

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 20 The Subtle Art of Simplicity

A “simpleton”, they used to say, or a “simple” person, to mean someone stupid, or ignorant, or lacking common sense. It’s still a widespread prejudice that stupidity is simple and intelligence is complicated. The opposite is often true. When intelligence appears complicated, or hard to understand, it’s immature. To reach full bloom it must evolve toward simplicity.

It’s easy to complicate, it’s difficult to simplify. The greatest advancements in philosophy, science and culture can be explained in clear and simple concepts. Also in the everyday practice of work, or personal relations, the most effective solutions are often the simplest.

The exciting experience of a creative synthesis – or of an intuition that helps to solve a problem – leads us nearly always to discover that the solution (after we have found it) appears obvious, but we couldn’t see it because our perceptions and our way of thinking were too complicated.

People have always been made miserable by all sorts of unnecessary complications. We are now in a state of turbulent transition that makes it even worse. Many things have become easier because of resources that we didn’t have – or were available only to a few people. But we are producing too many new complications, caused by the clutter and inefficiency of communication, our own and other people’s behavior – and a variety of distressing problems, including poorly conceived or badly used technologies – as we have seen in chapter 19.

These stupid complications are very different from the problem of complexity, as studied by the “Chaos Theory”. On this subject there is a short note, at the end of this book, that (deliberately) oversimplifies the issue but (I hope) helps to understand some of its practical implications. *Simple Thoughts on Complexity* – gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm.

Many years ago, long before we got into today’s mess, I had a sign hanging in my office that said KISS. It’s common knowledge that it stands for *keep it simple, stupid*. But that wise principle is rarely practiced. Sometimes I would point to it when someone came up with a messy problem that didn’t seem to have a simple solution. But, above all, I used it to remind myself to take a dose of my own medicine.

There is a great need for simplicity. While the prevailing trend continues to add complication, a perception that we should turn the tide has been spreading in recent years. One of several examples is a bright article published by Gerry McGovern on December 11, 2000: *In praise of simplicity*.¹

He explains that «we live in a world where change and complexity are forced on us at every turn. The world is hitting back. People are yearning for simplicity.» Complexity, he says, is a curse. «It is a type of intellectual pollution that smothers clear thought. Complexity is not a sign of intelligence, but rather a sign of a hyperactive mind gouging on more. True genius and great design is about turning something complex into a product that is simple to use and delivers a real benefit.» That isn't only true of products or technologies. It is the same for information, communication, knowledge, organization and management.

The stupidity of power, as we saw in chapter 10, isn't caused mainly by complexity. But it often uses complication to become even more stupid – or exploits it deliberately to confuse issues, to blur understanding, to hide simple facts behind a curtain of elaborate appearances.

Not only bureaucracies, but also other oligarchies, power clusters and cliques often use a complicated jargon that most people can't understand, to increase their control and keep the rest of humanity subjugated.²

Academics and “intellectuals” often play the same game. They use obscure language to hide the fact that they don't know what they are talking about – while keeping “ordinary people” in awe and blind obedience, making them believe that they are stupid because they don't understand.

Intelligence is clarity and simplicity – not obscurity. When people don't understand, the blame of stupidity is on whoever isn't explaining things properly.

Of course we shouldn't confuse simplicity with superficiality. An apparently simple explanation can be just triviality, or silly commonplace, or a widespread but false notion. Or a deliberate attempt to hide the real depth of a fact or a debate.

In other words, complication is often stupid, but “simple” answers aren't always intelligent. The art of simplicity is as subtle and difficult as the use of intelligence. Both need dedication, commitment, patience, in depth analysis and insatiable curiosity – as well as a constant cultivation of doubt. When we find a clear and simple answer or solution, we should always consider that we may be overlooking another approach that can be even simpler and more effective.

It's an endless task. But, when we learn to enjoy its taste, it can be very pleasant – and amusing. Finding truly simple solutions is a happy, often exhilarating experience.

Simplicity isn't only an intellectual achievement, it's also an emotion. Finding the simple key to an apparently complex problem has intense aesthetic values. It gives us a clear and unique perception of beauty and harmony.

Being in love with simplicity can be quite delightful. And it breeds intelligence.

A description of the book is online – stupidity.it

1 It's online in Gerry McGovern's interesting website:
gerrymcgovern.com/nt/2000/nt_2000_12_11_simplicity_praise.htm

2 On the use of confusing jargon as a tool for power see chapter 21 *Problems of Perspective*