



# in the moment

# 2014

## March

- Leadership and Certainty
- Experimentation and the Imposter Syndrome

## June

- The Inner World of Work
- Wanted: Journeymen Professionals

## September

- Thinking 'What if...?'
- Overcoming Inertia

## November

- Seeing Patterns
- Patterns, Inferences and Feedback

# Leadership and Certainty

By Phil Ramsey

On a number of leadership programs over the years we have discussed with participants the value in acknowledging mistakes and using them as a basis for improved relationships and better decisions. In the past we've been surprised when people have said things like "So, do you think it is a good idea for me to deliberately make a mistake and then acknowledge it?".



Most people can see the assumption behind the question.

The participant - usually a leader with some significant responsibilities - is operating off the belief that "I don't make mistakes". So, if mistakes are going to happen they will have to be deliberately fabricated. As you might imagine, we encourage people, not to fabricate mistakes, but to become more sensitive to the genuine errors they make all the time. And it has been remarkable how often we encounter this "I don't make mistakes" assumption.

We say that we used to be surprised. There is growing evidence that everyone has problems with being wrong. All of us have to battle some instinctive processes that stop us from acknowledging and really benefitting from our errors. These same instincts can be an obstacle to collaboration and effective teamwork. By instinct, we mean processes that are part of all humans, and which happen so naturally we usually take them for granted.

## Instincts

One of the most basic things we all share is the pleasure we take in getting things right. We love the feeling. So we enjoy game shows where we can know the right answer. And we struggle to stop ourselves from saying "I told you so" even when we know that it riles our friends. Further, we instinctively respond defensively when it becomes obvious we were wrong about something. We minimise, justify or blame others for mistakes, saying "I was wrong, but..." and coming up with a reason that makes us feel better but which doesn't convince anyone else.

When we think them, some of our instincts are rather embarrassing. Consider the way we respond to beliefs that people hold. You may have heard the saying "It is hard to make a man understand something if his salary depends on him not understanding it." This epigram highlights the ability we all have to look behind beliefs to note reasons why people might have compelling reasons to believe what they do. We can see that it might be in someone's best interests to hold a particular belief.

What is embarrassing about this ability is how we apply it. Instinctively we apply it to others and do not use it with regard to ourselves. If asked why I believe something I will say "Because it's true!" And I'll mean it. I don't experience my own beliefs as self-serving. But when it comes to your beliefs it is a different matter. If they are different to mine I will instinctively look for your self-serving reasons for holding them. And I will instinctively do so pejoratively, framing your reasons for holding your beliefs in the negative.

These instincts create a challenge for leaders and the relationships they try to form. Most leaders will instinctively feel certain about things for which they have relatively little data, or be certain that a pattern exists on the basis of a couple of observations. When others disagree with what they believe, most leaders are instinctively sure that they hold their beliefs because of the essential truths

on which they are based. And they will put the disagreement down to the ignorance—or maybe the wickedness—of the other party.

To complicate matters we don't act instinctively on our own. Those we interact with are working through the same process, holding their own beliefs as truth and seeing self-serving reasons for the position we take. No wonder so many 'collegial' interactions descend into abrasive, disrespectful discussions. With so much potential for personal blind spots and entrenched positions, it is a wonder that anything gets accomplished!

## **Out of Slavery**

Of course, we are not slaves to our instincts. We are captured by them only so long as we are unaware of how they influence us. We can learn strategies that enable us to acknowledge our errors, to learn from them and collaborate effectively. For instance, it might take effort but when we realise the damage it causes we can learn to withhold the phrase "I told you so!" Similarly, with practice we can learn to put a full stop after "I was wrong" rather than adding defensive clauses. And by doing so we become more adept at carefully examining our mistakes, seeing what was behind them and learning for the future.

Part of the process of learning involves acknowledging the realities of life. What is the probability that we are really right all the time? When it comes to disputes, how realistic is it to think that we are untouched by bias or ignorance when we can see that it is common in everyone else?

Sensing the possibility of our own fallibility encourages us to hold our opinions more lightly, and to show genuine curiosity about the perspectives of others. When we do so we gain a broader and richer picture of the challenges we face. And we become much easier for others to work with, enhancing our capacity for real collaboration.

# Experimentation and the Imposter Syndrome

By Phil Ramsey

People deal with being wrong in different ways. Because we love being 'right', it is easy to slip into the habit of treating 'wrongness' as a disaster. What's more, the views of others make a big difference to how we feel about mistakes; some communities highly value being right, to the detriment of those who are seen to get things wrong.

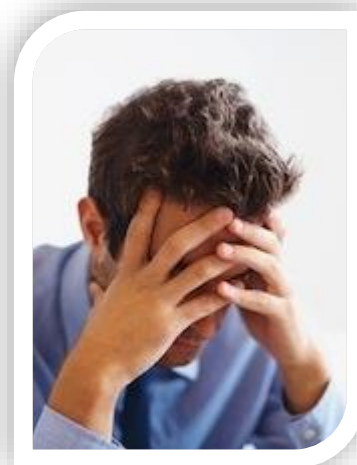
Yet, the truth of the matter is that we all get things wrong all the time. Think about the tension this creates. It can be socially important to be constantly right, and yet people - being human - are regularly making mistakes. What is the result?

While a few people decide they are going to be open about their mistake-making, others deal with tension in other ways. They may only engage in 'tried and true' practices, sticking to what they know they can do well. And they take care to hide their mistakes from others. All of this leads to the "imposter syndrome": nurturing the appearance of being right all the time, at the same time knowing this appearance hides the truth of what is really happening. In this situation people live with the lurking anxiety that they will eventually be exposed as imposters.

This fear of exposure can dramatically disrupt healthy professional practice in a school or centre. As professionals, teachers can be reasonably expected to experiment with new methods, evaluate effectiveness and share what they know with one another. Yet these processes all assume an environment free from fear. Quality improvement pioneer W. Edwards Deming taught that an essential first step in improving any organisational process was to "drive fear out of the workplace."

Deming's principle is usually associated with eliminating management practices that are based on threats and bullying. But here the issue is fear or anxiety generated by teachers themselves on the basis of their own assumptions about work. What can leaders do?

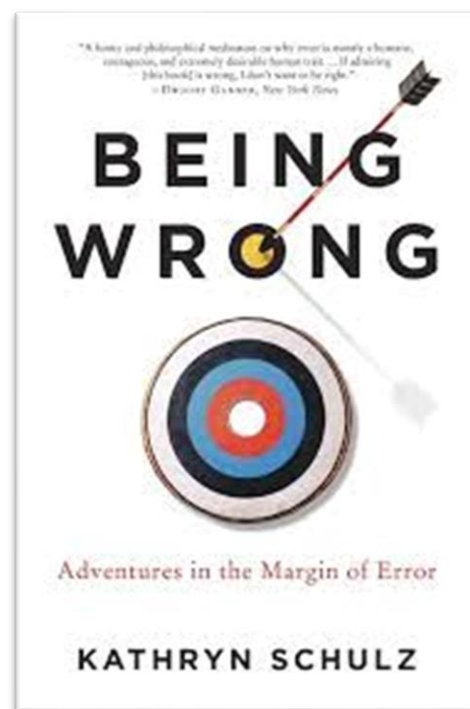
Disrupting unhealthy assumptions generally involves bringing them to the surface so people can deal with them consciously, and deliberately encouraging people to think in new ways. So talk about the need for experimentation, along with a positive few of the mistakes that are bound to occur. And celebrate the effort expended on experimentation, not just the results achieved. Don't let the imposter syndrome undermine professionalism in your school or centre.



## BOOK REVIEW: **Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error**

By Phil Ramsey

The first chapter of Kathryn Schulz's book is brilliantly titled 'Wrongology'. She suggests that the nature of wrongness is so important we need to treat it as a science. It is tempting to think we don't need to treat the subject so seriously. We could reason that, based on experience, we are very familiar with error and there can't be that much to learn. Schulz proves that that there is plenty to learn. As you have seen from other articles in this newsletter, we have found that some of the processes she describes shed light on issues we deal with in our work on school leadership.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter – March 2014*

Schulz starts by getting to the heart of the issue: how we think about being wrong fundamentally shapes how we go through life. Some are pessimistic, treating wrongness as always negative: an experience to be avoided wherever possible. Others take an optimistic view, recognising that wrongness and error is at the heart of scientific advances, not to mention art and humour. It is the pessimistic view that seems to dominate in many communities. And along with it come defensiveness, evasion and all manner of dysfunctional thinking.

Being Wrong covers the rich variety of ways we get things wrong: how we are 'let down' by our senses, our thinking, our beliefs and the people around us. Then she considers how we respond to the experience of being wrong, including our instincts for defensiveness and denial. Throughout she demonstrates how many of the processes involved are instinctive and how we are consistently unaware of what we are doing, or how we are being influenced.

As a journalist, Schulz writes in an engaging and enlightening way. While she draws on a wide range of relevant research, she illustrates her points with fascinating examples including her own experiences. And the book covers fascinating areas in which 'wrongness' has been explored, from the reliability of eyewitnesses, to the experience of the Swiss suffrage movement. She does little to guide readers in the "how to" aspects of embracing error. Nevertheless, reading the book creates a heightened sensitivity to one's own defensiveness, and a determination to remain conscious rather than enslaved to instincts that can do us harm. As a result, I've made it goal to say "I don't know" much more often, and to use a full stop after admitting mistakes, rather than "I was wrong, but..."

# The Inner World of Work

By Phil Ramsey

**When are you at your most productive? What helps you to be innovative and collaborative? What are your best experiences of life at work, and when have they happened?**

Perhaps you, like many people, suspect that work goes much better when you are feeling good within yourself: that your “inner” world makes a difference to how you perform. While this seems reasonable, and most people suspect it is true, very few workplaces are set up to give attention to the inner world of workers.



Imagine taking part in a conversation about how to make a difference to a failing team or organisation. Chances are you would hear many opinions about the need to ‘bring people into line’, apply rewards and punishments, and take other action involving compliance to external forces. It is rarer to hear people expressing the need for action to improve people’s inner experiences of work. Why not? Perhaps it seems like a ‘soft’ approach to a hard subject. And people are often uncertain how they can make a difference that really matter. It seems easier to deal with external issues, such as rewards, that can be more easily managed and organised.

Interesting new research into work has highlighted the importance of the inner world and the impact it has on performance. Further, it has shown that there are effective actions that leaders can take to make a real difference: one that improves the experience of work while setting people up for improved performance.

## What Goes On Inside?

What is the inner world of work? It is the part of a person’s worklife that is unseen by others and often unexpressed. It is all the perceptions, emotions and motivation that go on while you are working. And research shows that when these three elements of inner work life are positive, creativity, productivity, commitment and collegiality are all higher.

Have you had days when you have thought things like this: “My boss is an idiot who doesn’t really know what’s happening (perception). I hate having to go to these meetings (emotion). I really can’t be bothered making an effort on this (motivation).” This is your inner world. Chances are you kept these thoughts to yourself. Still, they dramatically influenced your capacity for getting things done.

On other days your inner world may have been more like this: “The people around here - my leaders and colleagues - are great to work with (perception). I’m excited by this new challenge (emotion). I’m really keen to make something happen (motivation).”

What shapes your inner work life? It is tempting to think that people are naturally either positive or negative. But you will know that your inner world can change from day to day. You can learn to influence it for yourself. And the actions of leaders can make a significant difference. The inner world does not have to be left to chance.

Research by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer (*author's of 'The Progress Principle'*) has highlighted areas that make a difference to the inner world: progress (as opposed to set-backs); support (as opposed to obstacles); and nourishing interactions (as opposed to toxic interactions).

## Encouraging Progress

Knowing that you have made progress toward goals you care about has the biggest positive impact on one's inner work life. This isn't just about achieving goals; it includes having a breakthrough, getting a small win, or making some forward movement. In contrast, a set-back can have the biggest negative impact on your experience of work.

Think about the implications of this for leaders. If they can provide support for progress, they are making a real contribution to the inner life of people. This might include setting clear goals, providing needed resources, and helping to get things done. Leaders can also undo some of the effects of a set-back: for instance, undertaking a thorough debrief that allows lessons to be learned, so that some of the impact of a 'failure' is turned into forward movement.

And how do leaders react to progress? No doubt you have encountered 'bubble prickers' who feel compelled to make sure no one gets too excited by success: their idea of helping is to inject a toxic reminder not to feel too good about progress that has been made. Happily, other leaders nourish people through respect, encouragement and the celebration of progress.

This may not seem to be startling news. In many ways it seems to be common sense that progress is a powerful influence on success. However, use of this knowledge is far from common. Leaders often overlook the importance of providing support for progress. They may introduce systems at work that obscure progress. And they may change direction in ways that people feel they past efforts have been wasted. Why not take some time to review ways that you can use the power of progress to positively affect the inner lives of yourself, your colleagues and your students.



# Wanted: Journeymen Professionals

By Phil Ramsey

Professionalism is a hot topic in education. We want new teachers to take a professional approach to their work. And we want teachers and leaders to aspire to high professional standards. But what do you think of when you contemplate professionalism? Are all professionals the same, or are there different types of professional?



The term 'journeyman' is used in a variety of fields - most commonly in sports - to designate a particular kind of professional: one who no longer is the "star player" on a team, but recognises there is a contribution to be made by diligently delivering consistent performance. Professional sports teams might have a handful of stars. While these are the players who make the headlines with spectacular performances, team success often depends on the journeymen in the squad.

Think about the mindset of the journeyman professional. In professional sports, it is usually the star players who act like prima donnas, get into trouble with drugs or are arrested for brawling in bars. A journeyman professional typically realises that a team might put up with bad behaviour from one of the stars, even keeping a space open for when they get out of jail or rehab. But teams don't go to this effort for a non-star. Journeymen who think they are stars get a rude awakening to the realities of life. For this reason, coaches will make sure that young players on tour share a room with journeymen, spending time together where they can learn what being a professional is really about: the need for discipline, hard work, practice, teamwork, respect for authority, and self-control.

Old time rugby players in New Zealand have expressed concern that young players can go straight from school to the big time: that they don't get exposed to veteran players. In essence, they are concerned that there is a 'journeyman' mindset that will disappear, leaving only (1) stars, who are prone to burning out too soon, and (2) gifted amateurs whose performance depends on whether they are in the mood.

Is there a corollary with education? What is the 'journeyman' mindset of a professional teacher? And what role do they have in developing new teachers? Why not take some time to discuss these thoughts with your colleagues in the days ahead.

**Note:** 'Journeyman' is used for both male and female athletes. It is derived from the term for qualified tradespeople who worked for others. The word 'journey' is from the obsolete English usage, where it meant "a day's work".



## BOOK REVIEW: **The Progress Principle**

By Phil Ramsey

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer

Earlier in this newsletter (*June 2014*) we outlined the crucial role that progress plays in the inner work life of people. Educational professionals need to tend to the inner work life of children, students, colleagues and themselves. The book 'The Progress Principle' tells the story of the remarkable research project conducted by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, and the insights they gained into the hidden world of people's emotions, perceptions and motivation.

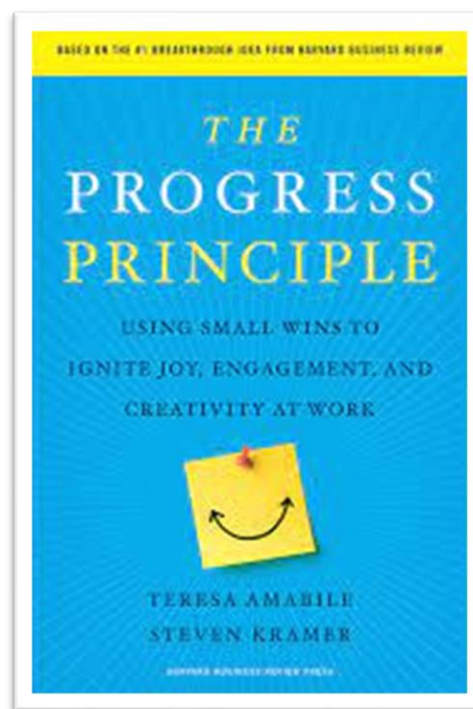
The research was fascinating. Amabile and Kramer recruited 238 people working in 26 project teams.

Projects lasted, on average, about 4 months. During the life of the project, the researchers emailed everyone on the team every day, asking them to complete a daily journal, describing one event that "stands out in your mind". Respondents emailed their journal entries to the researchers. This process yielded around 12,000 descriptions of significant work events and their impact on the people involved. The researchers then explored the data to find what made a difference at work.

The role of progress was clear. On people's best days at work, progress gets mentioned in 76% of journal entries. Set-backs (the opposite of progress) appear in 67% of the worst days.

This book is a fascinating read. The research and its findings are presented with drama. The authors draw on the journal entries of their participants so you get to a deep insight into the work of their teams, along with their highs and lows. Some teams were well led and some were terrible. You get to see the impact that erratic or egotistical leadership has on the inner work life of people. And you get a thrill to see how thoughtful, supportive leadership really makes a difference.

The book provides leaders with practical ways they can tend to the inner work life of themselves and others, and leaves the reader determined to foster progress and celebrate success.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter – June 2014*

# Thinking 'What if...?'

By Phil Ramsey

Sometimes a movie will present a view of the future which is extreme and dramatic, yet seems plausible. You may be left thinking, "That could actually happen!" You may have heard how government agencies around the world keep track of movies to get ideas about what the future might hold. While the movie industry doesn't set out to predict the future, the scenarios they create sometimes do work out in reality. How does this work?



The industry draws on the work of people who are superbly skilled at asking the question "What if...?" It is a capacity we all have. When you check that the spare wheel in your car is in good condition, you are not predicting that you are going to have a flat tyre on a particular day. You have considered a plausible scenario - "I might get a puncture" - considered what it would mean if that turned out to be the case, and taken an action in advance of it happening. At InterLEAD we have acknowledged the importance of "What if" thinking by including it amongst the competencies considered in Appraisal Connector\* teacher appraisal system.

Like all skills, 'What if' thinking can be refined and developed. A world leader in this type of thinking is Peter Schwartz (*author of 'The Art of the Long View'*). He has consulted for the movie industry for films such as *Minority Report*, plus helped major corporations and governments prepare for a dynamic and confusing future. In 2000 - a year out from the 9/11 attacks, he led a scenario building team that presented a report to the US government commission on national security; one of the scenarios they described involved terrorists flying airliners into the World Trade Centre.

This work on scenarios was not predicting the future. It didn't allow the US government to prevent the 9/11 attacks. It did, however, enable some agencies to respond quickly and effectively: while for most of us the attacks were a devastating surprise, for others it was one of several futures they had considered and planned for.

## Getting Past Denial

What made it possible to imagine the future in this way? According to Schwartz, many of the events that are going to shape our future have already happened. The children who will be starting primary school in 4 years have already been born. The technology you will be using in your classroom in 5 years has already been invented. Yet most of us still get surprised by inevitable events when they finally arrive. Why the surprise?

There are some significant obstacles to developing 'What if' thinking. At the heart of the difficulty is the degree to which we make decisions at an unconscious level. When presented with new data that challenges assumptions we make about the future (or about anything important) we reflexively dismiss it. Sometimes we might voice the thought, "That will never happen!" At other times we just move on to other things with little conscious thought at all. This is denial. If forced to confront disconcerting data our reactions can become defensive. Thinking more effectively about the future requires us to get past these reactions.

What does that mean? We really need to regularly engage in strategic conversations about the future where we consciously consider alternative futures and the data that surrounds us, telling us what is becoming possible, even inevitable. Because so much of our decision making is done at an unconscious level, it is virtually impossible to challenge assumptions on our own. We need others to help us to see gaps in our own logic and to help us reason effectively. So 'What if' thinking is a team sport.

Because of our tendency to become defensive, we need to give attention to how we talk when we have these conversations. Imagine a planning group in 2000, discussing the possibility of a terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. What if members of the group had friends or relatives working there? The tone of the conversation, the way in which possibilities were presented; all could deeply impact on the ability of members to think coherently about the topic. Developing the capacity for dialogue is essential.

## **Flexing the 'What if' Muscle**

Skills develop with learning and practice. Find out more about Scenario Building and how it is used to consider alternative futures to what is generally expected. Then use it as you address a decision that is strategically important to you or your school/centre.

Paradoxically, you can become better at 'What if' thinking by considering the past. You can sensitise yourself and your team to the processes involved by thinking about where your school/centre was 5 or 10 years ago, and how you got from there to where you are now. In doing so you'll see how forces that are generally easy to miss or deny were fundamental to shaping how things turned out. In hindsight these forces often appear obvious, even though they were missed at the time.

You might have qualms about considering what the future might hold. Many in our communities live just for the day, with little thought to what lies ahead. Considering a range of alternative futures is not as scary as many expect. When done well it is a creative process that can put you and your team in a better position to respond in thoughtful and reasoned ways to events in a dynamic world.

*\* Now referred to as InterLEAD Connector™*

# Overcoming Inertia

By Phil Ramsey

**We are surrounded by possibilities for change and improvement. What stops us from taking hold of them? One of the most powerful forces shaping organisational life is inertia. Particularly in teaching environments, people are busy. Doing what you normally do takes effort, consuming energy and time that is not available to embrace even the grandest of opportunities.**

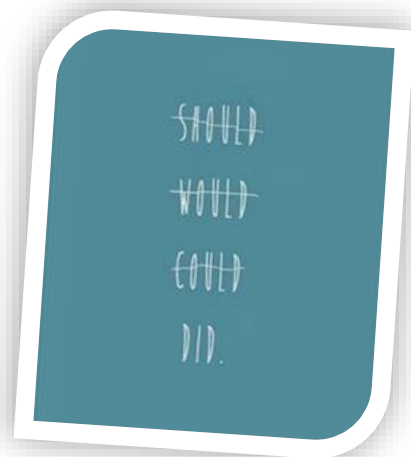
Sometimes inertia prevents leaders and teams from following through on decisions they have made. At times, though, inertia takes hold at an earlier stage: it surfaces in conversations, preventing teams from getting to a decision. Understanding how this happens can help you develop strategies for promoting change.

A key to successful change is getting something to happen. Once something is underway you can nourish the movement, move obstacles out of the way, and generate momentum. For this reason, organisations have become more aware of the power of small 'forays' in the right direction as a basis for large-scale change. Once you have some forays under way, people naturally start learning, growing their capacity to get the desired results.

Where to start? Interestingly, the question "where should we start?" can often act as a barrier to getting started. It suggests that a team should spend serious time in analysis before moving to action. It is, in effect, an opening for inertia to take hold.

Management expert and systems thinker Russell Ackoff noticed the tendency of teams to become bogged down in efforts to identify the best place to initiate change. He developed the rule of thumb: "There is never a better place to initiate a change than where the one who asks where the best place is, is."

Rather than allowing the question to put the brakes on change, Ackoff's rule of thumb transforms the question into a prompt for encouraging people to take responsibility. As a leader, keep this rule in mind so when you hear the question asked... you are ready to respond "Let's start with you."

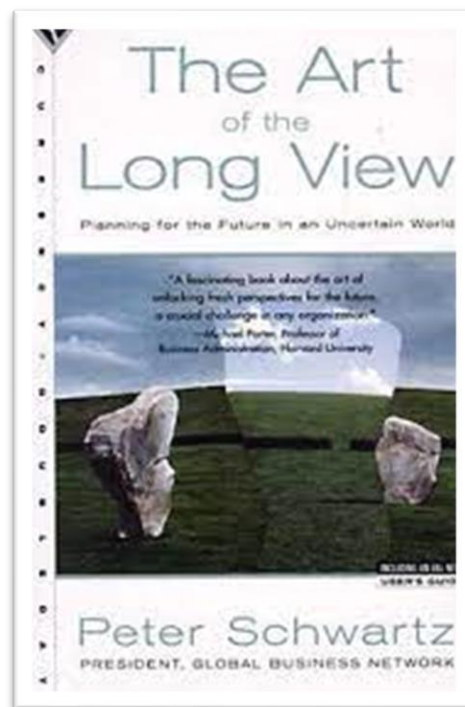


## BOOK REVIEW: **The Art of the Long View**

By Phil Ramsey

**Peter Schwartz is a world leader in the use of Scenario Building as a technique for thinking more effectively about the future. In this classic book he gives a fascinating insight into the very learnable process he has developed and used over decades, along with intriguing examples of the process in action.**

One such example is the work done at Shell Oil in the early 1980s, work that enabled Shell to prepare in advance for the breakup of the USSR. Shell was interested in the future of the USSR because of their huge reserves of oil and gas. When they started to really look at available data it became apparent that the terrible productivity of 'Iron Curtain' states made some kind of change inevitable.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter – September 2014*

The process Schwartz describes is one that you and your team can use to generate strategic conversations. It involves focusing on a decision that needs to be made: what is the issue at hand? By the time you make, implement and embed a decision, the world will be different to how it is now, so every decision involves looking ahead into an uncertain world.

Once you have your focus clear, identify the various stakeholders involved. How might their actions in the future shape the context in which you will be working? What are the driving forces that influence what they decide to do? Gather data to expand your understanding of how stakeholders think and how forces such as the economy, technology, demographics and politics are developing.

This preparation is a basis for developing several scenarios of alternative futures. Create a detailed story of how the world in which you operate may turn out, involving various combinations of the driving forces you have identified. Then come up with a story of how you got from the present to the world you have described.

Working through this process challenges teams to have strategic conversations and give attention to the assumptions they hold about the future. It also enables teams to identify 'sign posts' that will indicate which future seems to be emerging. Further, your team can consider the question "What actions can we take now that make sense whichever future emerges?"

# Seeing Patterns

By Phil Ramsey

**Several years ago - in October - I went to see the doctor with a minor ailment. It was quickly diagnosed and a suitable treatment was worked out.**

The doctor decided to give me a more thorough check up because he hadn't seen me for some time. He glanced at his records and saw that my previous visit was the October before. Looking again, he noticed that the year before that I had also visited him in October. Each time I came with a different ailment: it just seemed that things went wrong for me at that time of year.



My doctor was employing one of the 'thinking competencies' that is a feature of Appraisal Connector: seeing and responding to patterns. It is natural for people to get caught up in what systems thinking expert Peter Senge calls an "event focus". That is, because we are leading busy lives and we are constantly immersed in our activities, when something happens we treat it as a one-off event: a demand to which we need to respond.

It is difficult for us to step back from the events that are demanding our attention and look to see if there is any pattern to them. The doctor could have treated my ailment as a one-off event, collected his fee and we would both have been satisfied that he had done his job. Yet seeing patterns enables people to have insights that create opportunities for working with greater impact.

Educator Tim Gallwey has lamented the tendency of people to be caught up in 'billiard ball' reactions. If you have played billiards (or pool) you'll appreciate that a ball operates on momentum. It gets struck at a certain speed and angle which determines where it goes. Then it travels until something stops it. We can be like that too, caught up in the momentum of events. We might hear ourselves saying "XYZ happened so I had to..." or "I did that because you made me..." In each case we are talking as if we are objects (like a billiard ball) with no control over our own decisions: we have to respond to events and travel in the direction they are pushing us. Recognising patterns, pondering what they mean, and using them as a basis for action allows us to get beyond being a billiard ball, and according to Gallwey to become more fully human.

## Using Patterns

We need to do more than spot the pattern and simply adjust to it. Murray, my doctor, could have said, "Can I book an appointment for you for next October?" To say that would be to see the pattern, accept it as a 'given', and adjust to it. Many people respond to patterns in this way. Happily, Murray chose to use the pattern as the basis for further inquiry. He asked me about the sorts of things that happen to me in August and September, that set me up for health problems in October. Together we thought about changes I could make to my lifestyle at my busiest time of year. The result was that the following October, nothing happened!

Usually, identifying a pattern doesn't directly lead to new strategies. Rather, it draws your attention and prompts further investigation, reflection and experimentation. There can be flashes of insight, where you realise that this is a pattern you have seen in a different context. Or it may get you to think about your problems in new ways: instead of responding to individual events, you may get



provoked to consider how you can disrupt an unhealthy pattern or intervene at a point that shifts events in a new direction.

One of the biggest challenges when thinking about patterns is something my doctor didn't have to deal with. What happens when you are part of the pattern? Teaching and leadership involve complex interactions between people - and that includes you. It can be tempting to see an unhealthy pattern of behaviour as the things that other people are doing. Chances are, though, that you are contributing to what is going on. The good news is that your behaviour is the easiest to do something about. You may be able to disrupt patterns by changing the way you act and respond to events.

## Insight

History is littered with breakthroughs made on the back of patterns recognised by insightful investigators. No doubt you'll recall times when you have realised that a pattern exists and then used it as a springboard to a new way of thinking. The challenge is to be deliberate and disciplined when looking for patterns, when the temptation is to deal with whatever event is directly in front of you.

Teachers face this challenge when dealing with child/student data. They look for patterns that will help them understand what can enable a learner to move to a new level of understanding. And leaders do the same when dealing with the patterns they see in the work of those within their schools and centres.

It can feel you have no time to look for patterns; that there are just too many events that need to be dealt with. You can afford to stop and look. Why? Because if you are responding to events without understanding where they have come from, chances are there is an unhealthy pattern at work and you are fostering it with your actions. Many leaders have found that when they stop to look, things improve. Ironically, because they are doing nothing they have already begun to disrupt a pattern that needed to change.



# Patterns, Inferences and Feedback

By Phil Ramsey

**Do you find that people sometimes get defensive when you give them feedback? Or perhaps you struggle with the feedback that people give you. Advanced use of patterns can help you to be more effective in both cases. It has to do with the inferences we draw and our desire for valid information.**



People are generally more open to information and feedback that is valid. In other words, feedback is based on data that they can see for themselves. We have problems when feedback is based on hunches, or stories people have made up to explain data.

Teachers and leaders have to deal with potentially volatile situations. Issues of professional conduct may arise that need to be addressed promptly and directly, while showing respect for colleagues involved. And the issues may arise before you feel you have all the data you need to be certain whether there is a serious problem. Imagine observing that some of a colleague's comments to a class are extremely inappropriate. Or that a colleague's responses to children/students of a particular ethnic background don't meet the professional standards applied when dealing with other children/students. Rightly, you would likely feel ethically compelled to do something, and know you should start by talking to the colleague concerned. But how do you frame the feedback?

Think about what you have observed. You have seen a series of events. Each event in itself may be minor. You are being prompted to act because you see a pattern emerging. You may have come up with a story that explains the pattern: which includes your suspicions about the colleague's motives for the behaviour you have observed.

With both the pattern and the story you've had to jump to a conclusion. Facilitators call this making an inferential leap because you are inferring something on the basis of what you have observed. The jump from the data to saying "there's a pattern" is a relatively small jump, or a "low level inference". The jump from the pattern to the story is big: it is a "high level inference" because it involves drawing conclusions about motivations you are guessing at.

If you try giving feedback on the basis of a high level inference (e.g. "I notice you are a racist") your colleague will quickly get defensive. The feedback is not based on valid data, because you are claiming to know what is in the colleague's heart and mind.

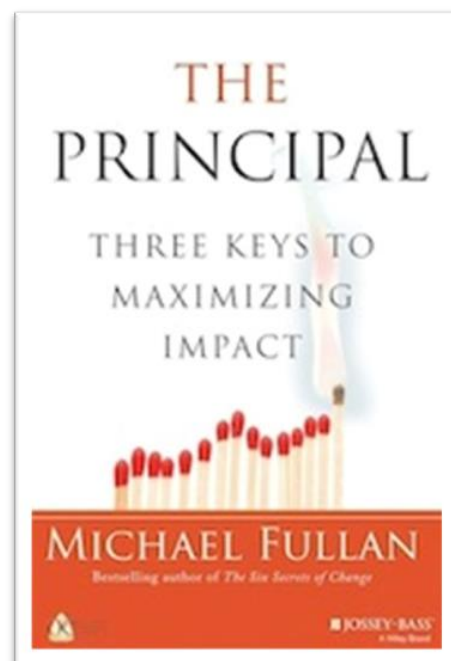
You'll be in a much stronger position to give feedback by sticking to the pattern you've observed. You can describe the pattern and point to examples. Then you can inquire into what is going on. You can facilitate a conversation around actions that will improve teaching practice.

If you find yourself getting defensive at feedback you are being given, it may be that you are objecting to a high inference story that someone has constructed, and you object to the suggestion that they have read your mind and your motives. You can make progress by asking for the data behind the story, and then use this as a basis for a conversation you can more readily engage with.

## BOOK REVIEW: The Principal: Three Keys to Maximising Impact

By Phil Ramsey

Michael Fullan has established himself as a master at identifying patterns in education and exploring their underlying causes. In 'The Principal' he turns his attention to the work of principals, and considers a pattern that smacks of momentum issue discussed in the opening article: school principals around the world are working harder and harder, without seeming to make a corresponding impact on student learning. Fullan explores the issue by examining research, conducted both by him and other international scholars. He also draws on the experiences of schools and principals, both those who fit the pattern, and 'outliers' who have found ways to generate a real impact in a challenging environment.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter – November 2014*

Key to understanding the pattern is an insight that 'In the Moment' has discussed previously: there is more to making a system work than demanding accountability on the basis of results. As management expert Tom Johnson has established, you need to manage by means rather than results. Fullan outlines how a combination of managing by results along with a misplaced emphasis on instructional leadership has led to leaders being overworked as they try to 'micromanage' the teaching practices of their staff.

What can be done to disrupt this pattern? Fullan puts forward a framework based on building professional capital within educational systems. Principals/leaders need to build up the capacity of their school/centre systems to deliver learning outcomes for students and children. He shows how this involves making sure that a school/centre is staffed with talented people, and then making sure that those people keep on developing through professional learning. Further, they need social capital: talented people need to know how to work together to create the results that they want. And they need to build decisional capital, building their collective capacity to make decisions that advance the work of the school/centre. Fullan explains that principals/leaders have to avoid the trap of thinking they must work with teachers individually. That is the road to micromanagement and burnout. Instead, they need to focus on creating systems and cultures that support teachers working with one another.

Interestingly, Fullan explains that a focus on one's own school (or centre) is not enough. Real impact happens when principals/leaders look outward as well, becoming a player in the wider system. Further, principals/leaders need to develop their capacity to become change agents, understanding the dynamics of change and the responses of those involved.

'The Principal' resonates with us at InterLEAD. Fullan provides a sound framework that is closely aligned with the work we do to help schools and centres. It also seems clear that his thinking is influencing decision-makers in the New Zealand education system, and proposed roles such as 'Executive Principal', 'Change Principal' and 'Lead Teacher' may have been derived from his framework for educational success. And this means there is good reason to read the book. Adopting new roles (or resisting and rejecting them) without understanding the thinking and intentions behind them may just reinforce unhealthy patterns. Likely, The Principal will provoke ideas for personal action no matter what your current role in education.