CHAPTER 1

SIMPLE

Every move an Army soldier makes is preceded by a staggering amount of planning, which can be traced to an original order from the president of the United States. The president orders the Joint Chiefs of Staff to accomplish an objective, and the Joint Chiefs set the parameters of the operation. Then the orders and plans begin to cascade downward—from generals to colonels to captains.

The plans are quite thorough, specifying the "scheme of maneuver" and the "concept of fires"—what each unit will do, which equipment it will use, how it will replace munitions, and so on. The orders snowball until they accumulate enough specificity to guide the actions of individual foot soldiers at particular moments in time.

The Army invests enormous energy in its planning, and its processes have been refined over many years. The system is a marvel of communication. There's just one drawback: The plans often turn out to be useless.

"The trite expression we always use is *No plan survives contact with the enemy*," says Colonel Tom Kolditz, the head of the behavioral sciences division at West Point. "You may start off trying to fight your plan, but the enemy gets a vote. Unpredictable things happen—the weather changes, a key asset is destroyed, the enemy responds in

a way you don't expect. Many armies fail because they put all their emphasis into creating a plan that becomes useless ten minutes into the battle."

The Army's challenge is akin to writing instructions for a friend to play chess on your behalf. You know a lot about the rules of the game, and you may know a lot about your friend and the opponent. But if you try to write move-by-move instructions you'll fail. You can't possibly foresee more than a few moves. The first time the opponent makes a surprise move, your friend will have to throw out your carefully designed plans and rely on her instincts.

Colonel Kolditz says, "Over time we've come to understand more and more about what makes people successful in complex operations." He believes that plans are useful, in the sense that they are proof that *planning* has taken place. The planning process forces people to think through the right issues. But as for the plans themselves, Kolditz says, "They just don't work on the battlefield." So, in the 1980s the Army adapted its planning process, inventing a concept called Commander's Intent (CI).

CI is a crisp, plain-talk statement that appears at the top of every order, specifying the plan's goal, the desired end-state of an operation. At high levels of the Army, the CI may be relatively abstract: "Break the will of the enemy in the Southeast region." At the tactical level, for colonels and captains, it is much more concrete: "My intent is to have Third Battalion on Hill 4305, to have the hill cleared of enemy, with only ineffective remnants remaining, so we can protect the flank of Third Brigade as they pass through the lines."

The CI never specifies so much detail that it risks being rendered obsolete by unpredictable events. "You can lose the ability to execute the original plan, but you never lose the responsibility of executing the intent," says Kolditz. In other words, if there's one soldier left in the Third Battalion on Hill 4305, he'd better be doing something to protect the flank of the Third Brigade.

Commander's Intent manages to align the behavior of soldiers at

all levels without requiring play-by-play instructions from their leaders. When people know the desired destination, they're free to improvise, as needed, in arriving there. Colonel Kolditz gives an example: "Suppose I'm commanding an artillery battalion and I say, 'We're going to pass this infantry unit through our lines forward.' That means something different to different groups. The mechanics know that they'll need lots of repair support along the roads, because if a tank breaks down on a bridge the whole operation will come to a screeching halt. The artillery knows they'll need to fire smoke or have engineers generate smoke in the breech area where the infantry unit moves forward, so it won't get shot up as it passes through. As a commander, I could spend a lot of time enumerating every specific task, but as soon as people know what the *intent* is they begin generating their own solutions."

The Combat Maneuver Training Center, the unit in charge of military simulations, recommends that officers arrive at the Commander's Intent by asking themselves two questions:

> If we do nothing else during tomorrow's mission, we must _____.
>
> The single, most important thing that we must do tomorrow is _____.

No plan survives contact with the enemy. No doubt this principle has resonance for people who have no military experience whatsoever. *No sales plan survives contact with the customer. No lesson plan survives contact with teenagers.*

It's hard to make ideas stick in a noisy, unpredictable, chaotic environment. If we're to succeed, the first step is this: Be simple. Not simple in terms of "dumbing down" or "sound bites." You don't have to speak in monosyllables to be simple. What we mean by "simple" is *finding the core of the idea*.

"Finding the core" means stripping an idea down to its most critical essence. To get to the core, we've got to weed out superfluous and tangential elements. But that's the easy part. The hard part is weeding out ideas that may be really important but just aren't *the most important* idea. The Army's Commander's Intent forces its officers to highlight the most important goal of an operation. The value of the Intent comes from its singularity. You can't have five North Stars, you can't have five "most important goals," and you can't have five Commander's Intents. Finding the core is analogous to writing the Commander's Intent—it's about discarding a lot of great insights in order to let the most important insight shine.The French aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once offered a definition of engineering elegance: "A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." A designer of simple ideas should aspire to the same goal: knowing how much can be wrung out of an idea before it begins to lose its essence.

In fact, we'll follow our own advice and strip this book down to its core. Here it is: There are two steps in making your ideas sticky—Step 1 is to find the core, and Step 2 is to translate the core using the SUCCESs checklist. That's it. We'll spend the next half chapter on Step 1, and the remainder of the book on Step 2. The first step in unpacking these ideas is to explore why Southwest Airlines deliberately ignores the food preferences of its customers.

Finding the Core at Southwest Airlines

It's common knowledge that Southwest is a successful company, but there is a shocking performance gap between Southwest and its competitors. Although the airlines industry as a whole has only a passing acquaintance with profitability, Southwest has been consistently profitable for more than thirty years.

The reasons for Southwest's success could (and do) fill up books, but perhaps the single greatest factor in the company's success is its

dogged focus on reducing costs. Every airline would like to reduce costs, but Southwest has been doing it for decades. For this effort to succeed, the company must coordinate thousands of employees, ranging from marketers to baggage handlers.

Southwest has a Commander's Intent, a core, that helps to guide this coordination. As related by James Carville and Paul Begala:

> Herb Kelleher [the longest-serving CEO of Southwest] once told someone, "I can teach you the secret to running this airline in thirty seconds. This is it: We are THE low-fare airline. Once you understand that fact, you can make any decision about this company's future as well as I can.
>
> "Here's an example," he said. "Tracy from marketing comes into your office. She says her surveys indicate that the passengers might enjoy a light entrée on the Houston to Las Vegas flight. All we offer is peanuts, and she thinks a nice chicken Caesar salad would be popular. What do you say?"
>
> The person stammered for a moment, so Kelleher responded: "You say, 'Tracy, will adding that chicken Caesar salad make us THE low-fare airline from Houston to Las Vegas? Because if it doesn't help us become the unchallenged low-fare airline, we're not serving any damn chicken salad.' "

Kelleher's Commander's Intent is "We are THE low-fare airline." This is a simple idea, but it is sufficiently useful that it has guided the actions of Southwest's employees for more than thirty years.

Now, this core idea—"THE low-fare airline"—isn't the whole story, of course. For instance, in 1996 Southwest received 124,000 applications for 5,444 openings. It's known as a great place to work, which is surprising. It's not supposed to be fun to work for penny-pinchers. It's hard to imagine Wal-Mart employees giggling their way through the workday.

Yet somehow Southwest has pulled it off. Let's think about the

ideas driving Southwest Airlines as concentric circles. The central circle, the core, is "THE low-fare airline." But the very next circle might be "Have fun at work." Southwest's employees know that it's okay to have fun so long as it doesn't jeopardize the company's status as THE low-fare airline. A new employee can easily put these ideas together to realize how to act in unscripted situations. For instance, is it all right to joke about a flight attendant's birthday over the P.A.? Sure. Is it equally okay to throw confetti in her honor? Probably not—the confetti would create extra work for cleanup crews, and extra clean-up time means higher fares. It's the lighthearted business equivalent of the foot soldier who improvises based on the Commander's Intent. A well-thought-out simple idea can be amazingly powerful in shaping behavior.

A warning: In the future, months after you've put down this book, you're going to recall the word "Simple" as an element of the SUCCESs checklist. And your mental thesaurus will faithfully go digging for the meaning of "Simple," and it's going to come back with associations like dumbing down, shooting for the lowest common denominator, making things easy, and so on. At that moment, you've got to remind your thesaurus of the examples we've explored. "THE low-fare airline" and the other stories in this chapter aren't simple because they're full of easy words. They're simple because they reflect the Commander's Intent. It's about elegance and prioritization, not dumbing down.

Burying the Lead

News reporters are taught to start their stories with the most important information. The first sentence, called the lead, contains the most essential elements of the story. A good lead can convey a lot of information, as in these two leads from articles that won awards from the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

A healthy 17-year-old heart pumped the gift of life through 34-year-old Bruce Murray Friday, following a four-hour transplant operation that doctors said went without a hitch.

JERUSALEM, Nov. 4—A right-wing Jewish extremist shot and killed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin tonight as he departed a peace rally attended by more than 100,000 in Tel Aviv, throwing Israel's government and the Middle East peace process into turmoil.

After the lead, information is presented in decreasing order of importance. Journalists call this the "inverted pyramid" structure—the most important info (the widest part of the pyramid) is at the top.

The inverted pyramid is great for readers. No matter what the reader's attention span—whether she reads only the lead or the entire story—the inverted pyramid maximizes the information she gleans. Think of the alternative: If news stories were written like mysteries, with a dramatic payoff at the end, then readers who broke off in mid-story would miss the point. Imagine waiting until the last sentence of a story to find out who won the presidential election or the Super Bowl.

The inverted pyramid also allows newspapers to get out the door on time. Suppose a late-breaking story forces editors to steal space from other stories. Without the inverted pyramid, they'd be forced to do a slow, careful editing job on all the other articles, trimming a word here or a phrase there. With the inverted pyramid structure, they simply lop off paragraphs from the bottom of the other articles, knowing that those paragraphs are (by construction) the least important.

According to one account, perhaps apocryphal, the inverted pyramid arose during the Civil War. All the reporters wanted to use military telegraphs to transmit their stories back home, but they could be cut off at any moment; they might be bumped by military personnel,

or the communication line might be lost completely—a common occurrence during battles. The reporters never knew how much time they would get to send a story, so they had to send the most important information first.

Journalists obsess about their leads. Don Wycliff, a winner of prizes for editorial writing, says, "I've always been a believer that if I've got two hours in which to write a story, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and forty-five minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily."

So if finding a good lead makes everything else easy, why would a journalist ever fail to come up with one? A common mistake reporters make is that they get so steeped in the details that they fail to see the message's core—what readers will find important or interesting. The longtime newspaper writer Ed Cray, a professor of communications at the University of Southern California, has spent almost thirty years teaching journalism. He says, "The longer you work on a story, the more you can find yourself losing direction. No detail is too small. You just don't know what your story is anymore."

This problem of losing direction, of missing the central story, is so common that journalists have given it its own name: Burying the lead. "Burying the lead" occurs when the journalist lets the most important element of the story slip too far down in the story structure.

The process of writing a lead—and avoiding the temptation to bury it—is a helpful *metaphor* for the process of finding the core. Finding the core and writing the lead both involve *forced prioritization*. Suppose you're a wartime reporter and you can telegraph only one thing before the line gets cut, what would it be? There's only one lead, and there's only one core. You must choose.

Forced prioritization is really painful. Smart people recognize the value of all the material. They see nuance, multiple perspectives—and because they fully appreciate the complexities of a situation, they're often tempted to linger there. This tendency to gravitate

toward complexity is perpetually at war with the need to prioritize. This difficult quest—the need to wrestle priorities out of complexity—was exactly the situation that James Carville faced in the Clinton campaign of 1992.

"If You Say Three Things, You Don't Say Anything."

A political campaign is a breeding ground of decision angst. If you think your organization has problems, imagine this challenge: You must build a nationwide organization from scratch, using primarily unpaid and largely unskilled workers. You've got about a year to pull the team together and line up an endless supply of doughnuts. Everyone in the organization needs to sing from the same hymnal, but you don't have much time to rehearse the choir. And the media prod you to sing a new song every day. To make matters worse, you must constantly contend with opponents who will seize on every errant word.

Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign was a classic example of sticky ideas at work in a difficult environment. Not only did the campaign have the normal set of complexities, Clinton himself added a few new wrinkles. First, there were the "bimbo eruptions," which need not be reexamined here. Second, Clinton was a policy wonk by nature, which meant that he was inclined to pontificate on virtually every issue that he was asked about, instead of staying focused on a few key principles.

As his key political adviser, James Carville had to cope with this complexity. One day, struggling to maintain his focus, he wrote three phrases on a whiteboard for all the campaign workers to see. One of the phrases on the impromptu list was "It's the economy, stupid." This message would become the core of Clinton's successful campaign.

The word "stupid" was added as a taunt to the campaign workers

themselves, reminding them not to lose focus on what was important. "It was simple and it was self-effacing," Carville explained. "I was trying to say, 'Let's don't be too clever here, don't come down here thinking we're too smart. Let's just remember the basics.' "

The need for focus extended to Bill Clinton himself, perhaps especially to Clinton himself. At one point, Clinton was frustrated that he'd been advised to stop talking about balanced budgets despite the fact that Ross Perot, the third-party candidate for president in 1992, was getting positive attention for his stand on the balanced budget. Clinton said, "I've been talking about these things for two years, why should I stop talking about them now because Perot is in?" Clinton's advisers had to tell him, "There has to be message triage. If you say three things, you don't say anything."

"It's the economy, stupid" was the lead of the Clinton story—and it was a good one, because in 1992 the U.S. economy was mired in a recession. But if "It's the economy, stupid" is the lead, then the need for a balanced budget can't also be the lead. Carville had to stop Clinton from burying the lead.

Decision Paralysis

Why is prioritizing so difficult? In the abstract, it doesn't sound so tough. You prioritize important goals over less important goals. You prioritize goals that are "critical" ahead of goals that are "beneficial."

But what if we can't tell what's "critical" and what's "beneficial"? Sometimes it's not obvious. We often have to make decisions between one "unknown" and another. This kind of complexity can be paralyzing. In fact, psychologists have found that people can be driven to irrational decisions by too much complexity and uncertainty.

In 1954, the economist L. J. Savage described what he perceived as a basic rule of human decision-making. He called it the "sure-thing principle." He illustrated it with this example: A businessman is

thinking about buying a piece of property. There's an election coming up soon, and he initially thinks that its outcome could be relevant to the attractiveness of the purchase. So, to clarify his decision, he thinks through both scenarios. If the Republican wins, he decides, he'll buy. If the Democrat wins, he'll do the same. Seeing that he'd buy in either scenario, he goes forward with the purchase, despite not knowing the outcome. This decision seems sensible—not many people would quibble with Savage's logic.

Two psychologists quibbled. Amos Tversky and Eldar Shafir later published a paper proving that the "sure-thing principle" wasn't always a sure thing. They uncovered situations where the mere existence of uncertainty seemed to alter how people made decisions—even when the uncertainty was irrelevant to the outcome, as with the businessman's purchase. For instance, imagine that you're in college and you've just completed an important final exam a couple of weeks before the Christmas holidays. You'd been studying for this exam for weeks, because it's in a subject that's important to your future career.

You've got to wait two days to get the exam results back. Meanwhile, you see an opportunity to purchase a vacation during the holidays to Hawaii at a bargain-basement price. Here are your three options: You can buy the vacation today, pass on it today, or pay a five-dollar fee to lock in the price for two days, which would allow you to make your decision *after* you got your grade. What would you do?

You may feel some desire to know the outcome of your exam before you decide, as did the students who faced this choice in the original experiment. So Tversky and Shafir simply removed this uncertainty for two groups of participants. These groups were told up front how they did on the exam. Some students were told that they passed the exam, and 57 percent of them chose to go on the trip (after all, it makes for a good celebration). Other students were told that they failed the exam, and 54 percent of them chose to go on the trip (after all, it makes for

good recuperation). Both those who passed and those who failed wanted to go to Hawaii, pronto.

Here's the twist: The group of students who, like you, didn't know their final exam results behaved completely differently. The majority of them (61 percent) paid five dollars to wait for two days. Think about that! If you pass, you want to go to Hawaii. If you fail, you want to go to Hawaii. If you don't know whether you passed or failed, you . . . wait and see? This is not the way the "sure-thing principle" is supposed to behave. It's as if our businessman had decided to wait until after the election to buy his property, despite being willing to make the purchase regardless of the outcome.

Tversky and Shafir's study shows us that uncertainty—even irrelevant uncertainty—can paralyze us. Another study, conducted by Shafir and a colleague, Donald Redelmeier, demonstrates that paralysis can also be caused by *choice*. Imagine, for example, that you are in college and you face the following choice one evening. What would you do?

1. Attend a lecture by an author you admire who is visiting just for the evening, or
2. Go to the library and study.

Studying doesn't look so attractive compared with a once in a lifetime lecture. When this choice was given to actual college students, only 21 percent decided to study.

Suppose, instead, you had been given three choices:

1. Attend the lecture.
2. Go to the library and study.
3. Watch a foreign film that you've been wanting to see.

Does your answer differ? Remarkably, when a different group of students were given the three choices, 40 percent decided to study—

double the number who did before. Giving students two good alternatives to studying, rather than one, paradoxically makes them less likely to choose either. This behavior isn't "rational," but it is human.

Prioritization rescues people from the quicksand of decision angst, and that's why finding the core is so valuable. The people who listen to us will be constantly making decisions in an environment of uncertainty. They will suffer anxiety from the need to choose—even when the choice is between two good options, like the lecture and the foreign film.

Core messages help people avoid bad choices by reminding them of what's important. In Herb Kelleher's parable, for instance, someone had to choose between chicken salad and no chicken salad—and the message "THE low-fare airline" led her to abandon the chicken salad.

Idea Clinics

The goal of this book is to help you make your ideas stick. So, periodically throughout the book, we will present "Idea Clinics," which illustrate, in practical terms, how an idea can be made stickier. The Clinics were inspired by the classic "before and after" photos used by weight-loss centers—visible evidence that the diet works. Like patients trying a new diet, the initial ideas in the Clinics vary in their need for change; some need dramatic help, like a stomach-stapling and liposuction, and some only need to lose a few pounds around the waistline.

The point of the Clinics is not to wow you with our creative genius, and it's fortunate for readers and authors alike that this is not the goal, because we are not creative geniuses. The point is simply to model *the process* of making ideas stickier. In contrast to traditional disclaimers, this *is* something you should try at home. Think about each message and consider how you would improve it using the principles in the book.

You can safely skip the Clinics—they are intended as sidebars to the text, rather than as building blocks—but we hope you'll find them useful.

CLINIC

Warning: Sun Exposure Is Dangerous

THE SITUATION: *Health educators at Ohio State University want to inform the academic community about the risks of sun exposure.*

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MESSAGE 1: Here's a Web page with facts about sun exposure from Ohio State University. We've added numbers to each paragraph so that we can analyze the message later:

Sun Exposure: Precautions and Protection

(1) A golden, bronze tan is often considered a status symbol. Perhaps this supports the idea that people who have time to lie in the sun long enough to develop a deep tan, or who can travel to warm climates during winter, have more money or leisure time than "common folk." Nevertheless, the goal of many is a deep tan early in spring or to return from vacation with that hearty, healthy glow. Whether a tan suggests status or not, careless exposure to the sun can be harmful. Ultraviolet rays from the sun will damage skin but can also create vision problems, allergic reactions, and depressed immune systems.

(2) Tanning and burning are caused by ultraviolet rays from the sun. These rays cannot be seen or felt, but penetrate the skin and stimulate cells containing a brownish pigment called melanin. Melanin protects the skin by absorbing and scattering ultraviolet rays. People with dark skins have high amounts of melanin, have greater natural protection from ultraviolet rays, and tan more easily. Blondes, redheads, and people with fair skins have less melanin and, therefore, burn more quickly.

(3) As melanin is stimulated by ultraviolet rays, it rises to the skin's surface as a tan and provides protection against future sun exposure. Individuals with dark skins such as olive, brown, or black are not immune to burning and skin damage caused by careless exposure to the sun.

(4) Two types of ultraviolet rays (UV) from the sun exist: UVA and UVB. UVB cause burning of the skin or the red associated with sunburn, skin cancer, and premature aging of skin. UVA rays stimulate tanning but are also linked to other problems such as impaired vision, skin rashes, and allergic or other reactions to drugs.

(5) Skin damage from overexposure to the sun is cumulative over the years and cannot be reversed. Once damage occurs, it cannot be undone. Most serious and lasting damage occurs before age 18. Protection should start early, particularly with children who enjoy outdoor play on sunny days.

Before you read our comments below, go back and reread Message 1. What can you do to improve it?

COMMENTS ON MESSAGE 1: What's the lead here? What's the core? The first paragraph dives into tanned skin as a status symbol, which is simply an interesting red herring. (In fact, the text acknowledges as

much when it says, "Whether a tan suggests status or not . . .") To us, Paragraph 5 flashes in neon lights as the core: *Skin damage . . . is cumulative over the years and cannot be reversed*. Wow. Isn't that the single most important thing we'd want to tell sun-worshippers? By contrast, Paragraphs 2–4 provide superfluous mechanics. As an analogy, do smokers really need to understand the workings of the lungs in order to appreciate the dangers of smoking?

• • •

MESSAGE 2: In the text below, we have reordered the points and tinkered with the prose a bit in the hope of unburying the lead.

Sun Exposure: How to Get Old Prematurely

(5) Skin damage from overexposure to the sun is like getting older: It is cumulative over the years and cannot be reversed. Once damage occurs, it cannot be undone. Most serious and lasting damage occurs before age 18. Fortunately, unlike aging, skin damage can be prevented. Sun protection should start early, particularly with children who enjoy playing outdoors on sunny days.

(2, 3, 4) Tanning and burning are caused by ultraviolet rays from the sun. Ultraviolet rays cause sunburn, which is a temporary sign of deeper underlying skin damage. Sunburns eventually disappear, but the underlying damage persists and may eventually cause premature aging or skin cancer.

(1) Ironically, a golden, bronze tan is often considered a sign of good health. But ultraviolet rays not only damage skin, they can also create vision problems, allergic reactions, and depressed immune systems. So instead of a "healthy tan," perhaps we should call it a "sickly tan."

COMMENTS ON MESSAGE 2: The core of this message is that skin damage is cumulative and irreversible. So we've rewritten the message to stress that point and eliminate nonessential information. We've done this to illustrate the process of forced prioritization; we've had to eliminate some interesting stuff (such as the references to melanin) in order to let the core shine through.

We've tried to emphasize the core in a couple of ways. First, we've unburied the lead—putting the core right up front. Second, we've added the analogy to aging to hammer home the idea that damage is irreversible. Third, we've added a concrete and perhaps unexpected image: Sunburns are a signal of damage; they may disappear, but the underlying damage does not.

SCORECARD

Checklist	*Message 1*	*Message 2*
Simple	-	✓
Unexpected	-	✓
Concrete	-	✓
Credible	-	-
Emotional	-	-
Story	-	-

PUNCH LINE: Avoid burying the lead. Don't start with something interesting but irrelevant in hopes of entertaining the audience. Instead, work to make the core message itself more interesting.

Names, Names, and Names

Dunn, North Carolina, is a small town about forty miles south of Raleigh. It has 14,000 residents and its workforce is primarily blue collar. The local diner is packed in the morning with people eating big breakfasts and drinking coffee. Waitresses call you "hon." The town recently got a Wal-Mart.

All in all, Dunn is a pretty normal place, except for one fact: Almost everyone there reads the local paper, the *Daily Record*. As a matter of fact, *more than everyone* in Dunn reads the paper.

The *Daily Record*'s penetration in the Dunn community is 112 percent, which is the highest penetration of any newspaper in the country. For a community penetration to exceed 100 percent, one of two things must be true: (1) People from outside Dunn—perhaps people commuting to jobs in Dunn—are buying the paper; or (2) some households are buying more than one paper. Maybe it's hard for some couples in Dunn to share.

What's the explanation for this remarkable success? The people of Dunn certainly have plenty of options for their news: *USA Today*, the Raleigh *News & Observer*, CNN, the Internet, and hundreds of other outlets. So why is the *Daily Record* so popular?

The Dunn *Daily Record* was founded in 1950 by Hoover Adams. Adams was born with ink in his blood. He got his first byline by sending dispatches from his Boy Scout camp. By the time he was in high school he was serving as a stringer—a freelance reporter—for the Raleigh paper. After World War II, Adams became the editor of the Dunn *Dispatch*. Eventually, he grew restless at the *Dispatch* and decided to start his own paper, the *Daily Record*. In 1978, after twenty-eight years of head-to-head competition, the *Dispatch* finally gave up and sold out to him.

Across the fifty-five years of his tenure as publisher, Adams has had a remarkably consistent editorial philosophy. He believes that newspapers should be relentlessly local in their coverage. In fact, he's a zealot about community coverage.

In 1978, frustrated by what he felt was insufficient focus on local issues in the paper, he wrote a memo to his staff, explaining his views:

"All of us know that the main reason anybody reads a local newspaper is for local names and pictures. That's the one thing we can do better than anybody else. And that's the thing our readers can't get anywhere else. Always remember, the mayor of Angier and the mayor of Lillington are just as important to those towns as the mayor of New York is to his people."

Let's be clear: Adams's focus on local coverage is not a revolutionary sentiment. In fact, among publishers of small newspapers it would be utterly uncontroversial. Yet it's easy enough to see that the idea has not become a reality at most papers. The average local newspaper is loaded with wire stories, analyses of pro sports teams, and spot photos with nary a person in sight.

In other words, finding the core isn't synonymous with communicating the core. Top management can *know* what the priorities are but be completely ineffective in *sharing* and *achieving* those priorities. Adams has managed to find *and* share the core. How did he do it?

Sharing the Core

Adams found the core of his newspaper operations: local focus. Then he turned his attention to sharing his core message—making it stick with his staff. For the rest of the chapter—in fact, the rest of the book—we will discuss ways to get core messages to stick. And we will start by studying the way Adams has made his "local focus" message stick.

While many publishers pay lip service to the value of local focus,

Adams is an extremist about it. He's willing to hurt the bottom line for local focus:

> The fact is, a local newspaper can never get enough local names. I'd happily hire two more typesetters and add two more pages in every edition of each paper if we had the names to fill them up.

He's willing to be boring for local focus:

> I'll bet that if the *Daily Record* reprinted the entire Dunn telephone directory tonight, half the people would sit down and check it to be sure their name was included. . . . When somebody tells you, "Aw, you don't want all those names," please assure them that's exactly what we want, *most of all*!

He gleefully exaggerates in order to emphasize the value of local focus, quoting a saying of a friend, Ralph Delano, who runs the local paper in Benson:

> If an atomic bomb fell on Raleigh, it wouldn't be news in Benson unless some of the debris and ashes fell on Benson.

In fact, asked why the *Daily Record* has been so successful, Adams replies, "It's because of three things: Names, names, and names."

What's going on here? Adams has found the core idea that he wants to communicate—that local focus is the key to his newspaper's success. That's Step 1. Step 2 is to communicate the core to others. And he does that brilliantly.

Look at the techniques Adams uses to communicate his seriousness about local focus. He uses an analogy: comparing the mayor of Angier to the mayor of New York. (We'll have more to say about analogy later in this chapter.) He says he'd hire more typesetters if the re-

porters could generate enough names. This is forced prioritization: Local focus is more important than minimizing costs! (Not a common sentiment among small-town papers. See the "Unexpected" chapter.)

He also speaks in clear, tangible language. What does he want? Names. He wants lots of individual names in the newspaper every day. (See the "Concrete" chapter.) This idea is concrete enough that everyone in the organization can comprehend and use it. Is there any room for misunderstanding? Is there a staffer who won't understand what Adams means by "names"?

"Names, names, and names" is a simple statement that is symbolic of a core truth. It's not just that names are helpful. In Adams's mind, names trump costs. Names trump well-written prose. Names trump nuclear explosions in neighboring communities.

For fifty-five years, since Adams founded the paper, his core value of community focus has helped hundreds of people at the paper, in thousands of circumstances, make good decisions. As a publisher, Adams has presided over close to 20,000 issues. And each of those issues involved countless decisions: Which stories do we cover? What's important in the stories? Which photos do we run? Which do we cut out to save space?

Adams can't possibly be personally involved in the vast majority of these hundreds of small decisions. But his employees don't suffer from decision paralysis, because Adams's Commander's Intent is clear: "Names, names, and names." Adams can't be everywhere. But by finding the core and communicating it clearly, *he has made himself everywhere*. That's the power of a sticky idea.

Simple = Core + Compact

Adams is a clever wordsmith, but his most useful bit of wordplay is probably his least clever: "Names, names, and names." This phrase is

useful and memorable because it is highly concrete, but also because it is highly succinct. This example illustrates a second aspect of simplicity: Simple messages are core and *compact*.

At one level, the idea of compactness is uncontroversial. Rarely will you get advice to make your communications lengthy and convoluted, unless you write interest-rate disclosures for a credit card company. We know that sentences are better than paragraphs. Two bullet points are better than five. Easy words are better than hard words. It's a bandwidth issue: The more we reduce the amount of information in an idea, the stickier it will be.

But let's be clear: Compactness alone isn't enough. We could latch on to a compact message that isn't core; in other words, a pithy slogan that doesn't reflect our Commander's Intent. Compact messages may be sticky, but that says nothing about their *worth*. We can imagine compact messages that are lies ("The earth is flat"), compact messages that are irrelevant ("Goats like sprouts"), and compact messages that are ill-advised ("Never let a day pass without a shoe purchase").

In other cases, compactness itself can come to seem an unworthy goal. Lots of us have expertise in particular areas. Becoming an expert in something means that we become more and more fascinated by nuance and complexity. That's when the Curse of Knowledge kicks in, and we start to forget what it's like *not* to know what we know. At that point, making something simple can seem like "dumbing down." As an expert, we don't want to be accused of propagating sound bites or pandering to the lowest common denominator. Simplifying, we fear, can devolve into oversimplifying.

So if we're going to define "simple" as core *and* compact, we need to assure ourselves that compactness is worth striving for. We've already got core, why do we need compact? Aren't "stripped-down" ideas inherently less useful than fully elaborated ideas? Suppose we took compactness to its most extreme form. Is it possible to say something meaningful in the span of a sound bite?

"A Bird in the Hand"

For thousands of years, people have exchanged sound bites called proverbs. Proverbs are simple yet profound. Cervantes defined proverbs as "short sentences drawn from long experience." Take the English-language proverb: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." What's the core? The core is a warning against giving up a sure thing for something speculative. The proverb is short and simple, yet it packs a big nugget of wisdom that is useful in many situations.

As it turns out, this is not just an English-language proverb. In Sweden, the saying is "Rather one bird in the hand than ten in the woods." In Spain: "A bird in the hand is better than a hundred flying birds." In Poland: "A sparrow in your hand is better than a pigeon on the roof." In Russia: "Better a titmouse in the hand than a crane in the sky."

Other variants can be found in Romanian, Italian, Portuguese, German, Icelandic, and even medieval Latin. The first documented case in English is from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678. But the proverb may be much older still. In one of Aesop's fables, a hawk seizes a nightingale, who pleads for its life, arguing that it is too tiny a morsel to satisfy the hawk. The hawk replies, "I would be foolish to release the bird I have in my hand to pursue another bird that is not even in sight." This story dates from 570 B.C.

The "bird in hand" proverb, then, is an astoundingly sticky idea. It has survived for more than 2,500 years. It has spread across continents, cultures, and languages. Keep in mind that nobody funded a "bird in hand" advertising campaign. It spreads on its own. Many other proverbs share this longevity. In fact, a repertoire of proverbs has been found in almost every documented culture. Why? What is their purpose?

Proverbs are helpful in guiding individual decisions in environments with shared standards. Those shared standards are often ethical or moral norms. Proverbs offer rules of thumb for the behavior of

individuals. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is so profound that it can influence a lifetime of behavior. The Golden Rule is a great symbol of what we're chasing in this chapter: ideas that are compact enough to be sticky and meaningful enough to make a difference.

Great simple ideas have an elegance and a utility that make them function a lot like proverbs. Cervantes's definition of "proverbs" echoes our definition of Simple ideas: *short sentences* (compact) *drawn from long experience* (core). We are right to be skeptical of sound bites, because lots of sound bites are empty or misleading—they're compact without being core. But the Simple we're chasing isn't a sound bite, it's a proverb: compact *and* core.

Adams managed to turn his core idea—the need to focus relentlessly on local issues—into a journalistic proverb. "Names, names, and names" is an idea that helps guide individual decision-making in a community of shared standards. If you're a photographer, the proverb has no value as a literal statement, unless you plan to shoot name tags. But when you know that your organization thrives on names—i.e., the specific actions taken by specific members of the local community—that knowledge informs the kinds of photo ops you look for. Do you shoot the boring committee deliberations or the gorgeous sunset over the park? Answer: the boring committee deliberations.

Palm Pilot and the Visual Proverb

Compact ideas help people learn and remember a core message. But they may be even more important when it comes time to help people act properly, particularly in an environment where they have to make lots of choices.

Why do remote controls have more buttons than we ever use? The answer starts with the noble intentions of engineers. Most technology and product-design projects must combat "feature creep," the

tendency for things to become incrementally more complex until they no longer perform their original functions very well. A VCR is a case in point.

Feature creep is an innocent process. An engineer looking at a prototype of a remote control might think to herself, "Hey, there's some extra real estate here on the face of the control. And there's some extra processing capacity on the chip. Rather than let it go to waste, what if we give people the ability to toggle between the Julian and Gregorian calendars?"

The engineer is just trying to help—to add another gee-whiz feature that will improve the remote control. The other engineers on the team, meanwhile, don't particularly care about the calendar-toggle. Even if they think it's lame, they probably don't care enough to stage a protest: "Either the calendar-toggle button goes or I quit!" In this way, slowly and quietly, remote controls—and, by extension, other types of technologies—are featured to death.

The Palm Pilot team, aware of this danger, took a hard line against feature creep. When the team began its work, in the early 1990s, personal digital assistants (PDAs) had an unblemished record of failure. Apple's famous debacle with its Newton PDA had made other competitors gun-shy.

One of the competitors on the PDA market in 1994 looked like a malnourished computer. It was a bulky device with a keyboard and multiple ports for peripherals. Jeff Hawkins, the Palm Pilot team leader, was determined that his product would avoid this fate. He wanted the Palm Pilot to be simple. It would handle four things: calendars, contacts, memos, and task lists. The Palm Pilot would do only four things, but it would do them well.

Hawkins fought feature creep by carrying around a wooden block the size of the Palm. Trae Vassallo, a member of the Palm V design team, says, "The block was dumb, which resonated with the simple technological goals of the product, but it was also small, which made

the product elegant and different." Hawkins would pull out the wooden block to "take notes" during a meeting or "check his calendar" in the hallway. Whenever someone suggested another feature, Hawkins would pull out the wooden block and ask them where it would fit.

Vassallo said that the Palm Pilot became a successful product "almost because it was defined more in terms of what it was not than in terms of what it was." Tom Kelley, from IDEO, a prominent Silicon Valley design firm, made a similar point: "The real barrier to the initial PDAs . . . was the idea that the machine had to do nearly everything."

Hawkins knew that the core idea of his project needed to be elegance and simplicity (and a tenacious avoidance of feature creep). In sharing this core idea, Hawkins and his team used what was, in essence, a visual proverb. The block of wood became a visual reminder to do a few things and do them well.

There is a striking parallel between the development of the Palm Pilot and the Clinton campaign led by James Carville. In both cases, the teams were composed of people who were knowledgeable and passionate about their work. Both teams boasted plenty of people who had the *capability* and the *desire* to do a lot of different things—argue every issue and engineer every feature. Yet in both cases the team needed a simple reminder to fight the temptation to do too much. When you say three things, you say nothing. When your remote control has fifty buttons, you can't change the channel anymore.

Using What's There

Our messages have to be compact, because we can learn and remember only so much information at once. But suppose we've assessed the core of our message and we have too much information to aspire to the compactness of a proverb. How do we convey lots of information when we need to? The following exercise is designed to reinforce the need for compactness and to provide a hint about how to cram more information into a compact message.

Here are the rules of this exercise: Spend ten to fifteen seconds, no more, studying the letters below. Then close the book, pull out a sheet of paper, and write down as many letters as you can remember. Spoiler alert: Don't turn the page until you've finished the exercise.

J FKFB INAT OUP SNA SAI RS

If you're like most people, you probably remembered about seven to ten letters. That's not much information. Compactness is essential, because there's a limit to the amount of information we can juggle at once.

Now turn the page and try the exercise again.

There's a twist this time. We haven't changed the letters or the sequence. All we've done is change the way the letters are grouped. Once again, study the letters for ten to fifteen seconds, then close the book and test your recall.

JFK FBI NATO UPS NASA IRS

Chances are you did much better the second time. Suddenly the letters meant something, which made them easier to remember. In Round 1, you were trying to remember raw data. In Round 2, you were remembering concepts: John F. Kennedy, the FBI, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, UPS, NASA, the IRS.

But wait a second. Why is it easier to remember "John F. Kennedy" than the random letters F, J, K? Surely John F. Kennedy is a bigger bundle of information than the three random letters! Think of all the associations with JFK—politics, relationships, his assassination, and his famous family. If remembering was like weight lifting, it would be ridiculous to think we could "lift" JFK easier than three little letters!

The secret, of course, is that we're *not* "lifting" JFK. All the remembering work related to JFK has already been done. We've already built those muscles—the concept of JFK, and all its associations, is already embedded in our memories. What we're remembering is simply a pointer to this information—we're posting a little flag on the terrain of our memory. With the raw letters, we're posting three separate flags. In the end, it's one bit of information (or one flag) versus three, and it's no surprise that one is easier to remember.

So what? Is this just neat brain trivia? Here's where we're going: We've seen that compact ideas are stickier, but that compact ideas alone aren't valuable—only ideas with *profound* compactness are valuable. So, to make a profound idea compact you've got to pack a lot of meaning into a little bit of messaging. And how do you do that? You use flags. You tap the existing memory terrain of your audience. You use what's already there.

The Pomelo Schema

So far we have presented situations in which one simple idea, or a handful of simple ideas, were useful in guiding behavior. But, let's face it, most people in the world do complicated things. It's not our intention to argue that complicated things—law, medicine, construction, programming, teaching—can be pared down to two or three compact messages. We obviously can't replace a school of architecture with a single compact idea ("Keep the building from falling down").

This leads us to an important issue that we haven't discussed yet: *How do you turn a freshman into an architect?* How does complexity emerge from simplicity? We will argue that it is possible to create complexity through the artful use of simplicity. If simple ideas are staged and layered correctly, they can very quickly become complex.

Let us teach you what a "pomelo" is. (If you already know what a pomelo is, be a good sport and feign ignorance.) Here is one way that we can explain to you what a pomelo is:

> Explanation 1: A pomelo is the largest citrus fruit. The rind is very thick but soft and easy to peel away. The resulting fruit has a light yellow to coral pink flesh and can vary from juicy to slightly dry and from seductively spicy-sweet to tangy and tart.

Quick question: Based on this explanation, if you mixed pomelo juice half and half with orange juice, would it taste good? You might make a guess, but the answer is probably a bit ambiguous. Let's move on to an alternative explanation:

> Explanation 2: A pomelo is basically a supersized grapefruit with a very thick and soft rind.

Explanation 2 sticks a flag on a concept that you already know: a grapefruit. When we tell you that a pomelo is *like* a grapefruit, you call

up a mental image of a grapefruit. Then we tell you what to change about it: It's "supersized." Your visualized grapefruit grows accordingly.

We've made it easier for you to learn a new concept by tying it to a concept that you already know. In this case, the concept is "grapefruit." "Grapefruit" is a *schema* that you already have. ("Schema" is a bit of technical jargon from psychology, but it's so useful that we think it's worth carrying through the book.)

Psychologists define schema as a collection of generic properties of a concept or category. Schemas consist of lots of prerecorded information stored in our memories. If someone tells you that she saw a great new sports car, a picture immediately springs to mind, filled with generic properties. You know what "sports cars" are like. You picture something small and two-door, with a convertible top perhaps. If the car in your picture moves, it moves fast. Its color is almost certainly red. Similarly, your schema of "grapefruit" also contains a cluster of generic properties: yellow-pink color, tart flavor, softball-sized, and so on.

By calling up your grapefruit schema, we were able to teach you the concept of pomelo much faster than if we had mechanically listed all the attributes of a pomelo. Note, too, that it's easier to answer the question about the blend of pomelo and orange juice. You know that grapefruit juice blends well with OJ, so the pomelo schema *inherits* this property from the grapefruit schema. (By the way, to be complete, Explanation 1 is itself full of schemas. "Citrus fruit" is a schema, "rind" is a schema, and "tangy" is a schema. Explanation 2 is easier to parse only because "grapefruit" is a higher-level schema—a schema composed of other schemas.)

By using schemas, Explanation 2 improves both our comprehension and our memory. Let's think about the two definitions of "pomelo" in terms of the inverted pyramid structure. What's the lead? Well, with Explanation 1 the lead is: citrus fruit. After the lead, there is no clear hierarchy; depending on what catches people's attention, they might remember the rind info ("very thick but soft and easy to

peel away") or the color info ("light yellow to coral pink") or the juiciness info or the taste info.

With Explanation 2, the lead is: grapefruit-like. The second paragraph is: supersized. The third paragraph is: very thick and soft rind.

Six months from now, people will remember—at best!—the lead of our story. That means that with one story they'd remember "fruit" or "citrus fruit." With the other story they'd remember "grapefruit." The second story is clearly better—it isn't a judgment call.

This concludes what will probably be the last psychological discussion of citrus fruit you'll ever encounter. But though the concept of "pomelo" may not be worth the neurons you just burned on it, the underlying concept—that schemas *enable* profound simplicity—is critical.

Good teachers intuitively use lots of schemas. Economics teachers, for instance, start with compact, stripped-down examples that can be understood by students who have no preexisting economics schemas. "Let's say that you grow apples and I grow oranges. We're the only two people around. Let's also say that we'd prefer to eat some of both fruits rather than all of either. Should we trade? If so, how do we go about doing it?"

Students are initially taught how trade works in this simplified context. This knowledge, in turn, becomes a basic trade schema for them. Once learned, this schema can be called up and stretched along some dimension. For example, what happens if you suddenly get better at growing apples? Do we still trade the same way we did before? To solve this problem, we're calling up a schema and adapting it, just as we did in making a pomelo out of our grapefruit schema.

Complexity from Simplicity

Schemas help us create complex messages from simple materials. In school, lots of science courses are taught by clever uses of schemas. In-

troductory physics deals with simple, idealized situations: pulleys, inclines, objects moving at constant rates along frictionless paths. As students become familiar with the "pulley" schema, it can be stretched in some way or merged with other schemas to solve more complicated problems.

Another nice use of a schema is the solar system model of the atom, which many of us were taught as kids. This model posits that electrons orbit the nucleus, much as planets orbit the sun. This analogy gives students a quick, compact insight into how the atom works.

The planetary analogy also provides an insight into the reason that many people avoid compact schemas ("a supersized grapefruit") in favor of exhaustive description ("a citrus fruit with a soft, thick rind, blah blah blah . . ."). The use of schemas can sometimes involve a somewhat slower route to the "real truth." For instance, physicists now know that electrons don't orbit the nucleus the way that planets do. In reality, electrons move in "probability clouds." So what do you tell a sixth grader? Do you talk about the motion of planets, which is easy to understand and nudges you closer to the truth? Or do you talk about "probability clouds," which are impossible to understand but accurate?

The choice may seem to be a difficult one: (1) accuracy first, at the expense of accessibility; or (2) accessibility first, at the expense of accuracy. But in many circumstances this is a false choice for one compelling reason: If a message can't be used to make predictions or decisions, it is without value, no matter how accurate or comprehensive it is.

Herb Kelleher could tell a flight attendant that her goal is to "maximize shareholder value." In some sense, this statement is more accurate and complete than that the goal is to be "THE low-fare airline." After all, the proverb "THE low-fare airline" is clearly incomplete—Southwest could offer lower fares by eliminating aircraft maintenance, or by asking passengers to share napkins. Clearly, there are additional values (customer comfort, safety ratings) that refine

Southwest's core value of economy. The problem with "maximize shareholder value," despite its accuracy, is that it doesn't help the flight attendant decide whether to serve chicken salad. An accurate but useless idea is still useless.

We discussed the Curse of Knowledge in the introduction—the difficulty of remembering what it was like not to know something. Accuracy to the point of uselessness is a symptom of the Curse of Knowledge. To a CEO, "maximizing shareholder value" may be an immensely useful rule of behavior. To a flight attendant, it's not. To a physicist, probability clouds are fascinating phenomena. To a child, they are incomprehensible.

People are tempted to tell you everything, with perfect accuracy, right up front, when they should be giving you just enough info to be useful, then a little more, then a little more.

Schemas in Hollywood: High-concept Pitches

A great way to avoid useless accuracy, and to dodge the Curse of Knowledge, is to use analogies. Analogies derive their power from schemas: A pomelo is like a grapefruit. A good news story is structured like an inverted pyramid. Skin damage is like aging. Analogies make it possible to understand a compact message because they invoke concepts that you already know.

A good analogy can wield a lot of power. In fact, in Hollywood $100 million movies can be green-lighted based largely on the strength of a one-sentence analogy.

The average Hollywood studio considers hundreds of pitches or screenplays for every movie it makes. It may be hard to muster sympathy for the life of studio execs, but let's try for a moment. Imagine the terrifying decisions they must make. When they invest in a movie, they are essentially betting millions of dollars—and their own reputations—on an intangible idea.

Contrast a movie pitch with the blueprint for a home. If an architect creates a nifty blueprint for a home, and someone puts up the money for construction, you can feel pretty confident that, nine months later, you'll have a home that realizes the architect's original vision.

A movie pitch, on the other hand, is destined to change. When a screenwriter is hired, the story will change. When a director is hired, the artistic feel of the movie will change. When stars are hired to play the parts, their personalities will change how we perceive the characters in the story. When producers are hired, the storytelling will become subject to financial and logistical constraints. And when the movie is completed, months or years later, the marketing team will need to find a way to explain the plot to the public in about thirty seconds—without giving away too much.

Imagine investing millions in an idea that will change as it is filtered through the consciousness of a succession of individuals with giant egos: directors, stars, producers, marketers. That idea had better be good.

In Hollywood, people use core ideas called "high-concept pitches." You've probably heard some of them. *Speed* was "*Die Hard* on a bus." *13 Going on 30* was "*Big* for girls." *Alien* was "*Jaws* on a spaceship."

The high-concept pitches don't always reference other movies. *E.T.*, for instance, was pitched as "Lost alien befriends lonely boy to get home." But a lot of pitches do invoke past movies. Why is that? Is it because Hollywood is full of cynical execs who shamelessly recycle old ideas?

Well, yes, but that's only part of the reason. The concept of the movie *Speed*, before it was pitched, obviously did not exist in the minds of the execs. It was like the word "pomelo," before you knew what it meant. The compact, five-word phrase "*Die Hard* on a bus" pours a breathtaking amount of meaning into the previously nonex-

istent concept of *Speed*. To see this, think of all the important decisions you could make, just on the strength of those five words. Do you hire an action director or an indie director? Action. Do you budget $10 million for the movie or $100 million? $100 million. Big star or ensemble cast? Big star. Target a summer release or a Christmas release? Summer.

As another example, imagine that you were just hired to be the production designer on the new film *Alien*. It will be your job to design the spaceship where most of the movie takes place. What does it look like? If you knew nothing at all about the movie, you might sensibly start by looking at old spaceship designs. For instance, think of the cool, immaculate interior of the *Enterprise* on *Star Trek*.

Then your boss tells you that the vision for the movie is "*Jaws* on a spaceship." That changes everything. *Jaws* was not cool or immaculate. Richard Dreyfus navigated around on a rickety old boat. Decisions were rushed, slapdash, claustrophobic, anxiety-ridden. The environment was sweaty. As you think about what made *Jaws* tick, your ideas start to take shape: The ship will be underdeveloped, dingy, and oppressive. The crew members will not wear bright Lycra uniforms. The rooms will not be well lit and lintless.

High-concept pitches are Hollywood's version of core proverbs. Like most proverbs, they tap the power of analogy. By invoking schemas that already exist (e.g., what the movie *Jaws* is like), the proverbs radically accelerate the learning process for people working on a brand-new movie.

Obviously, a good pitch is not synonymous with a good movie. "*Jaws* on a spaceship" could have turned into a terrible movie if it weren't for the contributions of hundreds of talented people over a period of years. On the other hand, a bad pitch—a bad proverb—is plenty to ruin a movie. No director could save "*Terms of Endearment* on a spaceship."

If high-concept pitches can have this power in the movie world—

an environment filled with forty times the normal density of egos—we should feel confident that we can harness the same power in our own environments.

Generative Analogies

Some analogies are so useful that they don't merely shed light on a concept, they actually become platforms for novel thinking. For example, the metaphor of the brain as a computer has been central to the insights generated by cognitive psychologists during the past fifty years. It's easier to define how a computer works than to define how the brain works. For this reason it can be fruitful for psychologists to use various, well-understood aspects of a computer—such as memory, buffers, or processors—as inspiration to locate similar functions in the brain.

Good metaphors are "generative." The psychologist Donald Schon introduced this term to describe metaphors that generate "new perceptions, explanations, and inventions." Many simple sticky ideas are actually generative metaphors in disguise. For example, Disney calls its employees "cast members." This metaphor of employees as cast members in a theatrical production is communicated consistently throughout the organization:

- Cast members don't *interview* for a job, they *audition* for a *role*.
- When they are walking around the park, they are *onstage*.
- People visiting Disney are *guests*, not customers.
- Jobs are *performances*; uniforms are *costumes*.

The theater metaphor is immensely *useful* for Disney employees. It is so useful that just by reading the last few paragraphs you can probably predict how cast members should behave in situations we haven't discussed. For instance, you can probably guess that employ-

ees are not allowed to be on break while in costume and in a public area. (An actor would never have a chat and a cigarette in mid-scene.) You might guess that street sweepers are evaluated on criteria other than the cleanliness of their sidewalks. Indeed, street sweepers are some of the most highly trained cast members, since their very visible public presence—coupled with the fact that they are clearly Disney employees—makes them an obvious target for customers' questions about rides, parades, and restroom locations. Having them think of their role as performance, rather than maintenance, is a key part of the park's success. "Employees as cast members" is a generative metaphor that has worked for Disney for more than fifty years.

Contrast Disney with Subway. Like Disney, Subway has created a metaphor for its frontline employees. They are "sandwich artists." This metaphor is the evil twin of Disney's "cast members." It is utterly useless as a guide to how the employee should act. Disney expects its cast members to behave like actors, but Subway does not expect its counter help to behave like artists. The defining trait of an "artist" is individual expression. We wonder how long an employee would last at Subway if she exhibited a lot of individual expression—in dress, in interaction, in the presentation of sandwiches. No doubt Subway's sandwich artists are trusted to place a handful of onions on a twelve-inch sub, and it's true that this is a certain kind of liberty. But one suspects that the counter person's "artistry" can't extend to adding an extra slice of turkey.

The Power of Simplicity

Generative metaphors and proverbs both derive their power from a clever substitution: They substitute something easy to think about for something difficult. The proverb "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush" gives us a tangible, easily processed statement that we can use for guidance in complex, emotionally fraught situations. Generative metaphors perform a similar role. The "cast members" at Disney

might find it easier to tackle a new situation from the perspective of a hired actor than from their own unique individual perspective.

Proverbs are the Holy Grail of simplicity. Coming up with a short, compact phrase is easy. Anybody can do it. On the other hand, coming up with a profound compact phrase is incredibly difficult. What we've tried to show in this chapter is that the effort is worth it—that "finding the core," and expressing it in the form of a compact idea, can be enduringly powerful.