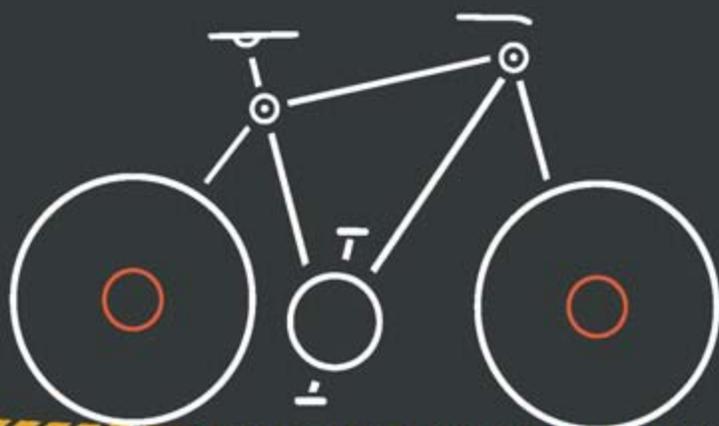


Jennifer Garvey Berger
and Keith Johnston

Simple Habits for Complex Times

POWERFUL PRACTICES FOR LEADERS



Advance Praise for *Simple Habits for Complex Times*

“Three cheers!!! This book doesn’t just tell you how. It shows you how to become a more effective leader in conditions of complexity and vulnerability—in other words, circumstances that we face all the time. Rather than a simple recipe that fits some adolescent dream of perfection, it’s an invitation into lifelong learning that will transform you and your organization. Welcome! All aboard?”

—William R. Torbert, Boston College and Principal, Action Inquiry Associates

“Faced with dramatic change, leaders in all sectors must boldly think anew. As a woman from the global south, leading a large global non-government organization, I need new models and approaches to leading in this new world. Keith and Jennifer offer me stimulating and refreshing advice on how I can think and act differently to achieve enduring change.”

—Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, Oxfam International

“Every leader will recognize themselves somewhere in this book. It distills the challenges that even the most talented teams face, and which keep them from realizing their full potential. More importantly, it shows you how to solve these problems. I’ve used the authors’ tools with our team and they work!”

—Gary Wingrove, CEO, KPMG Australia

“This is mandatory reading if you want a shot at navigating complexity with grace. Jennifer and Keith render complexity visible, accessible, and workable. We all know about the pressures of uncertainty and the rapid pace of change, but ‘the how’ of being a leader has been unfathomable—until now.”

—Gayle Karen K. Young, Chief Talent and Culture Officer,
Wikimedia Foundation

“This is the perfect guide to corporate transformation. Changing consumption patterns are turning business models upside down. Garvey Berger and Johnston show you how to drain the swamp of ambiguity, squarely face unexpected challenges, and seize new opportunities.”

—Eric Passmore, Chief Technology Officer, Online Publishing and Media,
Microsoft Corporation

“*Simple Habits* is a tour de force at the nexus of leader development and complexity. Integrating poignancy, accessibility, intellectual rigor, and pragmatic application, this book is infused with humor and reverence. It brilliantly articulates practical ways for us to become wiser as we navigate an increasingly chaotic world. Essential reading both for leaders and leadership coaches!”

—Doug Silsbee, Founder, Center for Presence-Based Leadership and author of *Presence-Based Coaching*

“Garvey Berger and Johnston offer a refreshing and bold take on meeting the challenges of leadership, fearlessly slaying sacred cows of previous theories to illuminate a model for the emerging future.”

—Erica Ariel Fox, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Winning from Within*

“*Simple Habits for Complex Times* gives us a glimpse into the future of how leaders will develop—providing practical approaches not only to cope with complexity, but to learn and thrive in it. Practicing these simple, counterintuitive habits will enable leaders to grow past their limits and lead strong. If you’re serious about maximizing your leadership potential, this is a terrific book.”

—Larry Clark, Vice President of Talent Management and Development, Comcast Cable

“This book is a superb exploration of the ways that complexity calls on leaders to think, act, and engage differently. It will leave you with a few simple, yet powerful, habits that will change you as a leader . . . and a person. A landmark work!”

—Michael Rennie, Global Leader, McKinsey & Company, Organization and Leadership Practice

“Garvey Berger and Johnston are superb teachers! *Simple Habits for Complex Times* is a perfect blend of ‘story’ and ‘lesson.’ You’ll keep turning the pages, and the pages will turn you into a better leader.”

—Robert Kegan, Harvard University and co-author of *Immunity to Change*

SIMPLE HABITS FOR COMPLEX TIMES

SIMPLE HABITS FOR COMPLEX TIMES

Powerful Practices for Leaders

JENNIFER GARVEY BERGER
AND KEITH JOHNSTON

STANFORD BUSINESS BOOKS
An Imprint of Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

© 2015 by Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of Stanford University Press.

Special discounts for bulk quantities of Stanford Business Books are available to corporations, professional associations, and other organizations. For details and discount information, contact the special sales department of Stanford University Press. Tel: (650) 736-1782, Fax: (650) 736-1784

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berger, Jennifer Garvey, 1970– author.

Simple habits for complex times : powerful practices for leaders / Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-8847-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Leadership. 2. Management. 3. Complexity (Philosophy)

I. Johnston, Keith, 1955– author. II. Title.

HD57.7.B4697 2015

658.4'092—dc23

2014033654

ISBN 978-0-8047-9425-1 (electronic)

Typeset by Newgen in 10.5/15 Minion

*For our friend Nicki Wrighton, whose vibrancy in life and
grace in the face of a volatile and uncertain future
will live on in all who knew her*

What is usual is not what is always, the day says again.
It is all it can offer.

Not ungraspable hope, not the consolation of stories.
Only the reminder that there is exception.
—*Jane Hirshfield*

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Leading the Possible	5
Chapter 2 Engage with Complexity, but Keep It Simple	32
Chapter 3 Say What You Think, Listening to the Ways You Might Be Wrong	59
Chapter 4 Create a Clear Vision for an Unclear Future	82
Chapter 5 Make Rational Use of Human Irrationality	115
Chapter 6 Communicate Your Certainty About Uncertainty	141
Chapter 7 Grow Your People to Be Bigger Than Your Problems	172
Chapter 8 Lead Change as the New Normal	205
<i>Notes</i>	235
<i>Bibliography</i>	245
<i>Index</i>	249

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1.1	Questions and mindsets	17
Figure 2.1	Cynefin framework	43
Figure 4.1	Actualeyes services and software polarity map	99
Table 6.1	How direction setting, change management, and communications differ in complexity	148
Table 7.1	Forms of mind as they interact with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity	179

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book that intends to help people transform their relationship to the future requires a lot of relationships, and quite a bit of transformation, to make it into the world. We began working on this book in 2005, and at first we thought we'd create a leadership development theory on which we could build a leadership program. It turned out we needed to experiment a lot on the way, and so there were years of leadership programs, reading, researching, and talking with leaders that transformed our ideas as we worked to help transform organizations.

We are grateful to the long line of theorists—in complexity, communication, adult development, leadership development, organizational change, and more—who have thought hard about what it means to live and lead in an unpredictable future. Those of you who write about and teach adult development have been models of our growth and thinking about what is possible. Particularly important to us are our ongoing relationships with the ideas and practices of Bob Kegan, Bill Torbert, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Marcia Baxter Magolda, Bill Joiner, Steve Josephs, and Michael Basseches. Perhaps even better than your ideas are the conversations and confusions we have shared over the years. We are grateful to be learning from and growing alongside you. Complexity theorists Eric Beinhocker, Peter Coleman, Gerald Midgley, Dave Snowden, Ralph Stacey, Brian Walker, and Robert Woog have stretched our minds and challenged us to not only see the world in a new way but also to actually see a new world, with new relationships among people and ideas and causality. We aren't there yet, but sometimes we tip into the basin of attraction that contains these ideas with the wholeness each of you seems to hold. Barry

Jentz and Joan Wofford continue to inspire us with their practical ways of dealing with the complexities of interpersonal communication and the development of new ways of listening to learn.

Our safe-to-fail experiments have often been in relationships with coaching clients and participants in our leadership programs around the world. We have hidden your names and details here, but your stories have taught us more about what it means to lead with heart and mind than any theory ever could. Your experiences are woven through with ours, and you make us better even as you work to make those around you more capable and to make the world a better place. It has been an honor to work with you. We are grateful for the opportunities that our clients have offered us, especially those complexity-based leadership programs we've created and cocreated and re-created alongside Al Morrison, Felicity Lawrence, and Angela Geerts at New Zealand's Department of Conservation; Gary Wingrove, Susan Ferrier, and John Somerville at KPMG Australia; Carole Brown and Paul Atkins at the Australian National University; Gayle Karen Young at Wikimedia; Nisha Agrawal at Oxfam India; Kirstin Dunlop and Felicity Nelson at SunCorp; and Sally deWitt and Lori Homer at Microsoft.

We have been clear all along that leadership—and leadership development—is a team sport. To lift our game, we have sought out a remarkably impressive team. Our partners Carolyn Coughlin and Jim Wicks at Cultivating Leadership have endured our writing and rewriting of our leadership curriculum to fit our emerging ideas, have pushed us around when we got too comfortable, and have made our ideas both richer and more practical. We are grateful for the ways we have felt safe to fail with you—and the laughter helps a lot, too. Our associates, Patrice Laslett, Geoff Mortimore, Sue O'Dea, Tim Pidsley, Ingrid Studholme, and Karen Waitt, have taught these ideas alongside us, prodded us when we were theoretically (or practically) mushy, and taken over details with clients so we could retreat and spend just a few more minutes writing. Joey Chan and Jade Yi have opened us to the vastness and nuance of China and offered us multiple perspectives on culture and complexity. Diana Manks has kept us sane even when we threatened her own sanity with our growing ability to forget things, move dates around, and attempt to find just one more venue possibility.

Those of you from the Growth Edge Network have tugged at our thinking and changed how we make sense of the world. You were a great safe-to-fail experiment, and we are amazed and delighted at how successful our mutual learning and enjoyment has become.

While many of you fall into at least one of the overlapping categories we've already talked about, we are most grateful to the early readers of this manuscript. Your questions and marginal squiggles, the pieces you remembered and the pieces you didn't—all of these made us better. Robyn Baker has read each chapter with the thought and care we've come to expect, and she never lets us get away with under- (or over-)thinking something. Al Morrison, while in violent disagreement over pronoun usage, has helped us see the ways our ideas resonate with leaders in complex and intractable fields. John Somerville's challenge to be more practical and less frustrating with our suggestions was a source of inspiration and mirth. Rosheen Garnon's thoughtful efforts at not just reading but "doing" the book, and the stories she shared after her work with each chapter, were inspirational. Gayle Karen Young always reminded us of the delights of the possible. Zafer Achi combined an incisive (and not always gentle) read with a reassuring certainty that these ideas would change the world. Craig Smith and Rachel Smith (not related) provided helpful perspectives on child protection issues, and Ewen McAlpine was a rapporteur on leadership qualities at large. Michael Cavanagh and Bill Torbert, our peer reviewers, took enormous time and care, and we hope you'll see your ideas reflected on these pages. Thanks also to Kelly Garvey Satcher, our test leader in a child protective services agency: your thought and care with these ideas is overshadowed only by your thought and care with the families you serve; Jennifer is proud to be your cousin.

Book writing probably takes its biggest toll on the folks who happen to be closest the authors. Keith's wife, Trish Sarr, has been his companion in leading many crusades over many years and has inspired him to always look beneath the surface of things and to be present with the full range of thoughts and feelings that arise from moment to moment along the way. Keith has also been shaped on this path by his experience as the global chair of Oxfam International and the web of committed leaders in Oxfam and other development organizations he has worked with around the world.

Melissa Garber kept Jennifer sane (and fit) with daily walks through a beautiful landscape in a difficult time. Jennifer's dad, Jim Garvey, offered encouragement to step off the trail of the typical business book and combine business and fiction in a safe-to-fail experiment. She is grateful for the support and for the genes. Her mom, Catherine Fitzgerald, might have the ultimate mother's revenge from the days when teenage Jennifer found all of her mom's ideas boring: in addition to seeing Jennifer follow in her footsteps as a coach and as her collaborator on an earlier book, she also coaxed her into the complexity field. Now mother-daughter outings are more likely to include the latest books on applied complexity rather than family gossip. Jennifer's kids, Naomi and Aidan, have taught her much about what it is like to grow up in a world unprecedentedly complex and uncertain for leaders in high schools, as well as organizations. Thank you for being the teenage field testers of some of your mom's wacky ideas. Jennifer's husband, Michael, continues to be a source of unending support during book writing and the unexpected twists and turns life offers. Life on the beach in New Zealand is awesome; cancer not so much. Jennifer can imagine no better companion for all of the twisty, sparkly, and unexpected detours on the path.

Finally, we'd like to thank each other, which is kind of weird but also really matters. In the years since we've begun building ideas together, Keith has gotten his doctorate and Jennifer has gotten her New Zealand citizenship. As we've formed a firm and developed a set of theories and practices, we've also grown a complex and pretty beautiful friendship. Meeting each other nearly a decade ago from opposite sides of the globe was just barely probable, but now we're wandering into the unscripted world of the possible. Just like life, really. What's next?

INTRODUCTION

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.

As you might guess, learning to thrive in this new world is no simple enterprise, no quick trip to a theme park about complexity. Instead, it's a long and scenic hike through the wilderness, wading through rushing rivers that might unsettle you and going into forest so deep you can't see what's coming next. To thrive in this wilderness and come to love it, you'll need new muscles and new ways of making sense of the world around you, new practices that will augment your current approach.

We have organized our expedition to first explore the habits of mind you'll want to develop en route, the habits that will shape your thinking and action over time. We use those habits to explore the various terrains we'll encounter as we learn to thrive in complexity: the way we think about and interact with people, the way we think about and solve problems, and the way we lead ourselves and others into a better tomorrow. In each case, the complex conditions of the world create the practice, which we support with habits of mind that you'll develop as you read. Our companions for the journey are a set of leaders, all of whom are working with their own complex challenges—their stories will unfold as we travel together.

Chapter 1 introduces what we mean about these shifts in complexity, volatility, ambiguity, and uncertainty that seem to be growing in our workplaces and our families right now. We also begin to explore the habits of mind that will accompany us through the other chapters. We meet Yolanda and Doug and learn about the tragedy that has marked their day.

Chapter 2 reminds us that while the world is complex, some things are still simple, and it pays to know the difference between the two when it comes to how you might think about and work toward the solution of an issue. Yolanda and Doug learn about complexity and why it matters to them.

Chapter 3 looks at how feedbacks flow through systems and relationships, and it offers a way to use feedback in a complex space. We meet Jarred and see in action the little miseries we inflict on one another in our quest not to hurt each other.

Chapter 4 takes on the question of how to create and spread a vision even when you can't know what the future will hold. Jarred attends a strategy workshop and ponders his role.

Chapter 5 debunks the idea that we are logical creatures, because simple, cold-blooded logic, in addition to being out of our grasp, is also limiting the face of a complex and nonlinear world. Instead, we can delight in our particular quirks and build organizational practices and perspectives that help us as we are instead of as we imagine ourselves to be. Yolanda conducts a study and has to remind herself not to jump to unfortunate conclusions.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of how a leader can communicate all this complexity to others, and how doing so is different from communicating about something that looks simpler and more predictable. Jarred hosts some people at his house for a weekend strategy session to support his mom.

Chapter 7 focuses on the ways we change over time to become better able to handle complexity and ambiguity, and it highlights the benefits of both thinking about that change and also doing it. The leaders of Jarred's organization meet with board members to understand what changes in them personally might be necessary to support the changes the organization requires.

Chapter 8 brings these ideas together into a model of how a leader can use a complex approach to create change in an organization. One year later, we get a sense of how things have worked out for our characters and where they might go next.

In all of the chapters, we offer tools, approaches, and new questions to ask that leaders around the world have told us are the most helpful ones in facing this more complex world with grace. As you try out these powerful practices, we think you'll find that the complex world will become less of a problem to be solved and more of a landscape to savor and discover.

Welcome to the trail.

1 LEADING THE POSSIBLE

“Damn!” Yolanda Murphy, director of the statewide Family and Children’s Services (FACS) Division, slammed her fist on the keyboard, inadvertently closing the email window she had just been reading. In her first 18 months on the job, Yolanda felt she must have seen more tragedy and mayhem than the previous director had seen in his seven years in the role, a notion never omitted in front-page news stories about the miserable series of misfortunes that still seemed to be unfolding.

Now that she was 56 years old, this was supposed to be the apex of her career—her first stint as a chief executive. While many applauded her as a no-nonsense, competent manager who knew the agency and the state government, some had thought that she lacked the frontline social work experience to do the job well. But not even a career social worker could have anticipated all of these different pieces breaking down, she thought. Six children dead and four hospitalized in 18 months, children that FACS was following, was supposed to be protecting. And here, today, another case of abuse from a foster family.

“Jamie!” she called. “Will you bring me whatever the review has got so far on the Proucheford office? And will you get Doug in here?” She ran her fingers through her hair and pushed away from the desk. She walked to the window, looking hard into the city as though the answers to her questions were somehow out there, as though she could save children at risk if she just stared hard enough.

“This is about the kid in the Proucheford County Hospital, isn’t it?” Doug, Yolanda’s next-in-line, had come in without her hearing him. She turned

and nodded. Sitting and shuffling through a set of papers, Doug looked as terrible as Yolanda felt. Doug had been with FACS for 20 years and knew the system inside and out. A career social worker, Doug had moved up the ladder to the No. 2 position and until he wasn't willing to be promoted any higher. Before Yolanda took the position, some had told her that Doug liked the No. 2 spot because there was power without visibility, but none of that rang true for Yolanda once she met him. And none of them in FACS could avoid visibility now, with their names trending locally on Twitter and on the front pages and editorial pages of every newspaper in the state.

Doug was coordinating the several investigations to figure out where the fault was in the system, and he had gathered thousands of pieces of data and found no clear conclusions, no smoking gun. Many of those pages of paper were organized into a series of neat files now in a thick stack on Yolanda's desk. He found the paper he was searching for and began to read aloud. "Ten year old kid, lived with this foster family for eight months. History of starting fires, last one burnt down the foster house where he was last placed. Current foster family on probation because of reports—never proven—of abuse of a kid in their care 18 months ago. This kid was the first placement during the probation, and he was placed there after six—no, seven—families turned him down as being too dangerous to placed with them. Got in a fight the day before yesterday with his foster mother's boyfriend and got beat up, head trauma, broken leg, a wide variety of bruises." Doug pushed a picture of a little boy in a hospital room across the table.

"What the hell is going on, Doug?" she asked, staring into the little boy's vacant eyes. "Why am I looking at another picture of a kid hurt while we were supposed to be protecting him? We've got more reviews running than we've ever had before, more people are looking under rocks than we've ever had, and we're still placing kids with foster parents who we suspect of beating other children? Is this a failure of a couple of links of the chain, or is this a failure of the whole damn organization? And who do I have to fire or promote or train up in order for this to stop?"

Doug, holding a close-up of a series of bruises on a child's back, said, "I would give anything to know the answer to that question. I have been through these documents a thousand times and . . ." His sentence was interrupted by Jamie, who had walked into the office, pink message slips in hand.

"Yolanda, you've got calls from the regular local press—but also there's someone from the *New York Times* who wants to talk with you."

"Tell them we're investigating and there will be a press conference at"—she looked at her watch and then at Doug—"three o'clock." Doug nodded. Yolanda sat down at the table and began to page through the largest file marked "Proucheford." "So, Doug, we have three and a half hours to figure out what's wrong—and how to fix it."

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 to 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