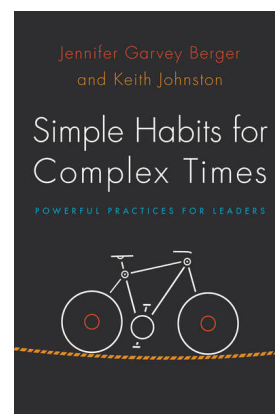


# Simple Habits for Complex Times

A book excerpt by Senior Mobius Expert, Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston



If you've picked up this book, you've probably noticed that things in your world are a little more complex – maybe even a little more overwhelming – than you'd like. You might be finding that you have to balance the needs of more people than you did before and that there is more volatility of perspective than you used to notice. Or maybe you're finding that the pathway that used to look clear is murkier than you'd like. Or maybe you think you would be a better leader if you could just find a way to slow down all the changes in your team or organization or sector so that you could catch your breath.

We know what you mean. While we have taught leaders around the world and researched, read, and written about leadership, we have found that this rise in complexity, ambiguity, volatility, and uncertainty is not just lingering around the edges of our workdays: it's everywhere. Coping with these changes requires whole new ways of making sense of the world and of taking action to make a difference. Some of these new ways are about how we have conversations and learn from one another, others are about how we solve intractable problems, and still others are about how we plan for an unknowable future.

We have been motivated by many good books on complexity and on leadership that explain carefully how the world is changing, how our ways of understanding it are changing, and how leaders must change to be more effective. But once you're convinced that you need to be

different, what then? Leaders tell us they want to learn more about what can they do to begin to make these changes. What steps can they take? What equipment would help them on their journey? How might the pieces come together to enable them to thrive as leaders? We've spent the past decade trying to answer that question. Here's what we've found.

## THINKING ANEW

A leader, reflecting on the growing needs for a new way of being, offered his ideas about the leadership challenge he – and his people generally – faced. He explained to his stakeholders:

*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*

You've probably faced a situation that made you think something like this, too – as Yolanda and Doug are thinking of their terrible situation. No matter how good leaders are, they find themselves dealing with problems – and opportunities – more difficult or complex than anything they've known before. Superb leaders have long known that they need to find ways to “think anew and act anew,” especially as their plates become “piled high with difficulty.” This challenge to think in new ways

about a novel situation has been with leaders always, and each time, they have pushed at the edges of what we know in order to grow more capable of handling the challenges that seem impossible. Abraham Lincoln was speaking to more than just the US Congress about the “quiet past” and the “stormy present” in 1862. The truth is that leadership requires ways of thinking anew no matter what era you’re in; it’s probably true that the first Neolithic leaders were pushed to the edges of their capacities as farming and stone tools created conflict and opportunities for their people. Leadership by its very definition is about taking people and ideas to new places.

The problem for leaders today is that as the world changes so quickly, the future becomes far less predictable, the options become exponentially increased, and the way we need to think about those options shifts. Imagine if Lincoln had had to tweet about his plans (and his breakfast) as well as being Facebook friends with the senators on both sides of the aisle. Lincoln needed to make decisions with small amounts of aging information, a hard thing to do. Leaders today need to make decisions with endless amounts of emerging information, which might be even harder; it is certainly more complex, and it makes our need to “think anew” different from what it’s ever been before.

This is the rise of VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. You can hardly open a leadership book without this discussion, so we’ll speed by it (increasing the speed of change even in talking about the speed of change). We know that even though we generally live longer and in greater safety and have much more stuff than our parents and their parents, people and ideas and organizations are also more complex because there is much more information available and things are much more interconnected. We know it’s more uncertain because as those variables intersect, new possibilities get created. These are possibilities no one ever thought about in advance: they just emerged from the current context as one new idea bashed against

another new idea (or against an ancient one). You also know that those interconnections – of ideas, of people, of conflict and congruence – are more likely because there are so many more of us around. There are billions of us: more than twice as many people now than there were in the mid-1960s, and at least those people in the developed world consume vastly more resources. This increases our volatility at a global scale because now our planet is having to do things it has never done before, and there is no possible way to predict what happens next. It is also the case that many of the issues we face in

society, such as climate change, will affect communities over a very long term in unpredictable ways, even as organizations and news outlets still seem captured by the very short term, preferring black and white to ambiguous gray.

Our awareness of the fact that the world is changing irrevocably also puts pressure on the way we think about the present and the future. Serfs in the 1600s probably had something like a “Kids these days!” expression, but they didn’t look at their children and wonder what they would be when they grew up; even 50 years ago, there weren’t that many choices. One of our clients recounted her deep frustration in high school when her teacher asked whether she

wanted to be a nurse, a teacher, or a secretary. “I was so frustrated to have only three options – none interesting to me,” she told us. Less than 40 years later, Jennifer’s then 14-year-old daughter, Naomi, came home frustrated because the teacher told her that the job Naomi would do when she grew up had probably not been invented yet. “What does she expect me to do about that?” Naomi asked. “How can I prepare for something that doesn’t exist?” Indeed. This might in fact be the key leadership question of our time.

Abraham Lincoln faced a world of rising volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and change. And so did Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And so did Keith’s grandfather as he was making the decision to leave his home and travel around the world to New Zealand to begin a new life. So

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it would be easy to say that this is just part of the human condition and move on from there. In our work with leaders around the world and our work leading global initiatives ourselves, though, we've been convinced that the thing that is happening in the world now is unlike any other time that humans have ever faced before, and we've been convinced that the rules for leaders are different now. And there's no handbook about how the rules have changed or how you need to change to meet these new requirements. We're trying to change that with this book, which while not a handbook, is a kind of a guidebook to this new land and to the strange way things work here.

Here's one of the most unsettling and distinctive features of this new land: it operates from a different set of choices, and because it is more untethered from the constraints of the past, it lives more in the set of options about what is possible rather than the set of options about what is probable. This sounds like an easy change that might be on a motivational poster: focus on the possible! It actually requires more than just attitude, though. A focus on the possible requires changes in the way we think, engage with others, and take action. Moving away from our own belief in a predictable world is a major effort indeed.

See, our minds love categorizing and learning from the past in order to keep us safe into the future. And that has been great for us. Without this capacity to predict and determine risks, we'd be just a stunted branch on the evolutionary tree. We carry with us a kind of a bell curve of possibilities, and depending on our background and knowledge (and, unfortunately, on what we ate for breakfast and which magazine headlines we happened to see as we waited in line at the grocery store), we are constantly making decisions about risk and reward. That internal judging system has done pretty well to protect and keep us for tens of thousands of years, but it's beginning to short out now. And one of the key ways our system misfires is as it considers the difference between the probable and the possible.

Let's take a few examples. We tend to make decisions based on what we think is most probable. In this way, our brains are like the actuary tables – judging the future by what we've seen happen in the past. We add new kitchens if we think it's probable that the new kitchen will increase the value of the house in five years



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**“You need chaos in  
your soul to give birth  
to a dancing star.”**

**– Nietzsche**



when we sell it, or we do a wilder, more idiosyncratic renovation if we think it's probable that we'll stay in this house for decades into the future. We choose Aruba as our holiday destination from among the ones we think are most probable to make us happy (based on the criteria we've decided is best for us). We choose "be more customer centered" as a strategy for our division at work when we think it's probable that the old strategy constrains our growth and effectiveness and this new one is the most enabling of the future we want to create.

What we don't notice is that because we are using the past as a kind of measure of what's likely, we have sharply constrained the set of possibilities when we made our decisions. We didn't consider whether an earthquake would roll through our house, making our new kitchen (and indeed, the neighborhood) less attractive to potential buyers. We picked Aruba because it was so much more off the beaten path than Jamaica, but still we've had friends that have gone there. We didn't select Réunion in the Indian Ocean, because we'd never heard of it – it was possible but not probable. We choose the customer-focused strategy out of the ones that were relatively familiar to us because we can see the problem (we're too internal) and being more customer centered looks like the best way to solve it. It might be that our internal focus is a symptom of some entirely different problem (our remuneration system creates perverse incentives for us to manage internal politics rather than customer relationships), but we picked from what looked like the most probable a cause to us (or the probable cause that was most attractive to us). As you read, you might be thinking that it would take all of your time and be paralyzing if you had to think about earthquakes and

every tropical island in the entire world. You would never renovate anything, never lie on a white-sand beach again. We agree that these would be bad outcomes, and we're not suggesting that at all. You can carry on planning your holidays and your renovations as before, because the rise in complexity and holiday options is less material than the rise in options leaders need to consider in their work. If you choose an island that isn't as perfect as it possibly could have been, the difference is mostly irrelevant because you'll have a good time anyway (even if the sand is whiter, the water warmer, and the fish more beautiful somewhere else). But if you put your eggs in the "customer-centric" basket when really the thing that's about to change your industry is the new phone app that replaces you, the change is very material after all. Part of the battle is knowing when to let the rise in VUCA change the way you work and when to just simplify things. We'll help with that distinction as we go.

The future has always been unknown – the serf in the 1600s didn't know, Lincoln didn't know, your parents didn't know. As Marshall McLuhan said, "We drive into the future using only our rear view mirror." Because there's no way of knowing what's next (that's the uncertainty and volatility part), we are always walking forward with our hands out in the dark, waiting to bump in to things. And because things are changing, we have lost much of the ability to predict what will happen next from what has happened before, to pull out the memories from other dark rooms we have bumped through in the past. Complexity is about getting our heads around what is possible (because anything could happen) rather than what is probably going to happen (which is determined from what has happened before).



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This shift – from trying to get your head around what is most likely to trying to get your head around what is in the field of possibilities – is much bigger than it sounds. As research has shown in study after study, our brains just don't like this. Our general pattern is to prune and simplify. We need to work at it if we are going to create new patterns of behavior for thinking and acting in this new world. We need to talk to one another differently, gather information differently, and build strategies and plans for the future in new ways. We need new habits of mind that stretch and expand us to deal in more thoughtful ways with the complexity the world offers.

### **HABITS OF MIND FOR COMPLEXITY TODAY AND A MORE COMPLEX TOMORROW**

All the leaders with whom we have worked have had some seriously impressive qualities. They are a smart bunch with good analytical facility and clear-mindedness. They are able to take apart problems and come up with solutions, quite quickly and often when the data are still emerging. They have been very good at the core business they are managing, whatever that might be. They have natural skills, and because both organizations and individuals know the power of continuous learning, many of them have been to additional schooling and/or have had coaching to help them get even better at the leadership tasks they face. And nearly all of them, when we finally put away all the barriers, admit that they are stressed and overwhelmed and concerned they're not up to the task. They are overwhelmed by their email, by their growing and diverse stakeholders, by the impossible demands on their time, by the increasing scale and scope of the challenges they face. They do not all have a language about volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, but they all have a felt reaction to it.

It's probably true that they're not up to the task; it's totally possible that this task of leading in times as complex and volatile as today is a bigger stretch for us humans than anything else we've ever had to do. That's the bad news. The good news is that there is a way to grow more able to handle the complexity in the world around us: three habits of mind that stretch your thinking capacity and help you grow more "complexity of mind." The better news is that while growing that new capacity, you can

also be understanding your work and its demands in an entirely new way at the same time that you are creating new possibilities for those with whom you work. In other words, as you grow to be a better leader over time, you can also be a better leader right now.

This means as you exercise the habits using the tools and approaches in this book, you may find your thinking changed about key issues you struggle with at work. And as you're solving difficult work problems, these habits are also an exercise routine for your mind; they stretch you and help you become more capable of dealing with complexity. Once they become your habits, they'll expand the way you can think, and they'll change your ability to deal with those things that are now overwhelming.

These habits of mind are deceptively simple:

- Asking different questions
- Taking multiple perspectives
- Seeing systems

So what makes them so powerful, and how can you benefit from that power? ■



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WHERE BEST PRACTICE MEETS NEXT PRACTICE



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