Six Simple Rules: How to Manage Complexity without Getting Complicated

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New tools for managing complexity

Does your organization manage complexity by making things *more* complicated? If so, you are not alone.

According to The Boston Consulting Group's fascinating Complexity Index, business complexity has increased sixfold during the past sixty years. And, all the while, organizational complicatedness—that is, the number of structures, processes, committees, decision-making forums, and systems—has increased by a whopping factor of thirty-five. In their attempt to respond to the increasingly complex performance requirements they face, company leaders have created an organizational labyrinth that makes it more and more difficult to improve productivity and to pursue innovation. It also disengages and demotivates the workforce.

Clearly it's time for leaders to stop trying to manage complexity with their traditional tools and instead better leverage employees' intelligence. This book shows you how and explains the implications for designing and leading organizations.

The way to manage complexity, the authors argue, is neither with the hard solutions of another era nor with the soft solutions—such as team building and feel-good "people initiatives"—that often follow in their wake. Based on social sciences (notably economics, game theory, and organizational sociology) and The Boston Consulting Group's work with more than five hundred companies in more than forty countries and in various industries, authors Yves Morieux and Peter Tollman recommend six simple rules to manage complexity without getting complicated.

Showing why the rules work and how to put them into practice, Morieux and Tollman give managers a much-needed tool to reinvigorate people in the face of seemingly endless complexity. Included are detailed examples from companies that have achieved a multiplicative effect on performance by using them.

It's time to manage complexity better. Employ these six simple rules to foster autonomy and cooperation and to effectively handle business complexity. As a result, you will improve productivity, innovate more, reengage your workforce, and seize opportunities to create competitive advantage.

Six Simple Rules: How to Manage Complexity without Getting Complicated Details

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From Reader Review Six Simple Rules: How to Manage Complexity without Getting Complicated for online ebook

Melchor Moro-Oliveros says

This is the best management theory book I've ever read. Bright and explained in such a simple way (as the tittle says: "without getting complicated")!. I recommend to listen to the author's TED speech, too. Excellent!.

Dennis Williams says

Or "Some tools to get people to cooperate"

Six Simple Rules provides managers with an alternative to the two management approaches (hard, metric driven; and soft, mind-set driven) that the authors suggest have overcomplicated, and thus diminished the ability of organizations to achieve their full potential.

The underlying point of this analysis is: the biggest problem faced by organizations is that people in the organization don't do their best work and don't cooperate with one another to achieve the best results for the organization.

Managers and leaders have been trapped by management theories that abstract employees into mechanistic parts or strive to grasp organizational zeitgeist (intellectualizing collective behaviors). The solution proposed is for managers to get out of the office (where they can safely intellectualize about how to solve abstract problems), engage with employees, figure out what they actually do, and empower them to do their work in ways that require them to cooperate with one another for the good of the organization.

The six rules are illustrated with case studies of anonymized corporations (service, transportation and production) with which the authors consulted.

There are sidebars that synthesize the key points of the rules. This is more effective in the print than the Kindle version. In the Kindle version the sidebar is plunked into the middle of the chapter. I think publishers with an eye toward digital content need to spend a bit more time thinking about digital layout on the kindle. Cooperation between publishers and Amazon would be beneficial for consumers. Sadly there is no way to apply pain points since digital books are generally not returned if they have some value. In this case, the "sidebars" aren't terribly distracting, but they'd perhaps be better placed in a consolidated appendix or maybe between chapters.

There also seemed to be a gap between the abstracted rule and the case study, leaving me wondering how I would go apply the rule inside my kind of organization (education sector). This was in part remedied in the Conclusion, where the authors laid out a process that helps one envision implementing a conversion to a six rules approach.

Overall an interesting and thought provoking read.

Jurgen Appelo says

Reinvention of Agile and Lean without any references to them, but with good insights and nice examples.

Maria says

Companies have only gotten more complex since the 1950s. Frequently large organizations just layer on more management and procedures instead of empowering those at the problem with enough authority to fix the problem.

Why I started this book: Quick audio and an easy way to cross off another book from my professional reading list.

Why I finished it: Same reason as above. Very easy to listen to and forget. The key thing that I remember just hours after finishing it is that employees are perfectly adaptable and will adapt to management's actions by positive and negative.

Kim Miller says

One the most insightful books on management theory I've ever read.

Through a lens of systems thinking and game theory, the author breaks management down in to one simple truth: context matters.

Cristian says

I read this book in a week. I guess the last document I read on BCG was the "matrix" they created several years ago. This time -given the huge expertise they have worldwide - BCG makes everything more simple (not easier) splitting -and fixing-all the managerial aspects of the company into 2 pillars: (1) hard [structure, metrics]and (2) soft [feelings, traits]. However, they say this pillars are obsolete and something needs to be done to create impact and increase employees engagement.
That being said, BCG thinks the best way to tackle this issue is by following 6 steps that make complexity go away.
- Understand what others do.
- Reinforce integrators
- Increase total amount of power
- Extend the shadow of the future (I loved this one)
- Increase reciprocity
- Reward those who cooperate (blame is not for failure, it is for failure to help or ask for help).
Useful book. Completely worth it and immersive. Yves Morieux also has a TED talk in which he explains all of this.

Michelle Brandstetter says

The actual rules reflected are really good. The book is not the most enjoyable to read though. When I've read something similar in the past, I'm left wondering what the authors priorities were. Was imparting the knowledge to help others make improvements at the top of the list or was it to sound very, very smart? It's kind of a shame. As a librarian, I do love a big vocabulary, although...well, I don't want to beat the proverbial dead horse.

Jiri Mocicka says

Brilliant book, incredible eye open for the big organisations.

Worth of every penny :)

Mr Keith M Willey says

A very smart model for complex global businesses

The smart simplicity model makes absolute sense in the current over complicated and distracted world today. The six rules contain practical methods to make a shift into this way of working eminently achievable. I thoroughly recommend this book.

Andrzej Kaczmarczyk says

Finally.
I thought, I'll never finish this one.

Language is needlessly complicated adding to the 'complicatedness' of the book (you'll need to endure the book to understand the word).

The stories, that support the arguments, are ranging from nice to artificially stitched to support whatever idea the authors had.

It's more six cases of the authors experience than a complete, comprehensive model of six rules. Each of the stories had some lead catch phrase, that were coined into six rules.

They try to be controversial by stating that the old ways (hard approach - structures, kpis and soft approach - culture, motivation) are obsolete, but at the same time, they use the old ways as solutions to the problems presented. Granted they take some clever (read consulting) word mincing to prove they bring something

original, but no, at the end it's just restructuring, broader targets, performance improvement targets and kpis.

Reggie Carlisle says

I'm still processing how to apply all of the ideas in this book to my work context...
But while reading it, I've already come up with ways to improve what I do, and how to help others promote autonomy and cooperation in their departments as well.

It should be obvious that cooperation is the key to success in business, but for those of you that still don't get it, take the time to read this book.
All businesses are people business, and business outcomes are based on the work that those people do, how well they do it, and how they work with others.

This book brilliantly explains how to transform your business to deal with modern complexity without complicating things.

Russell Simpkins says

I really enjoyed this book. I am going to read it again to digest and attempt to explain it to others. I found myself getting overwhelmed and excited as the author captured so much of what I experience in my working experience. We regularly attempt to implement hard and soft management approaches and what's worse is that we often implement it on only half of the business. I'm a software developer and I've experienced more than one company adopt "Agile Practices" to speed up product delivery only to have it implemented half way and get luke warm success only to follow up with the soft approach. When both don't work they company either "rinse and repeats" or new management gets brought in. As excellent as I think this material is, I fear that far too many will disregard the wisdom because to listen to it will mean the reader admits the problem they face is their own. Not an easy pill for most to swallow. The tough pill for me to swallow was their suggestion to "resist the urge to clearly define roles." I have asked to have my own clarified more than once. I think what they were saying was that by keeping roles somewhat ambiguous you take away the comfort created by the role. People are not as able to say "It wasn't my responsibility." It's a scary proposition on it's own, but when you couple that with the other rules of "reprimand those that don't help and those that don't ask for help" you can create a powerful situation where you promote engagement and reward cooperation. Great stuff. Worth reading, even if you don't agree.

Mykolas Petrauskas says

I would say it is a must-read for managers at all levels in large multinational organisations (and might be interesting for anyone else too). It does not reveal new and unknown insights into managing a company/department/team, but provides a different set of glasses to look at how your team runs. The author calls out a variety of primary methods used by managers to solve problems - KPIs, new roles, new org structure etc - as inadequate to deal with many of today problems. He does a fantastic job to acknowledge that fundamentally it is all about People Business. Already the first rule, 'understand what your people do every day' does a pretty good job to chart a conversation along 'people' rather than 'processes' or 'measurement' dimension.

The six rules are straightforward and underpinned with great examples - you read and if you work in a large company for sure you will empathise. It does provide some great ideas about 'levers' to pull to make your team both more productive and happy - some you might not have realised or focused on before.
So hold on that new organisational restructuring or hiring yet another VP - read this book first!

Horia says

The basic ideas are good and very useful. It will certainly make me rethink some of the things I was doing and it.

But I found it hard to read it as I felt the language was mostly artificial. For example
"They can do so by framing rich objectives and then embedding feedback loops that retain the benefits of specialization while ensuring a synergistic interplay" - sorry, I understand what you mean but you don't have to phrase it like this.

Claus Nørgaard says

The best book I have read to date on fighting complexity, however it is in itself written in a very complex language

The best book I have read to date on fighting complexity, however it is in itself written in a very complex language