

The Risks of Getting Simplicity Wrong

By David Brewster

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We often see the simple life portrayed as 'going with the flow'. You know: cruising along, not worrying too much about the future, never feeling any real pressure to improve or compete. I was reminded recently of the risks of this approach - and why we need to be a bit more sophisticated in our approach to simplicity.

Some years ago I remember having a talk with a friend of mine, Colin, about our plans for our respective careers. We were studying at the time. Colin's career seemed fairly clearly mapped out.

Colin's family owned a substantial business, one in which his accounting degree could be put to good use. He looked likely to join the business as a junior accountant and then progress fairly quickly through the ranks. He would take a position on the board well before most of us could dream of doing so.

During our conversation, Colin mentioned that he thought he should probably not jump straight onto his pre-destined path. He thought it was important that he broaden his experience by initially working outside the family business.

I remember thinking that this seemed like a terrific idea. I knew very little about management at the time. But I felt intuitively that joining a family business straight after study would probably have been taking too easy an option.

In the end, however, the easy option prevailed. Colin joined the family business straight after he finished. As expected, he moved quickly through the ranks and sat on the board (though he never achieved the general management role he was hoping for).

Some years later, the senior members of the family decided to accept an offer for the company from a large overseas buyer. Colin was suddenly forced to join the job market. He found that outside the protection of the family business, he was just another middle manager. He found himself in a situation he had never anticipated and he was not well prepared for it.

Colin paid the price for taking too simple a path. He thought it was safer being a passenger than taking the drivers seat. And when the car was sold from underneath him he was left with nowhere to turn.

No matter what your role in business, there is no security other than the security you provide for yourself. I've seen too many loyal heads roll in corporations to believe otherwise. Likewise there are

endless stories of small businesses falling over when they thought they were safe just trundling along.

Living the 'simple' life in business is not about cruising. It's about control. It means having clarity about what's important and what isn't - and reacting accordingly. Ride with the flow by all means, but don't forget to stay at the wheel.

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