

Complicate Yourself

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Faithful Colleagues,

As a young doctoral student at the University of Maryland, my academic guide Robert (Bob) Birnbaum was fond of telling my fellow graduate colleagues and me to “complicate ourselves.” Bob's counsel was a persistent and overarching encouragement to avoid simple solutions for really complex problems. At that time in my life, I was newly married with no kids, no debt, and almost no real problems I hadn't been able to solve with simple solutions. Additionally, the world seemed to be full only of potential and promise.

So Bob's advice to resist easy answers, though compelling, was unnecessary. Bob's admonition matured inside me for several years as life and experience continued to make its impact. It wasn't until I encountered new jobs of increasing responsibility, more and more human diversity (and learning about others' experiences), difficult organizational problems, the sudden death of my sister, the September 11th attacks, and serious challenges like the one in Ferguson, Missouri that I needed a way to approach the complexity that had invaded every corner of my formerly simple world.

I had to dig deep to recall the law of requisite variety, a concept I discovered in one of Bob's courses. In summary, this idea suggests that for organizations or people to deal effectively with the vast diversity of problems in society, the repertoire of nuanced potential responses must exceed the problems faced. As Karl Weick writes in his seminal book *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, "It's because of requisite variety that organizations have to be preoccupied with keeping sufficient diversity inside the organization to sense accurately the variety present in ecological changes outside it" (p. 188). In short, Bob's advice now seemed a helpful antidote for the fog that had overtaken my worldview. Respond to complexity with complexity. Resist simple solutions. Don't give up.

Nowadays, I use requisite variety as a hopeful template for everything from family issues to parenting to exercise strategies. I've learned to resist tantalizing, but way-too-simple, solutions in both my personal and professional endeavors. Ronald Heifetz's perspective about technical and adaptive challenges in his appropriately named book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, offers additive counsel. He distinguishes between two kinds of problems—technical and adaptive—to argue that many leadership roles not only require technical skills and knowledge but also new frames of mind and ways of being.

If we're going to be bold enough to address poverty, eliminate hunger, strengthen the quality of education, reduce inequity, or address climate change, among other gigantic problems, complicating ourselves might be the most important next step we can take. Of

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