Making

And of course none of us needs research to tell us that too much information complicates decision-making; it certainly doesn't simplify it.

Instinct, it seems, is not the simplistic street fighter we might have thought. In the fight between instinct and information, it seems to me it's time for the referee in all of us to step in and balance things up.

SIMPLY PUT:

... but leave a place for instinct in your decision making.

SIMPLICITY FOR GOOD COMMUNICATION



The Power of Simple Communication

“On the whole ... if you can't say it simply, it's probably not worth saying.”

—Alain de Botton

There is a little and perennial best-selling ‘management’ book which acts as a perfect demonstration of the power of simplicity. The book, with the quirky title *Who Moved My Cheese?*, remains a business best seller seven years after its original release. It has sold well over 15 million copies in a market where a few thousand is generally considered a success.

Who Moved my Cheese? was written by Spencer Johnson, who also co-wrote *The One Minute Manager*. It is a book about change and the way we handle it. Its lessons are taught through the telling of a simple parable. We follow the fortunes of four characters (named Sniff and Scurry, Hem and Haw) as they move through the maze which is their lives.

Who Moved My Cheese? is a paradox in a publishing industry which produces hundreds of business books every year. Most of

these books are thick, complex and offer countless checklists for success.

In contrast, *Who Moved My Cheese?* is thin (only 96 pages), offers no explicit solutions to anything and makes almost no reference to business at all.

To summarise the lessons of this book would be to do it an injustice: you need to read it for yourself. But the success of Johnson's approach has a lot to teach us about how simplicity can make written communication, in particular, more accessible. Consider these four characteristics:

- *Who Moved My Cheese?* uses simple language. Through its use of parable, the book speaks to a wide audience. Although marketed primarily as a management book, it has something to teach staff at all levels as well as parents, teenagers – even politicians.
- The book focuses on the basics. It strips the topic of 'change' down to its bare essentials without clouding them in detail. Its philosophy is that while the details may be important, they can always come later. But they will be worth nothing if the fundamentals are not understood first.
- It doesn't do our thinking for us. This book encourages us to interpret its lessons for ourselves. In this way, our conclusions are much more powerful and much more likely to stay with us.
- Perhaps most powerful of all, the book's concepts can be easily shared. Readers of *Who Moved My Cheese?* become members of an informal 'club'. They share a new 'language' and can readily compare each other's individual approaches to change using the simple cheese and maze analogy.

Simplicity for Good Communication

Getting the message across – to our market, to our customers, to our co-workers, to our staff – is a fundamental part of business. Johnson's success proves yet again that keeping things simple is an effective way to have more of your audience understand what you are trying to say. We should never underestimate the power of simplicity.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Have the courage to use simple language.
People will listen.*

A Simple Habit Brings Better Understanding

Wouldn't life be simpler if you didn't have to repeat yourself? If every time you attempted to persuade someone of something, they got the message first time? If your instructions were carried out without fault - first time, every time? My kids have taught me a powerful lesson in making these happen more often.

If you've ever had a conversation with a four year old you'll know that they ask a lot of questions. Boy do they ask a lot of questions!

Two of the more challenging questions posed by my daughters at that age were "what makes the wind blow?" and "what is a government?". What makes answering questions like this particularly testing is that, at that age, children have a vocabulary of only around 1,500 to 2,500 words. This compares with a typical adult's vocabulary of about 20,000 words.

Nevertheless, with a bit of thought, I found it was usually possible to answer questions like this using only words from the girls' limited 'personal dictionaries'.

Which got me wondering why, as adults, we need all those extra words.

Simplicity for Good Communication

On the surface this seems like a ridiculous question. Obviously we need extra words in order to be efficient with our communication. Most of these extra words summarise concepts it would be just too hard to explain in full every time.

Why would an accountant want to refer to the ‘amount remaining after expenses have been subtracted from revenues’ when he could simply say ‘profit’? Why would a chef want ‘to remove the browned bits of food from the bottom of a pan after sautéing’ when she could just ‘deglaze’?

What the experience with my kids has reminded me is that the efficiency we gain from using our own specialist words entirely depends on the listener or reader understanding them. This is a truism we often lose sight of.

When it comes to communicating, most of us have a tendency to err on the side of efficiency rather than effectiveness. In other words, we tend to choose words that make it easier for us to send our message than for our audience to receive it.

What you should do is the same whether you are communicating with your customers, your staff, your family or anyone else. You need to take responsibility for ensuring that your audience understands the language you are using.

I learnt my lesson because young kids are pretty good at letting you know that they don’t understand. But adults don’t like to appear ignorant. If they don’t understand, they often won’t let you know. Ultimately this results in very inefficient communication.

Think simple. If you’re not always properly understood, try listening to yourself for a time. Identify words and expressions you use that may not be clear to others. Think about how you might

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replace these expressions with 'Plain English'. Think like a teacher - not an expert.

Then if you want a real challenge, try and explain what you do to a four year old.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Focus more of your communication effort on
the receiver - not the transmitter.*

Getting the Message Across - or Not

In the olden days of photography (remember film?), my SLR camera was one of my favourite travel companions. Even after years of use, I still love the magical way a blurred subject suddenly gains clarity as the focusing ring reaches just the right spot. If only such sharp clarity was as easy to achieve in business.

At one time or another, every manager has issued what he or she hoped would be a magical memo. You know: the memo which, once posted on the wall, would provide instant clarity for all who read it - or even walked past it. In every office kitchen you'll still find, behind the dirty cups, a notice alerting those untidy somebodies to the error of their behaviour.

As bits have replaced biros, the enchanted email has replaced the magical memo in the manager's kit. Press 'Send' and before you can say "persistent problem" your staff will have received the message, understood it and altered their wayward ways. If only.

For the more sophisticated message, we need a more sophisticated method of persuasion. This is where the paranormal PowerPoint comes in. Gather everyone together, darken the room,

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throw up the bullet points and, voila, the message sinks in. At least we hope those glazed eyes indicate enlightenment and not drained brains.

If none of these works, we can always get someone else to provide the magic for us. Perhaps a conjured course will make things clearer. Customer service a problem? Easy, send them to a one-day customer service workshop, say ‘abracadabra’ three times and you’ll be winning satisfaction awards before sunrise.

Let’s face it: we’ve all done at least one of these at one time or another. Whether in haste, or out of frustration, or simply because we like kidding ourselves, we attempt to fast-track clarity and understanding through mystical means.

This is done with good intentions, of course. People need to know what’s expected of them, what authority they have, what the ‘big picture’ direction is and so on. When this clarity exists, life for you as a manager is made more simple because your staff are more self-sufficient and reliable.

But, as usual, making things simple takes effort. Magic only happens in Harry Potter novels.

When you next have an important message to get across, perhaps it might pay to look at what advertisers do. They use multiple modes (newspapers plus radio plus billboards, for instance). They use repetition: a ‘one off’ message will rarely cut through. And they focus mostly on the WIIFM (“What’s In It For Me?”) of their audience. All of this takes work.

Photography has changed enormously of late. Most cameras use electronic magic to automatically focus in an instant.

Simplicity for Good Communication

Unfortunately, in the real world of managing people, such instant clarity is a pipe-dream. If you want clarity, you have to work at it.

SIMPLY PUT:

The most effective communication is seldom the quickest. Don't forget the ultimate aim: understanding.

Don't Let your Email Make you Dumb

Email can damage your IQ. I'll tell you how in a moment. First, I need to get something off my chest. You see, this revelation has got me thinking about a recent present I bought my daughters. At the time I just thought I was helping them to build a sense of responsibility. Now I wonder if I'm damaging their IQs too.

When I was growing up, we were lucky to have lots of pets. Dogs, cats, budgies, a hamster. I even had a terrapin who lived in a fish bowl with a fake palm tree to shade itself under. All these pets helped us develop that sense of responsibility.

These days, the nature of our busy 21st century lives leaves us less time and space for pets. My kids have been limited to a couple of short-lived goldfish and, more recently, the pet of the moment: Tamagotchi.

Tamagotchi, for those who aren't aware, are electronic pets. These charming little digital beings spend their digital days singing digital ditties, munching digital donuts and doing digital droppings. They even go on digital dates and generate digital offspring (tamababies) before their ultimate digital demise.

Simplicity for Good Communication

But here's the rub: Tamagotchi are totally dependent. Being a 'responsible' Tamagotchi owner means reacting almost instantly to their every electronic cry. So the kids have become captive of these things. They will stop doing anything – even watching television – to fend for their digital friends.

Crazy, isn't it? Letting technology govern your behaviour.

Which brings me back to email. As it turns out, we adults are just as bad at letting technology rule the roost.

A study in the United Kingdom found that the majority of the 'connected' population have become addicted to checking their email. People will compulsively check and respond to email anywhere and anytime. Even on weekends and holidays.

The researchers gave this phenomenon a name: info-mania. And they discovered some interesting consequences of this techno-distracted behaviour.

Their most dramatic finding was that being an 'info-maniac' – having a part of your brain constantly tuned in and waiting for the next message – effectively reduces your IQ by 10 points. This is a lot. Smoking marijuana only reduces your IQ by four points. It's the same as going to work having missed a night's sleep.

In essence, the researchers are saying that our most popular productivity tool – email – is damaging our productivity.

Email is a fantastic, simple tool. But it will only work for us if we treat it properly. And using it for urgent communication isn't doing that. It's time we grew up and gave proper thought to the way we use email and all our other means of communication.

In the meantime, as our kids' electronic pets apprentice a whole

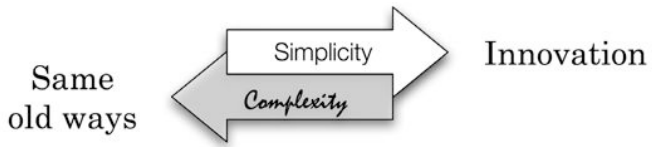
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new generation of IQ-depleted info-maniacs, perhaps I should be taking myself off to the pet-shop.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Ban urgent emails. Urgency is what
the phone is for.*

SIMPLICITY FOR INNOVATION



Finding Opportunities to Simplify

“The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.”

—Hans Hofmann

Questions.

Perhaps never before were so many asked than immediately after the extreme events of September 11, 2001. Why? How? What of the future?

The irony is that one reason the attack on America was able to happen is that the right questions weren't asked. Apart from the whole, so many of the individual components which made up the attack were unthinkable. Hijack within America, synchronised hijacks, hijackers who were fully trained pilots, hijackers determined to take their own lives. None of these had happened before individually, let alone together.

The threats to New York and Washington were not anticipated largely because doing so would have required putting together a jigsaw made up of invisible pieces. Asking the 'unaskable'.

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Whether we want to predict the future or identify opportunities for improvement, success depends much more on asking the right questions than knowing all the answers.

Questions open the door to opportunities. Opportunities to see the future. Opportunities to improve. Opportunities to simplify.

Questions come in many forms. The simplest ones ('why?', 'how?', etc.) don't need to be sought out, we just need to take time out to ask them.

As a production manager some years ago, I was surprised to learn at one point that many of my factory floor operators were actually qualified in areas including marketing, accounting and science. Having finally asked the question, I was able to look out for opportunities for these people to put some of their skills to good use. What hidden skills do your people have?

As a consultant, much of my work has involved mapping and understanding basic business processes like order processing and planning - mundane processes repeated numerous times every day by those involved. The results are always a revelation: participants in the process are amazed that a simple process can involve over 100 steps from end to end, most of which are not actually needed. Opportunities to improve abound, but have remained invisible because the question 'why?' has not been asked.

Sometimes more sophisticated questions rely on the 'asker' having a vision, no matter how vague, of what the answer might be.

In coaching people to become more efficient, I am frequently appalled at the time wasted by many who are unfamiliar with the

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computer software they use every day. I recently helped a team virtually half their workload - and vastly reduce paperwork - by working with them to get more out of the spreadsheet program they were already using. The exercise opened their eyes and, with new answers in sight, the questions flowed!

The tragedy in America forced U.S. intelligence to ask a whole new set of questions, some they never dreamed of asking. The challenge for the rest of us is to do the same - without it being forced on us.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Keep asking questions. It's the best way to
reveal opportunities.*

Where to find the Best Ideas

They're back! After 25 years, walking the dog and rocking the baby are cool once more. Our kids are going around the world when they should be getting ready for school. Our pictures and pottery are in peril. Yes – the yo-yo has returned. And with it a valuable management lesson.

The resurrection of the yo-yo has made me realise the wonderful openness to new ideas which primary school children have. They don't seem to care how old things are. For them, all is new. And everything is measured on a pretty simple basis: its ability to entertain.

My daughters weren't the least bit fazed when they learnt that their new toy is actually so ancient that their dad used to play with one. In the same way, the girls enjoy my Billy Joel collection and love watching 'The Sound of Music' with no concern that these things might be just a tad dowdy.

It's not that they aren't open to the latest fashion. They just haven't yet closed the door to yesterday's. These girls just want to have fun. Period.

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But don't fret for my naivety. I realise that this is not going to last; that before long I'll have to listen to the Piano Man in private. My children, as we all do, will develop 'fashion filters' and become more selective about what they will deign to enjoy. Newness will become critical; actually meeting a purpose less so.

And so to the lesson for management. It would seem that the 'fashion filters' we develop in our teens we carry into our careers as well.

In my research, I've trawled through over 100 years of management ideas. I have often been struck by the number of powerful ideas which seem to have been lost to fashion over the years.

While new management books strut the stores and their ideas permeate the collective management consciousness, older ideas hibernate or die.

It's true that most of these new ideas are built on the old ideas' foundations. But I can't help but think that by so readily embracing the new and exciting we tend to discount the value of the old but original. In doing so, we miss the chance to custom build our own house, opting rather to try and live with someone else's design.

It's also true that the really good ideas – like yo-yos – will keep coming back if we wait long enough. But why be governed by fashion? If an idea will make your business more effective, it's a good idea – no matter how outmoded it appears. In fact, it might just give you a jump on the competition.

Perhaps it's time to dust off the old toy box and see what you can find.

SIMPLY PUT:

The best ideas are the ones that work: how old or new they are is irrelevant. Have the courage to try ideas beyond the current fashions.

Turning your Creativity into Results

The irrational nature of stock markets reached a new low early in 2003 as they treated the war on Iraq like a sporting contest. The markets soared as each attacking 'goal' was scored. They then dived at every sign of effective defence. This behaviour serves as a valuable reminder of how NOT to do business if you want your creative energy to bring you real results.

Active stock market traders are experts at what I call 'reactive creativity'. They seem to focus their creative effort more on trying to out-smart each other than on buying into better performing companies.

Creativity, in a trader's mind, is the correct prediction, before anyone else, of a significant move in the market - up or down. It's also about being clever at minimising losses when those predictions prove wrong.

And where does the cost and confusion of all this 'reactive creativity' get them? In 2002, the average American trader lost 22% of the value of his or her portfolio. Average returns had been negative for the last three years.

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Compare these results to the performance of Berkshire Hathaway, the corporate vehicle of enormously successful investor Warren Buffett. Investments in Berkshire actually increased by 10% in 2002. In other words, they out-performed the rest of the market by 32%. Berkshire outperforms the market year after year.

What's the difference? Fundamentally, when Buffett buys into a company, he 'buys to keep'. He is not interested in reacting to market conditions. He uses his creative energies to identify strong, sustainable investment opportunities. His is 'proactive creativity'.

Proactive Creativity is the type of creativity which characterises a simple business. It is creativity built on a solid foundation. It is creativity which, as Jim Collins and Jerry Porras put it, 'stimulates progress' while 'preserving the core'.

For example, in a simple business, your core might include your clarity about what you are trying to do, your capability to do it and your consistency at doing it over and over.

This core is what gives a simple business its stability. It's what gives the managers of such a business their sense of control. And this stability and control in turn provides the means to be proactive, rather than reactive, when it comes to creativity.

Creativity built on a solid foundation - proactive creativity - is much more likely to succeed because it is easier for everyone in your team to understand. Your people will buy into change because it makes sense - not because 'the boss thinks it's a good idea'.

Where does your business sit? Are your creative energies focused on setting the direction of the market - or reacting to your competitors' moves? Do you actively seek ways to be more efficient

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internally, forcing your competitors to catch up? Or are you cutting prices and costs just to stay in the market?

Get the basics right, then get proactive with your creativity. A simple concept which will put you ahead in your market every time.

SIMPLY PUT:

Proactive creativity will always put you a step ahead of reactive creativity.

SIMPLICITY AND YOUR PEOPLE



Knowledge Management made Simpler

“The whole is simpler than the sum of its parts”.

—Willard Gibbs

Knowledge Management’ is Big and Now. The wide coverage of ‘KM’ in the management literature could easily give you the impression that it is a ‘big business’ issue requiring expensive, technology-based solutions. In truth, knowledge management is a new name for an old challenge facing businesses large and small.

So what is ‘Knowledge Management’ and what are its implications for managers in businesses large and small?

To understand ‘knowledge’, we need first to define its off-sider, ‘information’. Information, simply put, is anything that has been documented. Books, manuals, the world wide web, databases, software help files - all these contain information. Information is tangible, but it requires conscious effort to access it.

Knowledge, by contrast, is information that has been embedded in our minds and which can be drawn on virtually instantly. Knowledge gives us the capacity to act - without reference to external information.

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Let's look at gardening as an example.

There is limitless information out there designed to make green-thumbs of us. But 'knowing' how to be a good gardener cannot come from a book. It comes from a combination of hands-on experience, information and drawing on the knowledge of others.

Diagnosing the problem with the sick plant in the back corner can be a bit like negotiating a maze. Information gives us lots of potential paths to follow, and may get us there in the end, but we will encounter a number of dead-ends along the way. Knowledge gives us the ability to ignore the false paths and take the shortest route to the answer.

For business, the challenge of Knowledge Management is all about trying to capture the knowledge of our people and embed it within our organisation. This reduces reliance on key individuals and makes the business more 'scalable'. It also saves time and effort as identical problems aren't solved and re-solved over and over again.

Knowledge sharing is the ultimate 'win-win'. No matter how many times we share our knowledge with others, we still get to keep it for ourselves.

This doesn't make Knowledge Management easy to do. There are no short cuts. It takes time and effort. (That's why apprenticeships take three or four years.)

While technology may have a role to play in enhancing Knowledge Management, it is ultimately a people issue. It needs trust, an open environment and plenty of direct interaction. It needs forums for people to share their experiences and perspectives.

Simplicity and your People

The growth of the Knowledge Management industry has occurred in part because organisations are realising that the knowledge of their people makes up a large part their value. The starting point is creation of the time, space and environment for knowledge sharing to happen. It may start with no more than a loosely structured version of Friday afternoon drinks.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Boost Knowledge Management: get people
talking to each other.*

Change Management made Easier

A friend of ours recently pointed out that the paint on our front windowsill is cracked and peeling. With equal kindness, she reminded me that it is only a few years since it was last painted. As if I needed reminding. I thought of blaming our home's stubborn resistance to change but knew deep down that the fault lies elsewhere: with me.

A similar thing happens often in business. I have spoken to many managers over the years who blame difficulties associated with making change on the intransigence of their workforce. We have been conditioned to believing that 'people hate change' and that, therefore, they will naturally resist it.

My experience tells me that this preconception is a myth. The problem isn't resistance to change. It is the frequent failure by managers to properly prepare a sound basis for change before it happens. Just as I failed to do with my paint job.

The reality is that when a sound basis is prepared in the first place, what you often get is an irresistible momentum *for* change, rather than resistance to it.

So what is a sound basis for change? Here are three examples I

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can offer you based on my own experience as a manager and consultant.

- **Ideas from within.** Last year I ran a project which involved nearly 800 people changing the way they worked. The ideas for change were generated by the people themselves; this provided the sound basis. Their focus was on those things which made their work difficult to do. The changes made were broad ranging, often involving cost – and even staff – reductions. They were made with enthusiasm.
- **Authentic motivation.** I once worked with a group of staff who were so buried in their work they could see no way out. Initially they resisted any change for fear it might make things worse. Eventually they understood that our intentions were genuine – that we wanted to make their work easier to do. It took some time, but once this sound basis was in place, the changes were taken up with gusto.
- **Consistency of message.** The greatest resistance to change exists in organisations with a history of incoherent improvement initiatives. People come to associate change with a waste of time and effort; they want no part of it. In contrast, when change sits in tandem with a clear and consistent message and direction, making change simply becomes ‘the way we work’.

What characterises each of these examples – and of course there are many more - is the demonstration that *more work up front leads to less work later on*. It’s a lesson I should have applied to my painting.

It’s not that change is simple. It isn’t. But, like so many aspects of business, we frequently make it more complex than it needs to

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be. So next time you need to initiate change, spend some extra time with the putty and sandpaper – and reap the rewards.

SIMPLY PUT:

Don't manage change - prepare for it.

Simplicity and Keeping Good People

Remember that classic 1970s TV series ‘The Good Life’? (It was called ‘Good Neighbors’ in the US). Its central characters, Tom and Barbara, would now be called ‘downshifters’: people who jump out of the rat race to lead a more simple life. In the 21st century, downshifting is ‘in’. This has serious implications for businesses large and small. Studies in Europe, the United Kingdom, the USA and in Australia have found that an increasing number of people are volunteering to reduce the amount of work they do. Many are managers who have been highly successful in their careers. Many are taking significant pay cuts in order to ‘escape’.

One report, by market analysts Datamonitor (and reported in the London Telegraph) showed that the number of downshifters in Britain grew to about 2.6 million in 2002. The figure in 1997 was 1.7 million. Across Europe the number grew by over 5% per annum over this period.

The reasons for the trend include “too many demands on time [and] too much information”, according to the report’s author, Dominik Nosalik. The research showed that “the internet, emails

and mobile phones [have] added to employees' feelings of being overworked. People felt that, because they could work anywhere, they were working everywhere.”

(Can you see the paradox here? The increased availability of technology that is supposed to make our lives easier is contributing to feelings of quite the opposite.)

Now I think it's fantastic that more and more people are questioning their careers and opting to simplify them. Having done it myself, and as an advocate of simplification, I could hardly do otherwise. But there are other issues here.

It is costly for businesses to lose good people - and their knowledge - to the downshifting trend. What's more, for every downshifter, there must be several others who feel similarly overwhelmed but don't feel they can face the risks of downshifting. These people can't be working at their peak.

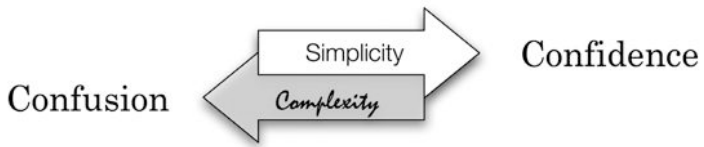
Surely it would be better for all if people were able to simplify the jobs they are doing, rather than downshifting out?

It can be done. But it requires managers at all levels to commit to finding simpler ways of working and more mature ways of using technology. And it requires a team effort. After all, Tom and Barbara only achieved the 'good life' by committing to it and working at it together.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Good people make being a manager easier.
Your job is to make it easy for them to stay.*

SIMPLICITY AND YOU



Simplicity's Dark Side

*“Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just
baggage enough.”*

—Charles Dudley Warner

Even if you've never seen a Star Wars film, you have probably heard of the 'dark side of the force'. In *Star Wars Episode III*, the implicit warning is that the dark side can be difficult to distinguish from the good side. This is certainly the case with simplicity, which also has a dark side. Which leaves us with a challenge.

To find the dark side of simplicity, look no further than the world of advertising. Simplicity sells: a simple message is the best way to quickly and easily win over a broad audience. And because simplicity sells, advertisers can be quick to use simplicity with little or no regard for substance.

A classic, if trivial, example: for decades, washing powder advertisers have been promising 'whiter-than-white'. If their promises had substance we'd need sunglasses to put on our underwear every

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morning. I can't speak for you, but my smalls look pretty much as white now as they always did.

The dark side of simplicity is perhaps even more prevalent in politics. Politicians of all political persuasions tend to prefer a simple catch-phrase (WMD, 'war-on-terror') to a proper explanation. The simple statement 'cuts through' in the age of the ever-shrinking sound bite.

Another cupboard in which the dark side of simplicity lurks is business. If, as happened recently in Australia, you're the new CEO of a major public company, what better way to win over the market than to announce the simplest strategy of all: cost cutting? Cost cutting is easy to understand, so it sells; never mind the consequences.

None of this is to suggest that all simple statements or acts in advertising, politics or business are bad. Our problem is that it is often difficult to discern which simplicity comes from the dark side and which comes from the light: coming from substance rather than expediency.

We need to do two things. First, those of us who value simplicity need to clearly understand the difference between the simplicity of the dark side and that of the light. We then need to ensure that our own attempts to simplify are grounded in the latter.

The difference is, dare I say it ... simple. In fact the underlying difference between the 'dark' and the 'light' forms of simplicity is the same as that which differentiates the dark and light sides of the force. It is this: integrity.

Put very briefly, it works like this. Anyone can make anything

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look simple. But the degree to which you simplify is governed, in the final analysis, by your integrity. Your integrity allows you to simplify that which you know or understand; that which has substance. But it forces you to defer or constrain your attempts to simplify otherwise.

On the surface, simplicity provides ready-to-eat, 99% fat free clarity. In a cluttered and confusing world, simple messages and initiatives are devoured faster than a dog downs his dinner. Our challenge is to create these messages with integrity. May the force be with you.

SIMPLY PUT:

Simplicity without integrity is an empty vessel.

The Ultimate Never-Ending Story?

I knew it was coming. I had recognised the horrible truth a year or so previously but I thought I would be able to keep it to myself for a while yet. Then, without warning, confirmation was delivered from the back seat of the car. “Daddy,” said my youngest. “You don’t know everything.”

With that blunt statement, the final pane in my window of illusion was shattered. The loss of my young daughter’s faith meant there was no longer a single person on the planet who saw me as a font of all knowledge. Thus it was time to put years of kidding myself behind me and declare officially: “I don’t know everything – and I never will,”

And do you know what? Putting up this new window is strangely liberating.

Gone is the complexity which goes with trying to pretend I have – or ever will have - all the answers. Gone is the need to protect a position: to try to mould the world to fit my beliefs – rather than the other way around. Gone is the misconception that, with all this information and technology at my fingertips, there can be nothing new to learn.

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These have been replaced by anticipation of endless opportunities to learn. The realisation that every unexpected outcome is not a personal assault on my beliefs but rather another piece in an endless puzzle. It's like having discovered a bottomless bottle of a good red.

Paradoxically, this newfound freedom makes looking at the way the world works a whole lot more simple. It's like living in successfully liberated country: there are fewer rules – though still enough to maintain control.

Now perhaps you're thinking that I'm stating the bleeding obvious. Surely everyone knows that learning, like life, is a journey, not a destination? I'm not so sure.

I look around me and I see politicians – on all sides – driven by ideology - with very little apparent willingness to learn. I see business leaders and senior managers in a misguided struggle to find the 'ultimate' solution which will finally get their business 'finished'. I see share traders who see every company announcement as a full-stop rather than just another comma along the way.

There seems to me ample opportunity for people to free themselves from the shackles of being unquestionably right.

(By the way, I'm not for a moment suggesting that we should dispense with our beliefs. Rather that we should be open to questioning them frequently and either strengthen them or remould them according to the answers we discover.)

How does this philosophical rant affect you? Only you can truly answer that (or perhaps one of your children). In the same way that simplicity is ultimately a matter of choice, the willingness to continue learning is also a choice.

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At some stage you will come to a fork in the road. I suggest you listen to that back seat driver and take the one which disappears over the horizon.

SIMPLY PUT:

Never stop learning. Never allow yourself to think you know it all.

The Value of Simplicity

If you want to know where to start in the quest for a simpler business, you might give some thought to that old story about NASA and the ballpoint pen.

The story goes that when NASA first started sending astronauts into space, they quickly discovered that ballpoint pens wouldn't work in zero gravity. To combat the problem, NASA scientists spent a decade and several million dollars developing a pen that writes in zero gravity, upside down, underwater, on almost any surface including glass and at temperatures ranging from below freezing to 300°C.

The Russians, faced with the same problem, used a pencil.

I don't know how much truth there is in this story. It doesn't really matter. We are all familiar with situations where 'what seemed like a good idea at the time' becomes 'Nightmare on Elm Street'.

Every time you make a decision to significantly change an aspect of your work, you are starting a new battle between complexity and simplicity. It's a battle fought on three fronts. Most of the time complexity wins.

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The first battlefield is the analytical one, of which financial justification is the major part. Complexity usually sneaks across this front unseen. The cost of complexity is hard to quantify so it is generally not considered. Major software implementations are a classic situation where the costs of imposed complexity are seldom factored in. Government initiatives are, similarly, often sold to us on the basis of expected benefits without full regard to the hidden costs.

The gut-feel, emotional front is an easy one for complexity to get over. Complex options are nearly always more sexy than simple ones. You can imagine how attracted the high-tech boys at NASA would have been to sending something as simple as a grey-lead into space.

The only real chance that simplicity has of beating complexity is at the final ‘values’ front.

Ultimately, whether sub-consciously or otherwise, all our decisions are filtered by our personal and/or business values. For instance, if we commit to being honest, dishonest options will be filtered out early on.

Simplicity is a value which, like honesty, needs to be committed to. You need to test the simplicity of your decisions, as you do your other values. Questions need to be asked routinely like “is there a more simple way?” and “what will the impact of this decision be on the business in terms of added complexity?”

Simplicity won’t always win the war against complexity. But it has a much better chance of doing so if you take the first step and make the commitment to simplicity as a value. One small step for you, one giant step for your business.

Simplicity and You

SIMPLY PUT:

*Want life to be simpler? Start by valuing
simplicity.*

Making Simplicity Last

What's the one thing many fun-loving single males find daunting? That's right. It's the 'C' word: Commitment. On the other hand, politicians seem to find commitment the easiest thing in the world. Understanding the difference is key to ensuring that your efforts to simplify don't fizzle out to nothing.

During the typical election campaign, the concept of being 'committed' always gets a good workout. Everyone, it seems, is committed to everything.

"Is health an issue for you? We're committed to addressing the health issue. Education? We're committed to fixing that too. The environment? To that we are absolutely committed. Oh, and we're committed to being economically responsible too."

Commitments are easy for politicians because they make them with private parentheses: "We're committed (*to the extent that we don't interfere with our real agenda*)". "We're committed (*as long as we don't jeopardize too many votes*)".

On this point, we shouldn't only point the finger at politicians. Commitments with private parentheses are common in business too. I've been into many workplaces where there is a stated com-

Simplicity and You

mitment to safety (*as long as it doesn't threaten our profitability*). And we're all familiar with organisations dedicated to customer service (*as long as it doesn't get too expensive*).

The problem, as our swinging single will tell you, is that *real* commitments can't come with these conditional clauses. They come devoid of ifs, buts and maybes – for the term of your natural life.

Real commitments are enacted. You have to *do* something to demonstrate them. Real commitments are also entrenched. They are made sustainable via some form of institution. Marriage, for instance.

Let me give you an example. Back in 1976, Australia's Olympic team returned from the Montreal games without a single gold medal. For this sports-proud country, this was a catastrophe. The government, fearing an electoral backlash, did what any worthwhile government does: it got 'committed'. Only this time, it got *really* committed.

The government acted to turn things around by establishing and funding the Australian Institute of Sport. This body proactively supports the development of sporting excellence. In the 23 years since the AIS was started, Australia's Olympic success has soared. The team returned from the 2004 Athens games with a record haul of 17 gold.

Now, while some may question the government's priorities, the point I am making is that their commitment to this issue was as solid as the one feared by Mr. Eligible. It was clearly enacted and entrenched.

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It is this sort of commitment you will need to make if you want to make simplicity work for you over the long term. Complexity is powerfully seductive. But if you avoid its temptations and make a real commitment, it will make your life a whole lot simpler.

SIMPLY PUT:

*Lasting simplicity requires commitment
and action.*

About the Author

David Brewster specialises in ‘managing for simplicity’: he helps managers and their teams succeed by finding ways to reduce the complexity which is so prevalent in the modern workplace.

David’s 20 year career to date has given him the broad experience which he draws on to help his clients. This career has included stints as a Research Metallurgist, a Quality Control Manager, a Production Manager, a National Operations Manager, a Recruitment Consultant and a Management Consultant. In 2001 he established his successful business, Business Simplification.

David writes and speaks regularly on the need for greater simplicity in modern organisations and how it can be achieved. His articles have been published in various print and online magazines.

David is the 2006 President of the National Speakers Association of Australia’s Victorian Chapter. He is also a member of the Australian Institute of Management. He lives in Melbourne, Australia with his wife and two daughters.

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Further information, downloads and advice are available from the Business Simplification website: www.business-simplification.com.

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David Brewster is a highly experienced consultant, educator and author. He spent the first ten years of his career as a middle and senior manager in medium and large organisations and is keenly aware of the challenges faced by managers in the 21st century. David is based in Melbourne, Australia. www.davidbrewster.com

Comments on David Brewster's writing:

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"quite out of the ordinary"

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