Small and Simple Things Promote Growth  
in Performance, Relationships, and Parenthood  

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1. Are there small and simple solutions?  
Today there is a resurgence of effort to find small and simple things. There are smaller batteries, smaller houses, smaller solar panels, simpler lifestyles, and less bother and stress. And there is an effort to find the simplest way to manufacture, sell, and build. This has been accompanied by science and known as Chaos Theory, which is designed to find the small and original conditions for complex and massive things. Given the success in identifying small and simple things in these areas, it seems like it is possible to find small and simple things in human performance, relationships, and parenthood. And is there benefit in finding these?  

2. Are there small and simple things in individual and organizational performance?  
Dynamic human experiences like friendships, family relationships, work relationships, and, as expected, whole organizations become more complex as they grow. As a result, it may seem like it is necessary to come up with something sufficiently complex to provoke better outcomes. In some cases, complexity needs to be considered, but suppose instead we consider one thing all human relationships and organizations have in common. They all have a beginning. A business may start with one idea, which grows to many applications. A love relationship begins with mutual eye contact, which blends into attraction, and a friendship begins with acquaintance and a common interest. And because they are dynamic, with forces of change and stability present in each, a wonderful question is implied. Is there any benefit to understanding the small and simple things related to human performance, relationships, and parenthood? I believe we have yet to recognize the full import of this idea, but I also believe the answer will be that searching for and finding the small and simple things will help us solve many of the problems now facing us, especially where human relationships are involved.  

To illustrate, I would like to recount two experiences. I have a friend who played linebacker for the Indianapolis Colts when they won the Super Bowl championship in 1996. He said that one reason they won is that the coach, Tony Dungy, used a certain technique to motivate and teach them. When they failed to win or achieve their objectives in one game, he took his players and all they practiced were the fundamentals. In football that would be blocking and tackling. He did this instead of yelling, pressuring, increasing incentives, imposing penalties, or any other form of motivation. What happened is that team members jelled, cooperation increased, and the combined effort led to victory. The principle was this:
Just find and apply the original conditions; perhaps apply them better or a bit differently. All things flow from these.

There is little more important than the role of leadership, and sometimes remarkable things happen in relation to it. There many versions of leadership, some of which are very complex. But there might also be a small and simple version that has much to offer. A vice president of a large energy company had inquired about our services. He wanted to know what I thought the most important processes of leadership were. I told him that I believed there were six and showed him a paper where I identified and defined them. When he saw them, he paused, blinked a bit, and grew silent. Noticing his reaction and thinking that he thought I had over simplified, I hastened to explain that my goal was to find the original principles and practices that were the undergirding foundation of what was taking place in his business. I explained that the six principles I proposed qualified as original conditions because they had been used to start the business and still had important growth processes, they were teachable to everyone, and their application was variable enough to allow for changes of application that would necessarily come when growth and innovation were underway. While I thought him somewhat taken aback by my statement, he stood up from his desk, went to a nearby file cabinet, and retrieved three large three-ring binders. He told me these were filled with research articles he had spent two years studying, trying to find the best forms of leadership. He turned to one page where seven items were listed. He compared what he had with the paper I showed him. His surprise was not disagreement with my list. They were the same except I had combined two of his into one principle on my list. This remarkable coincidence increased my faith in the idea that there are original conditions and they have real power to strengthen our desire to improve the outcomes we are seeking.

3. Small and simple things begin with leadership in organizations and in families. Both are designed to take people to places they have never been.

It is my belief that all good leadership at home or at work is focused on the idea that leadership in its truest sense is taking people to places they have never been. The primary responsibility of parents, in my opinion, is to know their children and organize plans of family cohesion, education, discipline, love, and communication—all designed to promote their children’s development to places they only have general ideas about. This happens all while the parent’s lives are changing as well. Leadership at work is the same, taking people and organizations to places of performance they have never been. Searching for the small and simple parts of leadership helps us see that they must activate the idea of growth—and in most cases, a truly remarkable form of growth. What is it that generates the excitement of finding something better and raising the level of achievement and performance to its highest possible levels? It is high-quality leadership. This idea also suggests something else. In virtually every human endeavor, there are levels of activity and stages where people start, get better with practice, and eventually improve. In nature, there exists the concept of successive approximations of growth. This natural condition leads us to believe in the idea of growth and the idea that there is almost endless growth.
possible. That is, if there is high-quality leadership. This then appropriately leads us to one central question. What do leaders, whether in families or at work, do to motivate and inspire movement and developmental growth?

4. **Leadership begins with trust and teamwork.**
   One of the first things good leaders do is to build trust and gradually increase their collaboration with the people they lead. Why? Where human behavior is concerned, both as individuals and in organizations, it is also possible that performance stagnates and plateaus. In most cases—unless it is due to some illness, challenging problem, or threatening environmental possibility—this is usually due to the forces of equilibrium that characterize any human system of interaction. The fact that these equilibriums come and stay is usually attributed to ineffective leadership. If we can accept this, the inverse of stagnation suggests to us that, with the right type of leadership, growth can happen, and with remarkable leadership, almost anything we humans can conceive we can accomplish. Attempting to take ourselves and other people to new places begins with our ability to engender a powerful and persistent form of trust. This is because effective leadership is designed to change people and organizational practices. In order for this to take place, trust is needed to help people accept innovation and growth.

5. **It includes defining the direction and beginning so that expected and unexpected benefits may emerge.**
   We can live for a while at least, just simply responding to the conditions we create. Parents respond to their children only to find that unless they lead their children, they will feel controlled by them. While we cannot predict and prepare for everything, defining our direction together provides real benefits. Once you understand how to apply the original conditions of leadership, you can develop leadership and accomplish as much as you wish to. Why? The original conditions of leadership are like a catalyst that activate and capture people’s ideas, teamwork, and motivation. When executed or applied, they unleash the natural developmental conditions born into every person, and these motivate or activate growth. Some of these include freedom, challenge, affiliation/teamwork, collaboration, and a focus on the future by building people’s capacities. Once these are activated, they soon can be found in a new vision and the perceived necessity to strategize in order to carry out and achieve any new vision. All of these, I repeat, can be found in the fundamentals of leadership at home or at work.

6. **Formulate a strategy and plan for innovation that everybody knows what everybody knows.**
   It is surprising to many that we live in one of the most transformative periods of history but are slow in recognizing the importance of planning for innovation. And we still have not yet fully appreciated that, whenever possible, people involved perform better if they are involved in the original plans or strategies. So we might ask, what separates and identifies the original conditions of leadership from all other behavioral principles? The strategy and planning for innovation incorporates some relevant steps to growth but also combines that
with the human forces that motivate and inspire. Essentially, step-by-step plans will bring
the convergence of two very powerful motivational forces. These are individual freedom
and the powerful collaborative motivation that comes from being in teams or groups of
people working together. Please remember here that leadership is about human beings
enthusing, guiding, mentoring, and accelerating other human beings until their attitudes
and actions are transformed into something better or greater than what previously existed.
Individual freedom and collaboration with others, if organized well, are the means by which
this can take place. The fundamentals of leadership, to be considered as such, must
demonstrate the ability to produce these two developmental forces.

7. **Energize alliances to involve more people.**

Sooner or later, hopefully sooner, every leader understands the significance of
relationships. Alliance relationships exist where there is mutual benefit from joint effort in
promoting successful innovation and growth. Yet we are just beginning to establish any
form of science or proven training methods of teaching people how to form and maintain
alliances with one another. The effort is more advanced in businesses than in families. But
the idea has considerable vigor when correctly applied to our children. Forming alliances
among all family members is often the difference between support and success on the one
hand and abandonment and failure to support on another.

I was visiting a young family in France, where the father was teaching at the international
business school located in Fontainebleau, a beautiful city south of Paris. At my departure, I
was speaking with the mother of their children when one of their two small sons, age five,
came up to her, apparently having some difficulty with his brother and said, “Mother, we
need an arbitrator.” I smiled and inquired about his statement, and the mother said they
had been teaching their boys to solve problems with help from the parents. Now consider
the power of children helping each other, older mentoring younger, and the family climate
is fused with the motive to work successfully together.

8. **Build your capacity and measure your progress.**

With so many opportunities available to us, it is surprising that, for many, the idea of
continuous learning and learning more is a new idea to many people. While large
companies create “universities” and train their personnel for their business, many other
medium-sized companies have no plan available. There also does not appear to be
concerted efforts by many parents to keep learning about their children, parent leadership,
and adapting to the times. When it comes to staying current with our children, studies
reveal that many parents are clueless about their children’s pornography for years before it
is disclosed. The same is true for educational efforts, social experiences, substance abuse,
inappropriate sexual activity, and criminal behavior. With children, as is true for our work,
formally inviting people to build their capacity and then use it in the application of home
and at work is an idea that is picking up speed.
The leadership principle of measuring progress is a very simple but powerful idea. First we need to be willing to measure and define a way that is both revealing and constructive. Second, what we want is to focus on growth and invite people to concentrate more on what they have done than they do on their failures. We also wish to invite workers to look for and find where their growth has taken place.

The Small and Simple Things of Successful Parenthood

We wouldn’t take the foregoing and explain it to the members of our families and insist that everyone applies those principles. What we would do instead is to adapt both the language and the application to the conditions and needs of our families. But it is useful to understand these leadership principles in order to apply them effectively. Here are the names and application of leadership principles that become the small and simple things of successful parenthood.

1. **Prepare more than you punish.** Some punishments might be necessary from time to time, but you will get more of what you hope for if you are busy teaching, mentoring, and promoting learning and do this more than you punish. This is where trust comes from.

2. **Communicate more than you control.** Some control will be necessary to provide order, which is necessary for positive emotions to thrive. But order can be achieved and maintained by establishing communication effectiveness, which makes control informal but extremely influential because of the emotional tie of important relationships. Communication is purposive, and with more if it, more people share in defining the future for the family.

3. **Encourage more than you criticize.** Keeping your focus on the success you desire is more likely to promote positive development than much focus on failures, mistakes, and inadequate behavior. Encouragement explains the strategy or plan that parents have to promote their children’s success.

4. **Involve and individualize.** One of the greatest challenges of parenthood is to establish good methods of involving their children with them and with the family but at the same time individualizing them so they have the freedom to choose and live their own successful lives while maintaining positive relationships with family members. This energizes alliances in the family.

5. **Resolve more than you isolate.** Isolating family members might be a good timeout, from time to time, but it is only effective if there is some resolution. But it is generally much better for the sake of learning and growth if we bring our children to us to resolve problems together rather than sending them off alone as a form of punishment. It should be “come to me, we will talk and solve this.” This is how parents build their capacity as parents and promote the same in their children.

6. **Love enough to set and maintain flexible and firm limits.** Most development and growth takes place within certain limits. Learning to establish limits is a great challenge for all of us, but when parents do this with children and maintain them well, then children can learn both firm and flexible limits for themselves. Flexible limits allow everyone to measure progress.