



Legibility

What legibility is: Legibility is the degree of understandability of a thing or system. I first learned about it from *Seeing Like a State*, where the concept was applied to states seeking to understand things in their domain (so that they could control those things).

As an example, states participate in warfare so they must draft military-aged men to fight. To streamline that, they need a list of every person, along with a unique identifier (also known as a “legal name”), birthday, sex, and location. We are so immersed in state legibility that we don’t even really know a world without it. I was surprised, for one, to learn that the idea of everyone having “a name” is a modern concept. People have always had names, but it was informal and context dependent.

The above example is straight from the book, but, now that I’ve had a turn or two in the corporate world, I can see how this applies there too. People who work for a business have lots of ways they can contribute to it, but as governments are managed by bureaucrats so too are businesses, and so too do they have a need to legibilize what their reports are doing, and they can comprehend that which is legible and cannot comprehend that which is not, even if the what they cannot comprehend is still good and valuable.

To extend the theory from the book, I do now believe that legibility is a factor at the highest level of organization (the state) down to the lowest level, the individual. In a relationship there are many ways to communicate or care for a partner, but some things are legible and some things just aren’t (and it is not always a matter of communication).

Why legibility is important: If you are working in any group, from the single relationship on up, and you want to make an impact, then it behooves you to think about what that group can actually understand (provided that you want to get recognized for your contributions), and on that basis mold your actions to fit.

Why legibility is annoying: Legibilitization involves jamming reality (with all of its complexities and nuances) through a procrustean meat grinder to arrive at an easily understandable end product. If you can’t or don’t want to play that game then it’s annoying/frustrating/feels unfair when you get passed up by people who are worse but better.

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