

Simplicity-Minded Leaders: A New Way to Look at the Challenge of Leadership

By Kim Spivey and Carson Tate

Yes, life is complicated and leadership is one of life's most complicated challenges. We are becoming convinced that simplicity is the key to unlocking the challenges of being an effective leader. Before we go further, let us reveal our biased view that everyone is a leader because minimumly we are each leading ourselves. So, what is simplicity and why are simplicity-minded leaders effective leaders?

Simplicity is - clarity: freedom: focus: living with intention: getting to the essence of what is important: and eliminating mental, emotional and physical clutter. Do these not also define the characteristics of an effective leader?

An effective leader:

- Has a clear vision for the future
- Provides clear goals and priorities for their team and then gives them the freedom to execute
- Is focused on their goals
- Consistently creates space for self and others to foster strategic thinking
- Is able to identify and eliminate complex processes

Much of the complexity in business today is self-generated and effective leaders should begin to view "simplicity-mindedness" as a competency that drives business results. Simplification means making it easier for your team to get work done and for your clients, vendors and partners to work with you. The most effective leaders we have observed through the years are those who understand that even in the most complex situations there are a few essential issues or questions that, once addressed, will strip away the layers of complexity. These leaders also understand the need to create space in their day to lead, versus creating an overscheduled swirl of activity.

In order to be most effective, leaders also need to create space for reflection and planning; for themselves and for their teams. This space affords leaders the opportunity to gain clarity about what is truly important for successful business performance. Leaders and teams who hurl themselves at one to-do after another often end up diluting their effectiveness because they haven't paused to consider what is most important. These leaders also run the risk of creating burnout because they don't take the time to learn from past experiences, or sort through what is critical for success and what is just window dressing. Bill Jensen, author and consultant, conducted a survey of 460 organizations and found that most workers were suffering from "cognitive overload"- too many choices and too little direction. Leaders need to cut through the overload and build a straightforward path for their teams.

As leaders build a straightforward path for their teams, another “simplicity-mindedness” opportunity presents itself. Leaders and their teams should pay careful attention to the processes that they and their teams create. Time and again we have seen leaders create or approve processes designed around a lack of competence or performance. In the moment, it seems easier to let a complex process evolve than to provide the feedback and development to close performance gaps. One sales organization stumbled along with a fulfillment process in which the order had to land on three people’s desks before the client could be serviced; all because the leader didn’t believe any one of them was capable of handling the task alone.

What can you do to take steps towards the power of “simplicity-minded” leadership?

- Book “think” time on your calendar before your schedule fills up with meetings and other commitments.
- Build in buffer time between meetings to reflect on what you learned from the meeting and your next action steps.
- Once a quarter, ask yourself what are the three most important things for our team to accomplish in the next three months? Communicate those priorities to your team.
- When you find yourself facing a complex challenge or situation, take a time out and ask yourself and your team — “what are the essential issues or questions at the heart of this situation that need to be resolved?”
- Use “alien eyes” to observe your processes. If someone from another planet (i.e. industry) watched your sales process unfold, would it make sense or would it appear clunky, inefficient and ineffective?

We invite you to join us on this path to “simplicity-minded” leadership and would welcome hearing your stories as you put our ideas into practice. Email us at: carson@workingsimply.com and kimspivey@gmail.com.

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