



meeting complexity with Smart Simplicity

Business is more complex today than ever. We have more stakeholders with more demands, more customers with more choices, more markets at home and abroad, and more varied expectations. Given the speed of change and increased diversity, it is hardly surprising that organisations have become more complicated. With so many interests to be served, the obvious solution is to devise structures, procedures, and rules to tend to every issue.

Unfortunately, countering complexity with management “best practices” exacerbates the problem. Adding too many layers, structures, committees, procedures, and additional KPIs in response to external complexity creates internal complicatedness. Such complicatedness hinders productivity and innovation, while simultaneously demotivating workers and making them work harder and longer on less valuable activities. Companies cannot reduce or control complexity. They have to face it – without getting complicated.

Managers must abandon traditional solutions and instead embrace “Smart Simplicity” principles designed to make people more autonomous, cooperative, and efficient, and which better use people’s intelligence to make organisations more agile, competitive, and responsive.

The six principles of Smart Simplicity fall into two categories: improving people’s autonomy so that they better apply their intelligence at work, and making sure that this autonomy serves the group through cooperation.

SOURCES

Morieux Y. 2011. “Management: a Sociological Perspective”. In *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Organization Theory: From Taylor to Today*, Friedberg E. (coord.), Research & Organization | Morieux Y. 2011. “Resistance to Change or Error in Change Strategy?”. In *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Organization Theory: From Taylor to Today*, Friedberg E. (coord.), Research & Organization | Morieux Y. 2011. “Smart Rules: Six Ways to Get People to Solve Problems Without You”, *Harvard Business Review*, volume 89, n°9, September: pp 78-86 | Morieux Y., Tollman P. 2014. *Six Simple Rules: How to Manage Complexity Without Getting Complicated*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Putting Smart Simplicity into action involves three basic steps.

- 1. Find out what people actually do.**
Behaviours are performance in the making. Most performance problems can be traced to people’s actions. Are they cooperating, finding resources, and solving problems, or are they protecting their turf? Look at these issues before you adopt standard management “fixes.”
- 2. Remember they have reasons for doing what they do.**
People are rational actors—they will act to further their interests and achieve their goals. Whatever your people are doing is a rational solution in their context—a response to conditions that management has created, but typically fails to understand.
- 3. Give them reasons for fulfilling the behaviours required to improve performance.**
If the things they’re doing harm performance, then you must create a new context within which the required behaviours become winning solutions (“rational strategies”). Changes might involve taking away resources so that people are impelled to cooperate, giving people more power to make decisions, or rewarding people who help solve a problem, instead of handing out punishment because the problem happened.

The six main tenets of Smart Simplicity are the focus of *Six Simple Rules: How to Manage Complexity Without Getting Complicated*.

- 1. Understand what your people do.**
Once you understand what people do and why they do it you can use the other simple rules to intervene.
- 2. Reinforce integrators.** Give people power and reason to foster cooperation; integrators, when reinforced, allow us to benefit from the cooperation of others.
- 3. Increase the total quantity of power.**
Create new power bases, don’t just shift existing power – so the organisation can mobilise people to satisfy the multiple performance requirements of complexity.
- 4. Increase reciprocity.** Create the conditions for effective autonomy, removing resources if necessary in order to avoid dysfunctional self-sufficiency – ensure that people have mutual interest in cooperation and they depend on each other for success.
- 5. Extend the shadow of the future.**
Create direct feedback loops that impel people to do their work in a way that satisfies performance requirements that will matter in the future.
- 6. Reward those who cooperate.**
Make transparency, innovation, and ambitious aspirations the best choice for individuals and teams.

These six rules are designed to be practical. Once you understand why people do what they do – their resources and constraints – it is possible to change the context, removing barriers to cooperation and fostering people’s autonomy, intelligence, and creativity at work.

This allows your organisation to become more responsive and competitive, and thus, more profitable.

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TED Talk:
[How too many rules at work keep you from getting things done](#)

TED Talk:
[As work gets more complex, 6 rules to simplify](#)

Harvard Big Think video:
[Rethinking the workplace](#)