

Seven Strategies for Simplifying Your Organization

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Over the past several years we have heard hundreds of managers talk about the negative impact of complexity on both productivity and workplace morale. This message has been reinforced by the findings of major CEO surveys conducted by [IBM](#) and [KPMG](#) [PDF], both of which identified complexity as a key business challenge.

Agreeing on complexity as a problem is one thing, but doing something about it is quite another — particularly for managers who are already over-worked, stressed, and can barely keep up with their current workload. In fact, the Catch-22 of complexity is that most managers don't feel that they have the time to focus on it: Having the problem precludes the ability to solve it.

With this dilemma in mind, we think it's important for managers to have a strategic framework that they can use to address complexity in their own areas, at their own pace, in their own ways. So to that end, we would like to offer a "simple" seven-step simplification strategy. While we present these sequentially, they can be implemented in any order, depending on where you might be able to make the greatest difference most quickly. Over time however, it's important to do all seven so that simplicity becomes a core capability of your organization and not just a one-time project.

1. **Clear the underbrush.** An easy starting point for simplification is to get rid of [stupid rules](#) and low-value activities, time-wasters that exist in abundance in most organizations. Look, for example, at how many people need to review and sign off on expense reports or small purchases; or how many times slide decks need to be reviewed before they are presented. If you can shed a few simple tasks, you will create bandwidth to focus on more substantial simplification opportunities.
2. **Take an outside-in perspective.** Simplification should be driven by the need to add value to your customers, either internal or external. So a key step in the process is to proactively [clarify what your customers](#) (internal or external) really want and what you can do to make them more successful. One manager, for example, took her team to visit a customer plant so that people could see how their product was actually used, which gave them ideas about how to improve it.
3. **Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize.** One of the keys to simplification is to figure out what's really important (and what's not), and [continually reassess](#) the priority list as new things are added.
4. **Take the shortest path from here to there.** Once it's clear that you are working on the right things, root out the extra steps in core processes. Where are the extraneous loops, redundancies, and opportunities to make our processes as lean as possible?
5. **Stop being so nice.** One of the patterns that causes or exacerbates complexity is the [tendency to not speak up](#) about poor practices. This is particularly true when people hesitate to challenge more senior people who unintentionally cause complexity through [poor meeting management](#), unclear assignments, unnecessary emails, over-analysis, or other bad managerial habits. To counter this trend, use constructive feedback and conflict to keep your colleagues (and yourself) honest about [personal behaviors](#) that might cause complexity.
6. **Reduce levels and increase spans.** Another source of complexity is the structural tendency to add layers of management, which often leads to managers supervising just one or two people. When that happens, managers feel compelled to add value by questioning everything that their subordinates are doing, which adds work and reduces morale. To reduce this kind of complexity and stay away from micromanaging, take a periodic look at the organization's structure and find ways to reduce levels and management and [increase spans of control](#).
7. **Don't let the weeds grow back.** Finally, remember that complexity is like a weed in the garden that can always creep back in. Whenever you feel like you've got it solved, do steps 1 through 6 over again.

In today's global, increasingly digital organizations, complexity is a growing drag on productivity and workplace satisfaction. Managers need to develop simplification as a core leadership capability and a critical component of the business strategy. Hopefully these steps will help you get started.