Simple Rules

"Simple rules are shortcut strategies that save time and effort by focusing our attention and simplifying the way we process information. The rules aren't universal— they're tailored to the particular situation and the person using them."

This is the sixth 'tool of the month' from the IHR Project's Workforce Development Team. We are sharing our favourite concepts, models, hints, and tips that resonate with us and really helped us out in different work environments. Please come back each month to see what we are sharing. As with any concepts, models, hints and tips – these do not represent a fixed way of doing things, they are not hard and fast rules – if they resonate with you please make use of them – if they don't that's fine too!

Simple rules – how they help teams and leaders make sense and give direction

Why?

Life is complex, with a great deal of information thrown at us. We need mechanisms to cope. People often attempt to address complex problems with complex solutions. For example, governments tend to manage complexity by trying to anticipate every possible scenario that might arise, and then promulgate regulations to cover every case.

What?

One way to manage and make progress in complicated situations is to adopt simple rules that help us follow a path in the right direction. We use simple rules to guide decision making every day. In fact, without them, we'd be paralyzed by the sheer mental brainpower required to sift through the complicated messiness of our world. You can think of them as mental shortcuts. Like shortcuts, most of the time they work but some of the time they don't [1].

One way to describe the concept is like following a compass. To travel to my home to London I need to travel East. The detail of the journey to our office can come later but by travelling East I can get 90% of the way there.

How do they work?

✔ First, they confer the flexibility to pursue new opportunities while maintaining some consistency.

✔ Second, they can produce better decisions. When information is limited and time is short, simple rules make it fast and easy for people, organizations, and governments to make sound choices. They can even outperform complicated decision-making approaches in some situations.

✔ Finally, simple rules allow the members of a community to synchronize their activities with one another on the fly.

Kathleen Eisenhardt and Donald Sull have written well on this topic [2]. They describe principles that guide how we identify and apply simple rules:

1. We focus on a defined activity. We use them to serve a purpose and goal.

2. Simple rules vary according to the person and situation. My compass example works for me, travelling for a specific purpose. It wouldn't apply to everyone in exactly the same way.

3. We need to make the rules simple. Just a few that act as guiding principles. We need to accept that if we try to plan for every eventuality, we complicate things.

4. They give clear guidance while also allowing for freedom to improvise within them. Not overly rigid.

We can all recognise that life can be complicated. By talking about *simple* rules, we are not ignoring the complexity, merely suggesting a mechanism to gain traction.

An example:

Patients arriving at a casualty department are triaged. Priority and treatment is determined by the application of simple rules which might include:

- Is there immediate danger to life? Can the patient be stabilised?
- Is the patient likely to survive if treatment is provided?
- What specialist resources are needed?
- Does the department have the facilities to provide the treatment needed?
- How old is the patient? Priority might be given to children.

How do we apply them?

There are different types of simple rules:

- **Boundary rules**, which help decide between mutually exclusive decisions (playing sport, did the ball cross the line, if we are caught speeding whether we receive a fine or tougher penalty)
- **Prioritizing rules** help rank available options (decisions about which project to invest time in)
- **Stopping rules** tell you when to reverse a decision (when a limit has been reached e.g. thresholds for the number of samples tested)
- **How To rules** help you do something. For example, the processes we use to run our projects.
- **Coordination rules** help groups function together. Birds flying in formation must follow rules to avoid collision.
- **Timing rules** tell you when to do something.

It can be an interesting exercise to think about the simple rules we each apply in our daily life. We might see them as habits but actually they are applied learning. For example, during Covid times most us routinely carry hand sanitiser, have a mask in our pockets. On video calls we mostly put ourselves on mute and raise our hands when we want to speak.

So how can we use this insight at work? [3]
This might be experienced in a number of ways

- **Agreeing priorities for work.** Having a framework for decisions about where to put resources and effort.
- **Knowing how much energy to put into projects.** We might employ a rule that we will undertake what we can do within a set time frame.
- **Simple rules can help during new projects or in change programmes**. We can set the direction and future aspiration and use simple rules as references to help guide us
- **Driving responsiveness and productivity**. Having a drive for quick wins might be useful and effective although we do need to be careful not to detract from strategic activity.
- **Improving how we work in teams.** Teams are where things get done. Taking time to acknowledge the (informal) rules for the team can improve communication and understanding between team members.
- **How we manage stakeholders.** There are some organisations and individuals that we will pay attention to and look to serve above others.

Using simple rules as leaders

A theme to our approach is to continue to develop and deploy our leadership practice. By adopting simple rules we can often help others to make sense and give direction. As leaders we can share the simple rules we are applying and encourage teams to deploy initiative to achieve the goals we need to meet [4]:

- Sense making.
- How we communicate
- How we organise work.
- How we make the most of our
- own time and look to use the skills of others.
- As a coach or mentor

If this subject has made you think a little, some questions you might like to ask yourself are:
- What are the simple rules that I commonly adopt. Hint – don't just think about work, consider your personal life.
- What are the simple rules that seem to apply in my organisation? What do other people think about these?
- Are there any complicated issues that I am dealing with where simple rules might help me.
- What are the simple rules to try here, who do I test these with?

Things to be careful of.

1. I have noticed that in technical and scientific organisations we do tend to want to gather all the information (and consider all the possibilities) before making decisions and taking action. This is valid but can lead to less agility. Simple rules help avoid decision paralysis:

2. It is easy to slip into judgement and assumption. This is just a technique that can be tried– it doesn't mean that people are not thinking or being simplistic

3. Any classification is a simplification. Human beings are complex and in truth we will be a mixture of different techniques. Look at this concept as something that might help – in a given situation. Some decisions right do need a great deal of fact gatherings, testing and consideration.

Common Questions

"***Do we all need to have the same rules?"***
Absolutely not. We apply them to a defined activity. Simple rules vary according to the person and situation.

"***Are they permanent?"***
No. They are temporary structures to help with specific activity. We might have one set to navigate and make a start and then refine them as a project gains momentum

"***How many rules do we need?"***
There isn't a set number but it should be a few. If we create too many rules, we replicate the complexity we were looking to resolve.

Finally...
This is an area where giving the technique a try can be enlightening. If there is an area where complexity is slowing down progress or even stopping you see a way forward, try stepping back and thinking what really matters and if you can break the problem down by applying some simple rules.

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References:

[1] Simple Rules: How to Thrive in a Complex World - Farnam Street (fs.blog)
[2] Simple Rules: How to Thrive in a Complex World eBook : Eisenhardt, Kathleen, Sull, Donald: Amazon.co.uk: Kindle Store Extract from the book Simple Rules for a Complex World (hbr.org)
[3] What Are Simple Rules? on Vimeo
[4] How Too Many Rules at Work Keep You from Getting Things Done | Yves Morieux | TED Talks - YouTube

Further material:

There are only a few (but good) articles on this topic. Note. If you google search Simple Rules, please look past the US sitcom by the same name.

- Best short article: Simple Rules: How to Thrive in a Complex World - Farnam Street (fs.blog)
- Example from Science education Seven simple rules for science teaching | Education in Chemistry
- Example from Primary Health Care Simple-Rules-Toolkit_2.pdf (nihr.ac.uk)
- Reference for the book on the topic Simple Rules: How to Thrive in a Complex World eBook : Eisenhardt, Kathleen, Sull, Donald: Amazon.co.uk: Kindle Store
- Extract from the book Simple Rules for a Complex World (hbr.org)

For those that prefer videos:

- Very good short video What Are Simple Rules? on Vimeo
- Longer super video, really engaging French speaker How Too Many Rules at Work Keep You from Getting Things Done | Yves Morieux | TED Talks - YouTube