

# The Appriser

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## *On the uses of difficulty*

—[Mark L. Vincent](#), PhD, CCNL  
CEO, Design Group International

*The Economist* (U.S. version) publishes a quarterly supplement from its sister publication [Intelligent Life](#), in hopes to develop an interested and loyal subscriber base. Count me among the interested. In their recent supplement they included an important essay from Ian Leslie on the uses of difficulty. The essence of the argument comes from brain science and observation of human behaviors. Simply put, we need challenges. Our brain comes alive because of them. We get creative and innovate when obstacles and limitations hinder our progress. Mr. Leslie provides several examples of people and organizations that did their best work when faced with difficulty, including the Beatles' Abbey Road recordings.

Particularly noteworthy is that we learn best and retain information and skills the longest when there is difficulty in attaining them. Bite-sized, simple lessons might be quickly understood, but they are not retained and become unavailable for recall and reflection when they are needed down the road. It is the difference between "I once knew this" and "I know this."

Think about the moments of great celebration in your life. You likely did not celebrate them because they came easy, but because you worked to accomplish them. Anything accomplished without effort, such as winning a drawing or receiving an inheritance, might be clung to, but not cherished as something worked for and achieved.

Put this in an organizational context and a parallel is easily observed. Disruptive and leap-frogging technology, innovations in providing service and entrepreneurial dreams tend to succeed because there was difficulty, not because difficulty was not present. Remove difficulty and vision does not get sharpened. Adjustments that are noticed because something is not working yet do not get fixed. We need to understand that there is no patented shortcut through the slog of figuring it out. Difficulty is what leads to new solutions, organizational advances and the development of managerial character.

So, you will not find an advocacy for removing obstacles here—not for the individual's growth, and not for the organizations'. However, it is possible to erect obstacles that block and kill initiative. Kill the potential of fulfilling a dream and people and organizations cease trying. Changes to tax codes and attempts to engineer an economy tend to careen between removing difficulty altogether and erecting unnecessary obstacles. May our great economic debates find the needed balance points!

[-mark l vincent](#)

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E-mail us at [info@DesignGroupIntl.com](mailto:info@DesignGroupIntl.com)  
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