

Swanson, R. A. (1991). Only simple solutions will win. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 2 (2), 99-100.

Only Simple Solutions Will Win

Each year I consciously take the time to review and synthesize my experiences over the previous twelve months into a personally profound lesson. In 1986 it came out to be "Only simple solutions will win." This lesson has been part of my thinking ever since. Back then I had to make some intellectual sense out of President Ronald Reagan; this was the result.

This lesson has tiers of logic behind it, which I find interesting. First, there is the crass statement that only simple solutions will win. Unlike individuals, organizations and groups of people generally do not and will not accept ideas or systems that appear complex. Thus, when presented the alternatives—complex versus simple—the simple solution will win. You may say, "As it should be! What is so vexing about that?" I agree. All else being equal, I believe that the simple solution should win acceptance.

The next tier of logic from my 1986 lesson is that simple versus complex is more powerful than effective versus ineffective. Thus, an ineffective simple solution will generally be accepted over an effective complex alternative. Furthermore, my observation is that a poor simple solution will even win over effective moderately complex solutions! At this point, I get vexed for the second time. Unfortunately, only simple solutions will win.

Hold it, there is more. The next layer of logic starts with the observation that most of the important problems in life and organizations come to us as complex problems. The tough problems in life usually are not simple problems, and effective solutions are not likely to be simple. Whereas only an effective solution can be an ultimate winner, only simple solutions will win acceptance. Vexed again!

What to do? If you just want to win approval, regardless of the solution's effectiveness, your tactical response should be to advocate a simple, plausible solution for acceptance. In contrast, if you want to improve conditions, you are compelled to present effective solutions, ones that are more complex. Because your odds of gaining acceptance are low, the strategic response in this case is more difficult. The intellectual challenge is to simplify your complex effective solution as much as possible without losing its effectiveness, to the point that it becomes a true rival of the simple ineffective option. This process is very hard intellectual work.

The simple solutions are indeed attractive. They are everywhere. HRD has its fill of simple fixes to complex problems, including wilderness events and whole brains:

- The Minnesota Vikings football team, in need of winning, went to the Pecos River Learning Center wilderness training program to develop

teamwork. They finished the year in last place of their division. The interim news reports were that the football players at first thought the outdoors stuff was silly, but they did end up enjoying the trip.

- Companies need their employees to apply all their brains to company problems and issues. Thus, you can have the Whole Brain Corporation systematically ask your employees questions like, "Does a messy office bother you?" When the accountants say yes and the advertising graphics personnel say no, the corporation summarizes the data by telling the individuals and their firms that the accountants fit in one quadrant of the sphere and the artists in another! I am still confused as to whether artists do better art by staying in their strong brain quadrants, or if they should first clean up their art tables.

As noted, the simple solutions, effective or not, are attractive. Revealing the impotency of the simple ineffective solution is clearly the best route. I am taken aback time and again by how difficult it is to do this. Those simple solutions are very, very attractive. Thus, more complex effective solutions, in order to gain acceptance, must be portrayed as seemingly more simple than they are just to gain acceptance. Simplification for the purpose of gaining acceptance may be the most vexing of all as the limits of honesty and truth get challenged. The old saying, A little lie saves a lot of explanation, may apply. Revealing all the complexity of an effective solution could cut off support. Not revealing it could be dishonest. Most of us struggle with this dilemma.

The strong method from theory and research is conceptual model building. Conceptual models that have proven to be effective and that are presented in a simple form can be formidable rivals to HRD fads and quick fixes. In fact, next time I am in one of those dilemmas, I might use the following matrix of solution complexity and effectiveness as a way of making my case:

		<i>Solution Effectiveness</i>	
		Effective	Ineffective
<i>Solution Complexity</i>	Simple	Win	Lose
	Complex	Lose	Lose

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