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*The article below made me smile when I read it. It sounded like the words came directly from my mouth! As most of you know, I embody simplicity in all areas of process improvement and quality - and stress this through one of my favorite quotes below. In fact, this actually represents the unique expertise that P Squared has perfected in the area of team based process improvement.*

***" Making the simple complicated is commonplace.  
Making the complicated simple is the key to success."***

*The best way to ensure success when implementing process improvement is to get everyone in your organization involved. And to accomplish that, your employees must understand and become passionate about improving what they do everyday. They need to feel empowered and believe that every action on their part will make your company a better organization - and benefits them individually as well.*

*Another of my favorite quotes is:*

***"When the student is ready, the teacher will emerge."***

*P Squared creates ready, willing and able students who crave to learn and search for improvement opportunities.*

*Enjoy the article!*

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### **Don't Overcomplicate Quality** by Kevin McManus

During my twenty plus years in the business world, I have experienced a variety of programs, processes, and training that were intended to improve quality and organizational effectiveness. Unfortunately, I have yet to find an approach that meets my complete list of expectations.

One day, this all changed. On that day, I stumbled upon what appears to be one very plausible theory for explaining why many, if not most, of these approaches have failed to deliver what they promised. In our efforts to put new spins on old programs, to develop new ones, or to just find something that works, we as internal or external change agents have ignored an important mindset that I call "effective simplicity."

I have to thank one of my past employer's terminal managers, Joel, for leading me to this mindset. While my personal willingness to learn enabled my paradigm shift, it was his open and honest feedback that triggered it. I had become frustrated with the seemingly low level of interest that existed in many of the new tools and concepts that I was trying to introduce as part of our total quality process. No one seemed to read much of what I sent them in the mail, and few of our managers seemed to ask me much about these ideas in face-to-face gatherings.

Instead, they claimed that I was asking them to learn things that were not important, or that I was making things too complicated. My first reaction was to

categorize these claims as resistance to change or as an unwillingness to learn. Through a series of e-mail notes with this terminal manager however, the true picture of what was happening began to come into focus.

In short, Joel told me how most of his peers had spent their work lives growing up in the "simple" world of trucking. A lot of them had not had a lot of formal schooling past high school, and those that had most certainly did not major in organizational development, finance, or behavioral sciences. In many cases, I was going over their heads with a lot of the material I was sending out or talking about. This was not due to a lack of intelligence, but instead was due to a difference in focus and experience - - we came from different worlds and cared about different things.

Most importantly however, he shared with me a story of how he had resolved some interpersonal conflict that existed at his terminal when he first assumed leadership of it. Instead of conducting a workshop on conflict resolution or giving everyone a book to read on that subject, he chose to practice effective simplicity -- he read them a children's storybook! Reading the book to them pointed out the ineffective nature of their behaviors, and also stressed the value of working together as a team. The bottom line is that this simple action made a difference, as conflict was reduced and performance improved.

Through personal reflection, I applied this anecdote to the myriad of organizational change techniques and theories that have emerged over the past twenty plus years. Take the concept of having teams for example. What began as quality circles that were trained with a fifty-page workbook has evolved into hundreds of books, workshops, and video titles, not to mention the wide variety of names we now have for different types of teams. We have taken the concept of working together as people and grossly overcomplicated it, without stopping to ask if any of these theories or approaches was truly working.

We have done the same thing to quality. While it is important to use data analysis to understand a system, it makes no sense to expect everyone to know the formulas for control limits if they do not first understand the basics of common and special cause variation. Our tendency is to teach more and more tools instead of making sure that the proper mindsets exist and that the basics of using a given tool are truly learned.

The solution lies not in discarding these organizational improvement tools and concepts, but in effectively simplifying them. Effective simplicity can be found somewhere on the continuum between oversimplification and complexity. To practice effective simplicity, I am discovering that you have to find a balance between making something so basic that certain key points are missed and including so many new terms and theories that they are not understood or cannot be absorbed.

To find this balance for a given concept, ask yourself:

- "What are the bare essentials that should be understood about this concept in order for it to have the greatest regular impact?"
- "How do I explain these bare essentials to others in terms they will understand?"

- “If these basics are consistently practiced, to what degree do we really need to learn about more advanced topics?”

Practicing effective simplicity does not mean that we abandon the need to learn. It does however require us to question what we need to learn and use in order to provide excellent customer service in a cost effective manner. If we are honest with ourselves as we ask such questions, we will most likely discover that we are making things much more complicated than they need to be. For example, are we wasting a lot of time trying to teach people how to be effective team leaders before they have mastered the art of being an effective team member?

At this point in time, the gap continues to widen between what many academics, consultants, and even some managers preach, and what most employees understand. In our zeal to make more money, to show off our intelligence, or in a more positive sense, to help others, we have tried to run before we could walk and overcomplicated what we are trying to accomplish.

On the other hand, some of the best selling sets of books on the market today are the “Dummies” books. The “Dummies” books are based on the concept of effective simplicity. If you have used one or more of them, you know that they are both effective and not that much unlike a children's storybook. Maybe there is a place for the concept of effective simplicity in your company -- are you overcomplicating quality?

***Keep improving!***