

simple thinking

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simple thinking

tackling problems
with simplicity

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INTRODUCTION

Is *Simple Thinking* merely a collection of amusing stories?

The answer is yes and no.

Yes, this book has many tales and anecdotes. Yet, they all describe true events and challenge the notion that complex problems need elaborate solutions.

And no, they are not just stories. Each story will show you how a seemingly difficult problem can be broken into smaller chunks and tackled with simple thinking.

We are obsessed with complexity and seek intricate solutions to solve problems. *Simple Thinking* offers an alternate approach. Remember, simplicity isn't the absence of sophistication. Rather it is about finding clarity amidst chaos. If you are overwhelmed with challenges and clutter all around, you will realize how a shift to simplicity can unlock smarter solutions.

You may be keen to follow a healthy diet or pursue a childhood dream. You may want to become an expert negotiator or question existing rules that you feel could have unintended consequences. Or perhaps, you just want to thrive at work and inspire others to do the same. You can achieve all this, and more, by thinking with simplicity.



Let's see what nature can tell us about simple thinking.

We have 10,000 times as many neurons in our brain as an ant does. Yet the humble ant has much to teach us. Large colonies of ants organize themselves to build complex structures. They employ basic heuristics for tasks like making nests, foraging and even protecting themselves from invaders. With skills honed over millions of years, ants have learnt how to organize themselves and provide food to thousands, sometimes even millions who live in the colony. Just as we rear cows for milk, some varieties of ants farm aphids for their honeydew.

Contrary to popular belief, the queen ant does not issue orders to the entire ant colony. Her job is to breed, and she spends her life laying eggs. Using information available locally, and interacting with nearby workers, ants act independently. They survive floods by using their own bodies to make a living raft.* The air trapped between their bodies ensures they are buoyant till they reach firm ground. This allows them to breathe for periods from a few days to several weeks.

Research in a range of fields from organizational behaviour to psychology, and management to human resources, shows that common sense and simple tools often outperform complicated routines. Our ability to make decisions is frequently limited by our capacity to understand and process information. This is known as bounded rationality.

Whether it is planning your finances, choosing a medical treatment or making a business decision, simple reasoning frequently yields better outcomes than intricate algorithms can give us.

Simplicity does not mean making something trivial or assuming they are insignificant. Rather, it is the ability to

* The rafting behaviour of fire ants has been extensively studied by biologists, business scholars and even mathematicians.



manage complexity with clear thinking. To achieve this, adopt a paradoxical mindset in which you learn to embrace constraints. As we will see later, this mindset will enable you to accept opposite points of view and even flourish in them.

* * *

In the US, the Federal Reserve Board is responsible for fiscal and monetary policy. They take decisions based on simple rules. For example, interest rates are kept constant until the economy achieves target levels of employment and inflation.

In nature, female crickets seek a partner to mate with. To attract a female, male crickets chirp as rapidly and loudly as they can. A female cricket will settle on a partner with a chirp rate of more than three a minute. In court, judges often use simple rules when deciding whether to grant bail. Simple rules have helped Tina Fey perfect her improv routine. She also used simple guidelines while producing her popular comedy series *30 Rock*.

How honest are citizens in paying their income taxes?

One would think it would depend on the taxpayer's age and education, the fairness of the tax rate and the likelihood of being caught. A study across forty-five countries found that simplicity of the tax law is the single-most important factor influencing tax collections. Citizens are more likely to pay taxes honestly if the laws are easy to understand and follow.

Mumbai's dabbawalas deliver thousands of lunch boxes every day with close to zero errors. They use simple colour codes to ensure that boxes reach the correct address. Professors at Harvard Business School use this example to show that a simple and well-executed process can yield exceptional results.

Ignoring simple rules can have tragic consequences. In 1988, within a twenty-four-hour period, fifteen climbers died on the slopes of Mount Everest. After numerous investigations, one factor stood out: Failure to follow the golden two o'clock rule. Team leaders had decided that no matter how close they were to the summit, climbers must head back to their camp at 2 p.m. In the mountains, weather can change rapidly, affecting visibility and making the return trip dangerous. Ignoring this rule caused the deadliest accident in the mountain's history.



To be able to think in a simple way, we also need to adopt a paradoxical mindset. In this approach, we welcome constraints that initially appear to limit our choices.

This allows us to accept opposing points of view and even embrace them. The simple act of breathing is an example of a paradox. Inhaling and

exhaling are opposites, yet both are essential for life.

Complexity and simplicity need not be contrary to each other. In fact, you may find that common sense can help you solve certain aspects of a problem. This will reduce the complexity of the original problem, often making it easier to resolve.

Fields like art, music and literature frequently take advantage of paradoxes. To make his work more alive, Picasso integrated light and dark in the same painting. In William Shakespeare's play, Prince Hamlet kills his uncle as he wants to be cruel *and* kind at the same time. The pigs in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* announce that although all animals are equal, some animals are born more equal than others.

A paradox will make you think in an entirely different way. Niels Bohr, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, said: ‘How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.’

Sometimes, we must learn to live with a paradox as Hickey does in *The Iceman Cometh*. The play is about a set of alcoholics who live in the west side of Manhattan. Hickey, who is a travelling salesman, wants his wife to be faithful and unfaithful to him at the same time.

How does Hickey justify this?

Although he loves his wife, Hickey is always in the company of his alcoholic friends:

I much preferred drinking all night with my pals to being in bed with her. So, naturally she was unfaithful . . . I was glad to be free—even grateful to her, I think, for giving me such a good tragic excuse to drink as much as I dammed well please.

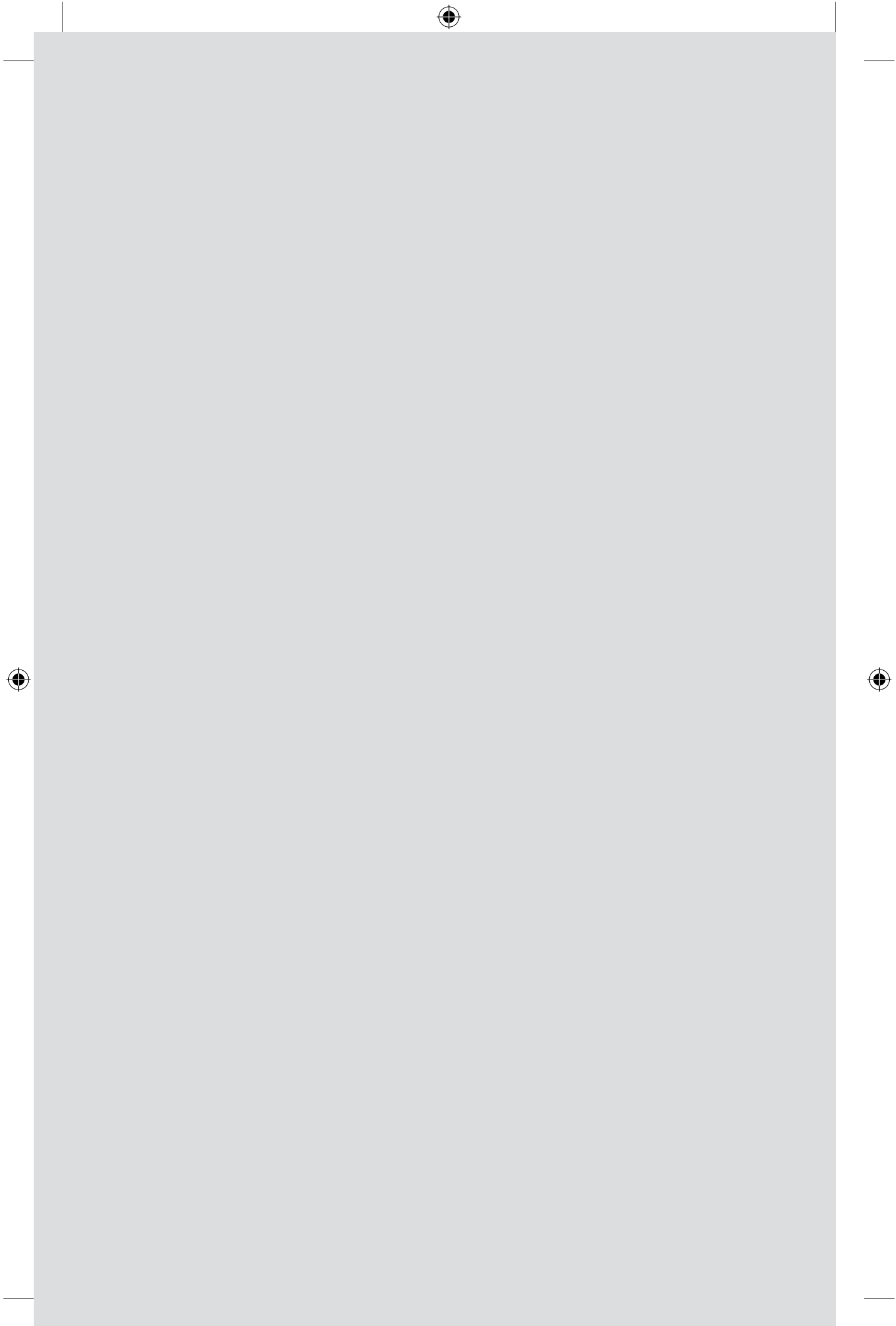


In life, we often face a paradox:

- Can you plan your day while being flexible with your schedule?
- Can you balance your professional and family life?
- Can you be a manager and a friend at the same time?

This book has many anecdotes and stories to illustrate the way seemingly difficult challenges can be resolved. First, break the problem into smaller parts. Then, use a paradoxical mindset to tackle each of them. Finally, look for obvious but simple clues others haven't observed. That was the advice Sherlock Holmes gave Dr Watson, which you will discover in the concluding chapter.

Simple Thinking will show you the power of simplicity.



A SNEAK PEEK

Chapter 1 begins with a question: Could the food we eat be responsible for our lifestyle diseases? To find out, a researcher accompanied a group of indigenous Australians into the bush. For seven weeks, they survived on what they could hunt or gather themselves. You will find out how this sojourn in the wild affected their health.

Why are beverages and packaged foods irresistible? Companies know your bliss point that is the optimal proportion of sugar, salt and fat to entice your taste buds. Scientists long wondered why after a meal, that leaves you satiated, you still have place for dessert. No, your stomach does not have a secret pouch, nor does dessert fill the cracks between earlier courses. There is also a story about the tennis player Novak Djokovic and the way a plant-based diet keeps him physically and mentally agile. The chapter ends with seven simple words of wisdom that your great-grandma might have given you on the ways to eat wisely.

Chapter 2 will remind you of Winston Churchill's advice during World War II: 'Never, never, never . . . give in.' The FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit, who earlier followed this mantra, learnt that negotiation is both an art and a craft. In one story, George



Giffe hijacked a plane and instructed the pilot to fly to the Bahamas. When they landed in Miami for refuelling, FBI agents stormed the aircraft. In the shoot-out, three people, including George, died.

A case followed in which the judge ruled against the FBI and ordered that the families be compensated. This led to a rethink on the way to deal with a hostage crisis. After that, the FBI decided to use force only as a last resort. Instead, simple tactics like listening empathetically and giving the other person an illusion of control are used. Read about a tip from a leading FBI negotiator, who has peacefully resolved over 200 hostage situations. His simple mantra will surprise you.

In **Chapter 3** you will discover why taking part in a competition can make you strive towards an improbable goal. Rahul Narayan, founder of TeamIndus, spent many years trying to win a Google X prize. For him, pursuing a dream was like falling in love. It is difficult to explain and only you know the reason you are doing it. Rahul's team failed to win the prize, but his story inspired two college students to launch satellites to map India's surface. Their company has been funded by Google and supported by NASA and India's space agency.

In 2009, DARPA* announced a Red Balloon Challenge. The first team to find ten large weather balloons that were hidden all over the US, would win a prize of \$40,000. It took nine hours for a team from MIT to locate the balloons. How do you think they did it? It was not technology but just thinking simply that helped them win the prize.

Meet Papa CJ in **Chapter 4**. After an MBA from the University of Oxford, CJ was working with IBM in England. On a visit to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, he witnessed a

* Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.



comedian entertaining a crowd while drinking beer. Now a successful comedian himself, CJ has simple rules for his stand-up routine. Learn what they are in this chapter.

You might have seen a magician cutting a woman in half or pulling a rabbit from a hat. How do magicians guard their tricks? They don't file a patent as that would make them reveal their magic. In fact, comedians and magicians use informal norms to protect their jokes and tricks. One of them is to simply bad-mouth anyone who steals their material. It works.

Chapter 5 will teach you ways to challenge your boss. The opening story is about Jeff Bezos's fixation for a device that could rival the iPhone. His team, who were not convinced, lacked the courage to challenge him. It didn't end well.

The next story is about Robina van Lanschot. A tourist guide, Robina was accompanying her passengers on a flight from Amsterdam to the Canary Islands. After a terrorist threat, their aircraft was diverted to Tenerife, another island in the Canaries. On a whim, Robina decided to leave the plane and join her boyfriend who lived on the island. As Robina left the airport, her flight began to take off. Moments later, it crashed into another jet that was taxiing on the same runway. It was, and remains, the deadliest airline crash.

Did the KLM captain suffer from get-home-itis? It is when pilots continue with their original plan while ignoring evidence of new risks in doing so. This chapter offers simple ways you can avoid this syndrome.

Can you motivate and inspire your employees to thrive at work? In **Chapter 6**, find out the reason why Reed Hastings, the founder of Netflix, treats his employees as a team rather than a family. He has implemented simple rules, like giving them freedom *with* responsibility. Employees at Netflix do not need

prior travel and expense approvals. The company also has a no vacation policy. Will your organization benefit by simplifying its rules?

Beto Perez, founder of Zumba Fitness, has a simple tenet. When trainers want to add a new fitness routine, he asks whether it delivers FEJ. Find out what it stands for.

The psychologist Paul Watzlawick said that the problem is not the problem, rather the problem is how we think of the problem. The stories and anecdotes in *Simple Thinking* highlight how individuals and firms have used the art and craft of simple thinking to tackle personal and professional challenges.

You can too.