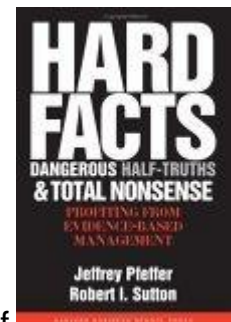


## What Great Managers Know: It's Obvious!

### *Stating The Obvious – Making Management Ideas Simple*

What do great managers know? J.D. Rockefeller once said: “the secret of success is to do the common thing uncommonly well”. Referring to his book: [Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-based Management](#), Stanford University professor Bob Sutton (below) argues that if a business idea seems obvious, it's probably a good sign. “The most effective companies are masters of the mundane.” If an idea or a business model is complicated and difficult to understand it's likely that most of us will struggle to implement or apply it.



That's not to say simple or obvious ideas and business plans are easy. In fact the opposite is usually the case. More often than not, a great deal of hard thinking has gone into an idea that may now seem obvious. Great managers don't confuse simple with simplistic. Nor, for that matter, with easy!

As Albert Einstein once said: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler.”

### *Argue As If You're Right, Listen As If You're Wrong*

Sutton also suggests that “the best leaders have the courage to act on what they know right now, and the humility to change their actions when they encounter new evidence. They advocate an 'attitude of wisdom'. Arguing as if they are right, and listening as if they are wrong.”

He quotes former Intel CEO, Andy Grove: “I think it is very important for you to do two things: act on your temporary conviction as if it was a real conviction, and when you realize that you are wrong, correct course very quickly.”

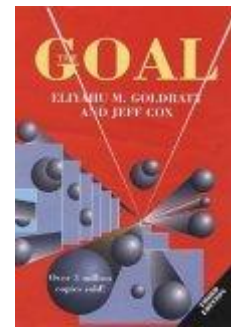


Sutton goes on to point out that implementing even the simplest, most obvious and powerful change is hard enough. He illustrates the point poignantly. “It turns out that about 90,000 Americans die every year from infections they catch from health care workers and settings”. And what is the most effective step that can be taken to reduce this? It is simply for staff to wash their hands before touching patients. Yet a 2004 survey found that only 43% of physicians wash their hands.

A tragic circumstance yet an obvious answer.

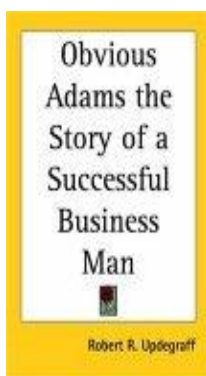
### The Obvious Isn't That Obvious

In 1916 a U.S. newspaper published a series of fictitious stories entitled [Obvious Adams the Story of a Successful Business Man](#), by Robert R Updegraff. These told the story of a young boy named Adams, following his career in an advertising agency - from “periodicals filer” to president of the company. What was Adams' talent? It was his ability to discern the obvious solution to any problem. Like Goldratt's classic [The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement](#), Updegraff chose to use a fictional setting to illustrate his management ideas. The story may be almost a hundred years old, but the ideas are as powerful now as they were then. Arguably more so. Being able to find the obvious solution, especially in today's complex management world, is a skill all managers should develop.



Towards the end of his career, Adams is asked: “why don't more business people do the obvious?” A good question!

Though the prose style is dated, the reply is worth reading in full:



*“I have given considerable thought to that very question, and I have decided that picking out the obvious thing presupposes analysis, and analysis presupposes thinking, and thinking is the hardest work many people ever have to do, and they don't like to do any more of it than they can help. They look for a royal road through some short cut in the form of a clever scheme or stunt, which they call the obvious thing to do; but calling it doesn't make it so. They don't gather all the facts and then analyze them before deciding what really is the obvious thing.”*

Do the hard work first. Analyse and think before deciding what is obvious. Perhaps that's one thing that will help turn managers into great managers.



### The Five Tests Of Obviousness

Updegraff's little known contribution to management literature didn't stop there. He later collated his newspaper series into a book -"Obvious Adams: The story of a Successful Businessman". Several years later he published a follow-up article entitled "The Five Tests of Obviousness".

We could do far worse than consider these when making any management proposal:

#### 1 The problem when solved will be simple

- The obvious is nearly always simple – so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women have looked at it without even seeing it.

#### 2 Does it check with human nature?

- If you do not feel pretty certain that your idea or plan will be understood – and accepted – by your mother, next-door neighbour, or your barber, it probably is not obvious. These people will see it in its simple reality, uncomplicated by professional or technical knowledge, and free of the inhibitions which grow out of experience.

#### 3 Put it on paper.

- If the explanation becomes long, involved, ingenious – then very likely it is not obvious. No idea or plan, no program or project, is obvious unless it can be understood and worked by people of average intelligence.

#### 4 Does it EXPLODE in people's minds?

- Mental "explosions" are revealed in what people say, in the light that spreads over their faces, in the acceptance that comes into their eyes, when they grasp an obvious idea.

#### 5 Is the time ripe?

- Sometimes the time may have passed, definitely and irrevocably; in which case the obvious thing to do is forget your idea. In other instances its timeliness may be ahead, which calls for patience, plus alertness

**What Do Great Managers Know? - It should be obvious!**

