

# 7. Book Review: An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization

by Tony Burkin

**If a ‘fly on a wall’ tracked you at home and at school over a two-week period it would most likely become perplexed. If it could it would be scratching its head a lot.**

You may change your persona significantly, or in more subtle ways, but if you’re like almost everyone else you will act differently to some degree. These are the sorts of conundrums industrial and organisational psychologists try to get to the bottom of.

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, two of the world’s foremost organisational psychologists, work out of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. Both are renowned for their innovative thinking and for challenging conventional opinion. Where others might offer thoughts, Kegan and Lahey offer rich insight. Their most recent book, **An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization** (<https://www.amazon.com/Everyone-Culture-Deliberately-Developmental-Organization/dp/1625278624>) (2016) is no exception.

Prior to reaching chapter 1, the reader is challenged from the very first sentence of the very first paragraph of the introduction:

*“In an ordinary organization, most people are doing a second job no one is paying them for. In businesses large and small, in government agencies, schools, and hospitals; in for-profits, and*

*non-profits, and in any country in the world, most people are spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other peoples’ impressions of them, showing themselves to their best advantage, playing politics, hiding their inadequacies, hiding their uncertainties, hiding their limitations. Hiding.” (p.1)*

Like a roller coaster entering a sharp bend abnormally early in its run, this is a confronting message so early on. The problem is the difficulty one has in disagreeing with its truth.

The disconcertingly yet irrefutable message - that organisations are psychologically unsafe - is reinforced on each of the book’s 287 pages.

Ordinary people, including those with high decency quotients (**Guilty or Not Guilty?**), spend much of their work time and energy minimising risks to their image and identity. We don’t want others to see us as incompetent, ignorant, negative or disruptive and in schools and centres, as is the case anywhere else, that energy would be better spent on teaching and learning. It’s a very destructive force contributing to workplace stress, anxiety and therefore burnout.

Tantamount to experiencing the discomfort of pulling g-forces on a challenging roller coaster ride, the reader encounters at regular intervals cognitive dissonance – something Kegan and Lahey excel at creating. This is the first of many sharp bends and loops the reader encounters.

The authors don't let up. Another *stomach churner* this time created by a seriously sharp bend followed by a gut-wrenching steep double-loop is encountered on page 4.

Readers are posed the question, *what is the most powerful way to develop the capabilities of people at work?*

It's a pertinent question. It goes right to the heart of supporting teachers' growth and development irrespective of whether they're a red, green, yellow or blue zone teacher (***Performance Management: Fewer Snakes – More Ladders***). Get the right answer and you've unlocked human potential.

If you believe the authors, it's all bad news. All the evidence suggests leaders' and policy makers' solutions are rooted in outdated, obsolete and redundant 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking.

If you answered coaching, mentoring, attending off-site retreats, enrolling in corporate university courses and participating in development programmes, you're at least 20 years out of date.

These outmoded and low impact 20<sup>th</sup> century solutions all rely on people changing their organisation and according to Kegan & Lahey, that's fundamentally flawed thinking.

*"If the organisation wants to significantly impact on peoples' capabilities", they say, "it should apparently find something new, outside the organisation itself, some additive: give them a coach, program a course, a mentor. The organization itself does not change. We might soup up the fuel through these additives, but the engine remains what it has always been."*

In the author's experience, asking people to change their organisation exceeds most peoples' capacities. The approach requires vast amounts of organisational and personal energy and there's enough research over the last half century showing some 70% of change initiatives fail. So, if people aren't the correct point of dynamic entry what is?

Systems. The authors show how by deliberately designing systems in specific ways requiring users to demonstrate particular practices and behaviours, you can change culture. If people can't change others' practices and behaviours, systems, especially when they have been successfully designed with the end in mind, do.

The authors share how leaders in three organisations successfully *unleashed their peoples' potential* by designing systems requiring their people to work in specific ways. Some systems were technological – apps. Others were protocols for meetings. In all cases leaders started by asking *how can our organisation change our people?* Not, *how can our people change our organisation?*

Reframing the challenge in this way has some serious implications.

Rather than developing an appraisal system to develop teachers' capacity it should be designed to create a psychologically safer culture. Performance management approaches should be designed with the same outcomes in mind too. Such systems would deliberately designed in ways:

- *Helping teachers to become comfortable acknowledging publicly their weaknesses, errors, mistakes and gaps in knowledge;*

- *Allowing teachers to overcome any fears of lesson observation and not resorting to using the tried and true tactic of bringing out their best china;*
- *Supporting teachers to lead with honesty analytical, challenging and critical conversations around their practice;*
- *Promoting critical thinking; and*
- *Ensuring teachers take responsibility for their own growth and development without becoming complacent and inert.*

Imagine a system where users have no option other than demonstrating these practices and behaviours? Ultimately, your centre's/school's culture becomes your developmental tool and you end up with the culture Joseph Grenny described in the most successful organisation he had ever seen (see the article ***The One Soft Skill that Counts***).

Taking the authors' message to its natural conclusion, the goal is to deliberately develop appraisal and performance management systems that create psychologically safer organisations. Achieve this and your culture comes to replace

these systems – your culture becomes the primary incubator of growth.

This is not easy work. It's the work of leaders – not managers. However, reading the stories and challenges leaders confronted and overcame throughout the book, one is left thinking here-in-lies meritorious work. Here is innovation, disruption, and reframing of adult learning all in one gift-wrapped package.

This is an excellent, thought provoking read providing leaders and policymakers interested in rethinking appraisal timely pathways for thought but it does come with a cautionary note.

This is not a read for the faint-hearted. The intellectually humble will thoroughly enjoy working out how their thinking and beliefs may have stymied the effectiveness of appraisal and other adult development approaches in their organisations in the past. Those who have the ability to acknowledge their contributions to past failures and are in possession of the chutzpah to change direction will love the latent potential the authors offer. Those who don't probably won't.

