

From Simplistic to Simple

By Preston Pouteaux

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You, like me, might be irked when someone gives quick and easy answers to hard challenges. Is there crime in the community? Just get the police to do their job. The city has growing pains, what should we do? Just elect a better government or fire someone. The teenagers are bored! Build them something to keep them busy.

The truth is that some challenging questions require more than a pat answer. While it might be easy or comforting to toss forward a black and white answer, many of our challenges are not satisfied by shifting the blame or saying, "if only...": If only the mayor would do this, or if only the service club or church could just fix that, or if our taxes were like this or if only my neighbours were more like that. "If only" solutions and answers are simplistic.

Simplistic is different than simple. Simplistic takes something that is not easy or straightforward and offers a trite solution or answer. They are offered from the outside, often without clarity, and seldom are they thoughtful.

Simplistic solutions find their match, however, in the chaos or complexity of the problem. When I studied in the Middle East I quickly learned that my simplistic solutions or answers to the challenges faced by Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Palestine, for example, did not work. The "if only" answers were not about to solve any of their problems. My simplistic answers were naïve and even damaging.

When we realize that our challenge is complex, chaotic, and messy, we have a decision to make. We can change our approach, or we can go back to where we came from. People will sometimes return to their simplistic solution and entrench themselves not because the solution works, but because it is easier than doing the work of solving the problem. They go from simplistic to complex, and back again.

But there is a third way. When we move through the complexity of the challenges we face in our community and when we meet others and work it through in a hands-on, open, and hopeful way, we might find something new emerge. We may discover a simple solution. Simple solutions are not trite or dismissive. They are not flippant nor do they gloss over the hard realities. Simple solutions to complex challenges often emerge as a welcome and even elegant surprise.

Simple solutions may be hard but they find their way through the complexity. A friend of mine recently cut down a tree in his yard. His neighbour sent him a scathing email telling him how awful he was for doing so. The simplistic solution would be to write back and defend himself while setting the stage for a feud. Instead he reflected on the challenge and decided to go and spend time with the neighbour. It was hard and the conversation was messy, but in the end his simple gesture of hospitality and personal friendship saved the day. The challenge was resolved because of a simple conversation.

As we move from simplistic to complex may we find the third way - the simple way. May we reach out to others, listen, learn, and become the kind of community that actively looks for hope in everything we do. It is simply the best way to go.

This syndicated content is provided by Preston Pouteaux, author of The Bees of Rainbow Falls, on behalf of 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.