

Finding Simplicity

in

Complexity

by John D. Anderson with Michael Brennan

Business leaders are increasingly overwhelmed by complexity. In this era of information overload, every day seems to bring new technology, new theories, and new management tools – and thus new expectations. As an advisor to CEOs and executive teams, I find many individuals feeling fearful, confused, out of control, and frustrated.

This feeling is not unique to CEOs; it is shared at some level by everyone in your organization. For the sake of yourself and your employees, your job is to create simplicity from complexity. It is your responsibility to provide direction, confidence, and clarity. When each individual has a roadmap for navigating challenges with confidence, it drives his performance, fuels his coworkers' performance, and ultimately satisfies customers (which shows up on the bottom line). Creating simplicity out of complexity is the essence of leveraging leadership and a non-negotiable ability for the CEO. Before you can simplify for others, however, you must first do it for yourself.

Start by identifying the fundamental principles that drive your success and review those principles on a daily basis. For me, those principles are captured in Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I have found that both my successes and failures over the years can be directly attributed to how well I practiced those seven habits. Therefore, I now read Covey's book for fifteen minutes each morning. I even listen to it in my car. I find the only way to truly digest a great book is to read it, listen to it, and break it down into small chunks that I can share with others at work and at home.

An equally important discipline for me is journaling. Each morning, I spend about twenty minutes (enough time to fill up one page) recording my thoughts. This has proved invaluable



in fleshing out new ideas, identifying priorities, and sorting through challenges. Those who know me well encourage me to complete it each morning because they know how influential it is on my performance.

A couple years ago, a good friend of mine developed his own set of simplifying habits and disciplines. Michael Brennan is the CEO of United Way for Southeastern Michigan (UWSEM). His CEO Mastery Success Plan was the foundation for a formal six-month mentoring program he developed for select members of his team. The Mentor Series consists of a simple 3-step process:

1. Attain piercing clarity of your unique ability and strengths.
2. Define success for your life and criteria by which to measure it.
3. Establish a daily discipline of “deliberate practice” to execute your goals.

To date, Mike has nine of UWSEM’s highest performing individuals working through this program, which requires each of them to make the following commitments:

1. **Readiness:** Complete a brief application to confirm one’s readiness for the six-month Mentor Series.
2. **Learn:** Read the following books:
 - a. *Strengthfinders 2.0* by Tom Rath (to discern one’s top five areas of strength)
 - b. *Unique Ability: Creating the Life You Want* by Catherine Nomura, Julia Waller, and Shannon Waller (to discover one’s unique ability)
 - c. *Talent is Overrated* by Geoffrey Colvin (to understand the value and method of “deliberate practice”)
3. **Meet:** Commit to the following meeting rhythm:
 - a. Monthly two-hour meetings with Mike and other participants to learn, plan, and drive accountability.
 - b. At least two one-on-one meetings with Mike for one hour.
 - c. A one hour, one-on-one session with a Strengthfinders Coach.
4. **Goals:** Set lifetime goals, two-year targets, and habits for the first 100 days.
5. **Deliberate Practice:**
 - a. Walk 10,000 steps each day with a pedometer for the entire six months.

- b. Journal your experience and observations throughout the process.

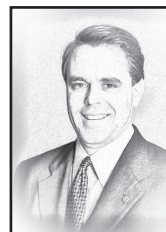
6. **Network of Support:** Intentionally build your personal “help network” to ensure support and guidance throughout the rigorous journey.
7. **Encourager:** Proactively encourage fellow participants in the Mentor Series.

This process is designed not to change things external to oneself but to increase awareness in each participant of his unique gifts. It also uncovers many inconvenient truths, such as toxic relationships, jobs that don’t align to one’s unique ability, and long-standing habits that must be replaced by daily deliberate practice. The process is hard work, but so rewarding. One participant said after just one month of the mentor series, “I am now 40, and this morning was the first time since I was 17 that I have woken up happy about my day and my future.” It reminds me of the words of Roman philosopher Seneca: “Make this your business: learn how to feel joy...true joy, believe me, is a serious thing.”

Thomas Edison wanted a major invention every six months and a minor invention every ten days. He ended up with 1,093 patents including the light bulb, phonograph, and motion picture camera. Like Edison, we need to grip our day and future like a carpenter holds a hammer: firmly and with our eyes fixed on the target. Once we are able to do that, we must lead others to do the same. Amidst all the complexity of this world, it is really that simple.



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