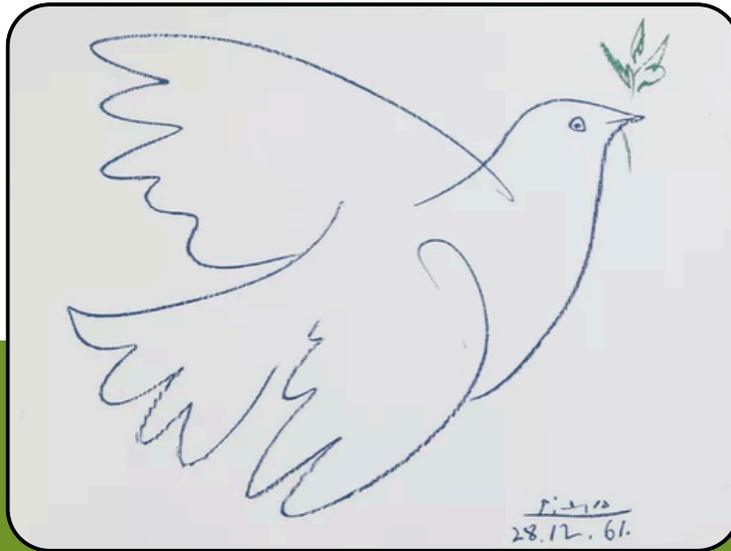


SIMPLICITY, THE UNDERRATED LEADERSHIP SKILL



It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.

~Pablo Picasso

This morning, I joined a weekly inspirational call centered on simplicity. The resonance was immediate. Over decades in the corporate world, starting in the late 1990s, I was steeped in a culture that valorized complexity. Systems integration, ERP deployments, multi-layered process architectures, and the relentless push to connect elements that didn't naturally align shaped how I, and many leaders of that era, learned to think.

In that period, complexity was a signal of sophistication. The more moving parts, the more assets, the more integration layers, the



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more authority and credibility we believed we earned. We were rewarded for weaving many threads together, even when they were frayed, misaligned, or contradictory. That wiring of complexity became embedded in our mental models.

Today, complexity has exploded. Legacy systems persist, dependencies multiply, data structures balloon, and organizational silos proliferate. Yet the leadership skill we most urgently need is not improving at managing complexity. It is the courage and clarity to simplify it, and in so doing, to reveal what truly matters.

Simplicity is not superficial. It is not reduction for reductions sake. Rather it is the distillation of experience, intuition, and rigor into what is essential. Like Picassos quest to paint like a child, leaders must unlearn habits of complication and rediscover the primitive clarity of purpose.

When we lead from simplicity, our vision becomes sharper, our decisions clearer, and our presence felt more deeply. In a world of noise, simplicity becomes a beacon. It invites connection, focus, and alignment.

The Art of Leading with Less

Antoine de Saint Exupery once said:

Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.

That line is deceptively simple, yet profoundly applicable to leadership. The art of leading with less is not about doing less. It is about doing what matters most. It is about trimming what distracts, removing the nonessential, and structuring space for the essential to breathe.

In business, that means creating processes people can understand and use. It means designing systems that deliver value without burden. In communication, it means saying exactly what needs to be said, no more and no less. In relationships, it means listening with full attention, speaking with intention, and removing emotional friction.

The evidence supports this. According to research by Heidrick & Struggles, organizations that embed simplicity outperform peers. Their so-called super accelerators achieved on average a 22.8 percent higher economic impact than their lower-acceleration peers. Their teams performance ratings were often double those of less disciplined organizations.

Another finding: organizations with simpler operations often grow faster. Heidricks research also suggests that firms with high levels of organizational simplicity enjoy roughly twice the compound average growth rate of firms burdened by complexity.

Simplicity is also linked with employee engagement. A workplace that is easier to navigate reduces frustration, low morale, and attrition. One study cited in Forbes described that simple workplaces lead to more engaged employees and stronger business outcomes.

When leaders design for simplicity, they ask different questions. Rather than What can we add? they ask What can we remove? Rather than layering more features, processes, or committees, they seek minimal coherence. Rather than overloading statements and emails, they strive for clarity and alignment.



The paradox is that simplicity often feels harder than complexity. It demands discipline, constraints, and having the courage to discard parts of ourselves, habits, systems, and ways of speaking that no longer serve the clarity of purpose.

The Courage to Simplify

Choosing simplicity is an act of leadership courage. It counters the cultural bias that equates complexity with brilliance. People often fear that if they simplify, others will misjudge them as simplistic or weak. Yet real strength lies in clarity of thought, courage of restraint, and confidence in what is essential.

To simplify, a leader must slow down when the crowd is speeding up, ask Why? until the noise recedes, and be ready to discard what no longer works. Simplicity demands vulnerability: admitting that some structures, practices, or stories no longer serve the mission.

In practice, simplicity means releasing complexity in four key domains: strategy, structure, culture, and daily activity. Heidricks framework calls it killing complexity by simplifying strategy (clear priorities), simplifying operating model (less fragmentation), simplifying culture (behaviors over rules), and simplifying day-to-day work (meetings, communications, decision paths).

Leaders who model simplicity invite others to follow. When your email is concise, your meeting small and focused, your metrics few and meaningful, your decisions transparent, people internalize that simplicity matters. You begin to shift collective norms.

Consider Picasso's other words: *J'ai mis toute ma vie à savoir dessiner comme un enfant.*

He speaks to the lifelong discipline of returning to essence. Similarly, great leaders spend years of experience and experimentation to lead with a kind of childlike clarity, curious, direct, honest, and uncluttered.

True leadership today is not about mastering complexity. It is about illuminating simplicity. It is about creating disciplined space for human connection, insight, and direction. In a world of overload, simplicity is an act of liberation.

Reflection for the Week

Let's turn this into a generative inquiry. Use the prompts below to explore where simplicity might unlock new energy, focus, or clarity in your leadership and life.

- In what domains of your work or organization are you most burdened by complexity? Systems, meetings, decision paths, relationships?
- If you removed half of your current priorities, what two or three core things would remain? What would that change?
- What would it look like to lead like a child, with openness, directness, curiosity, and empathy, in your next conversation or decision?
- Where do you sense resistance when you try to simplify? What stories or fears arise?
- What is one small elimination of a process, report, meeting, or email habit you can test this week to create breathing space?



Simplicity is not the absence of sophistication. Rather, it is its highest expression. It is where clarity, insight, trust, and alignment converge.

I invite your voice: 

Where in your life or work could simplicity bring more flow, freedom, or focus? Reply to this message, your insights may spark others reflection and could shape our next edition.

Belinda MJ Brown, MCC 

Your Reflexivity Partner in Transformation,
Crafting Your Legacy One Step at a Time for a
Regret-Free Life

