



in the moment

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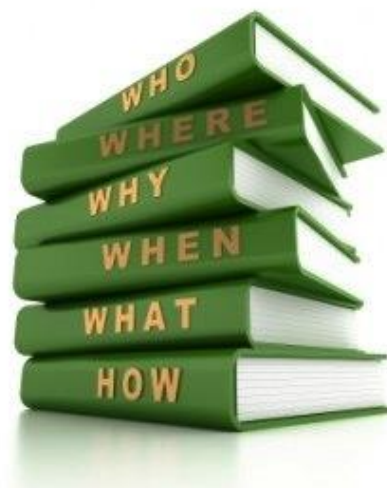
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Where is Your Evidence?

By Phil Ramsey

How do you know? This seems like a basic question. Likely, you consider yourself a logical person, with good reasons for believing those things you 'know' to be true. Yet you will also be aware of many people whose reasoning you can see is flawed, and who seem to believe things because they want them to be true, not because they have any evidence.

Every day we encounter examples of faulty reasoning. So, it makes sense that we may need to build our own capacity for evidence-based thinking.



InterLEAD's Appraisal Connector™ provides professional educators with a means by which they can get developmental feedback from those familiar with their practice. This includes feedback on 'Thinking', established as a Key Competency for the New Zealand Curriculum by the Ministry of Education. Appraisal Connector™ features several items on different forms of thinking. One such form is the ability to make the link between what you believe and the evidence available.

First, consider how thinking can go wrong.

Assumptions

Douglas McGregor published *'The Human Side of Enterprise'* in 1960, and it turned out to be one of the most influential books ever written. In it, he outlined two opposing theories that seem to shape how managers go about their work. He called them 'Theory X' and 'Theory Y'. Theory X assumes that people are lazy, self-centred and inclined to slack off at work, which is an activity that is unnatural generally disliked. Theory Y assumes that work is a natural activity and people are inclined to be self-directing and motivated to do a good job. As you may have experienced some managers seem to support Theory X and others Theory Y. Their beliefs shape their interactions and their decisions.

But which theory is right?

McGregor discussed the self-fulfilling nature of these theories. A manager who believes people are lazy will tend to micro-manage and over-control. As a consequence, people will lose motivation and tend to slack off when the boss's back is turned. A manager who believes people are self-motivated is more likely to create conditions in which people operate in a goal-directed, self-motivated way. Even though they hold opposite theories on how people need to be managed, each manager can point to evidence that their theory is right! Each theory generates its own supporting evidence.

Most teachers are aware that their own assumptions about students/children influence student/child behaviour in the same way as described by McGregor.

Further, consider the conclusions you have drawn about people in your life. You may have reached them on the basis of substantial observation. Yet is this real evidence? You have observed what these people are like when you are around. So your observations are influenced by the dynamic relationships going on at the time. And you contribute to these dynamics.

While it is tempting to think that we can gather enough data to be able to take in the whole picture, it is more realistic to acknowledge that we never get the full story. The evidence we have gathered may apply to situations we have experienced but not to others. Or our observations may have been flawed by our own biases.

Some people don't deal well with the realisation that their conclusions cannot be supported by real evidence. Rather than admit the possibility, some present their conclusions as incontrovertible facts, using phrases like "Everyone knows..." or "The reality is..." Others might refer vaguely to hard-to-pin-down authority, saying things like "I read recently..." or "You know that they say..."

Building Thinking Capacity

The challenge for everyone is that we have to act in order to achieve what is important to us. If we wait around until we have all the evidence, we will never get anything done. We need to make judgements about the people we lead, and the students/children we teach in order to decide how to be effective. We also have to protect ourselves and others from those who might cause harm. This requires good thinking skills in regard to our use of evidence.

What does this include?

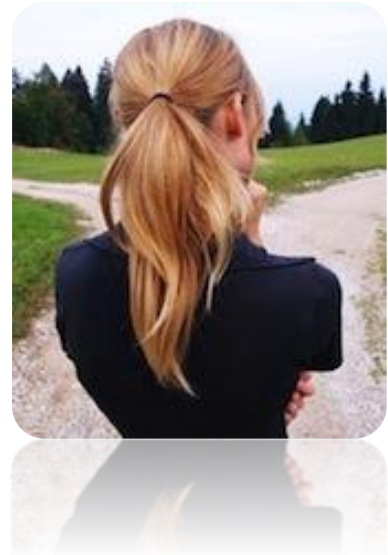
- ❖ **Disconfirmation:** Humans have a tendency to look for evidence that "confirms" what they suspect to be true. It takes discipline to take the more rigorous approach of looking for evidence that "disconfirms" what we believe. This includes being willing to ask people with different conclusions about the data behind their views.
- ❖ **Adaptability:** Once a conclusion is reached we tend to hold on to it tightly, perhaps thinking that it will need to be defended against attack. Realising that many of our conclusions will need to be modified over time, particularly as more evidence becomes available, should encourage us to hold them more lightly, being ready to reconsider what we thought was established 'fact'.
- ❖ **Experimentation:** Lewin, the founder of Action Research, suggested that the best way to understand something was to try and change it. Experiments give rise to new evidence and provide a basis for reflection and deeper understanding.
- ❖ **Present Your Evidence:** Many people hold back the evidence that supports their views, perhaps fearing it will lead to embarrassment. It can take courage to say "I believe this because..." and to outline the data that shapes your thinking.
- ❖ **Consider Credibility:** The world is full of people anxious to present themselves as experts. Many have little or no evidence to support their assertions. Often we are presented with one-sided and biased reports that claim to be authoritative. Develop the habit of considering the credibility of sources and the degree to which their conclusions are based on sound evidence.

It is tempting to avoid conflict amongst opposing ideas by "agreeing to disagree." A key competency for educational professionals is to develop their capacity to resolve conflicts by thoughtful use of evidence, answering the question "How do I know?"

The ACE Audit

By Phil Ramsey

Why do people make poor decisions when there is plenty of evidence available to support a good decision? This is a question that engaged the mind of researcher Irving Janis. Janis is most famous for coining the term “groupthink” after studying the dynamics of team decision-making. He spent a career encouraging people to engage in “vigilant decision making”, paying attention to the available evidence in order to develop effective strategies.



One thing Janis established is that most people, when asked, can describe a sound process for making a crucial decision. He also found that, more often than not, people found ways to compromise the quality of their decision-making process. What goes wrong?

Janis catalogued a broad range of decision-making errors that people make. He found that they fell into three main areas or, as he termed them, ‘constraints’. People tend to trade-off the quality of their decisions because of ‘Affiliative’, ‘Cognitive’ and ‘Ego-Centric’ constraints.

Affiliative constraints are where social pressures restrict the degree that you are prepared to consider alternative courses of actions. You may feel embarrassed if you have to disagree with a friend. Or you may not be prepared to listen to the point of view of someone you dislike. You might choose to stay quiet when colleagues are discussing an action you think is misguided. By doing these things you are trading off the quality of a decision to maintain some social equilibrium.

Cognitive constraints are those that occur when we can’t handle the complexity of a situation. There may be too many challenges going on at one time to give our full attention to the decision being made. Or we may have restricted ‘bandwidth’ due to some form of scarcity. We can be tempted to grab at the first viable alternative that presents itself, rather than really weigh up our options.

Ego-centric constraints are those involving personal identity issues. We may be reluctant to admit that an earlier decision was wrong. A course of action might make us appear weak or arrogant, or some other trait we dislike. We may avoid considering options that involve taking the lead, or yielding to others. Whatever the issue, how we think of ourselves can cause us to compromise the quality of the decision making process.

We are much more effective at spotting trade-offs and compromise in others than we are in ourselves. However, we can do it if we give it our conscious attention. For this reason, prior to making an important, high-stakes decision, it is good for individuals and teams to do an ‘ACE’ audit, considering what **affiliative**, **cognitive** and **ego-centric** factors might be in play. By bringing them to the forefront of our thinking they are less likely to quietly undermine the quality of our decision.

BOOK REVIEW:

Scarcity

By Phil Ramsey

What connection is there between poverty, dieting, work deadlines and your household budget? In each of these people are having to deal with scarcity, whether the resource in question is money, food or time. Economist Sendhil Mullainathan and psychologist Eldar Shafir have collaborated for a number of years in research that explores the way that scarcity affects thinking and behaviour. In their book *Scarcity: The True Cost of Not Having Enough* they outline the fascinating patterns they have established. In doing so, they suggest - quite reasonably - that they have established the science of scarcity as a new and critical field to be explored and understood.

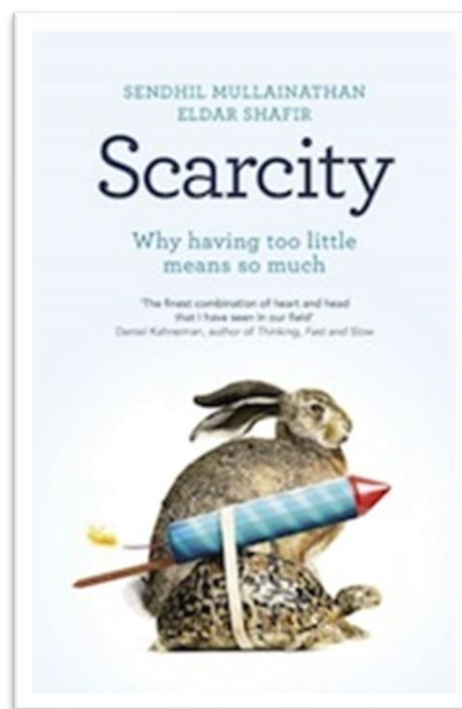
Mullainathan and Shafir are rigorous in their approach to the work. Throughout the book they present their evidence with reference to numerous experiments conducted by them and their colleagues. In doing so they give a great example of using evidence to shape and challenge their thinking. What did they establish through their work?

While the plight of those who are financially destitute might seem quite different from the life of the wealthy but time-poor executive, some of the dynamics of their lives are very similar. Humans seem to react to scarcity of anything in a consistent way. And it is important to understand, given that scarcity is often used as a tool for shaping behaviour. Schools/Centres use deadlines, for instance, to create a scarcity of time for both teachers and students/children, but most leaders give little thought to the psychology of scarcity.

A key finding is that scarcity captures the mind. When you are hungry, food is at the forefront of your thinking. The same is true for money and time. The authors describe scarcity as creating a tunnel in which attention is only given to whatever is the focus of attention. What happens outside the tunnel tends to get ignored, even though it might be something that could make a significant improvement to one's life. 'Tunnelling' explains why the poor are more likely to neglect taking prescribed medication: this is an issue that falls outside the demands that scarcity is making right now, even though the neglect will likely cause health and financial problems in the future.

Scarcity, by capturing the mind, also generates what the authors call a "bandwidth tax". Each of us has a certain amount of cognitive capacity, or bandwidth, that we can use to solve problems, deal with the challenges of life, or meet the demands of work. Feelings of scarcity reduce our bandwidth: we have less capacity to think things through, to pay attention, and to make good decisions. When challenged to meet a deadline you have less mind available to think about employing good parenting skills or exercising self-control.

Focusing the mind by employing a deadline is a time proven way of getting things done. Scarcity awakens the reader to the trade-off that is involved and the unintended consequences that can result. And it challenges the reader to become more aware of one's own bandwidth and the factors that limit our capacity for thinking. For leaders it provokes important questions about the way work is designed and the ways that 'slack' (that is, spare capacity) can be employed to make people more resilient and effective in their work.



'In the Moment' Newsletter - March 2015

Purposeful Thinking

By Phil Ramsey

Have you ever had to give feedback to a child, student or a colleague who has done a marvellous job, involving lots of effort ...of something that didn't need to be done? It is disheartening for people to realise they have done a great job of the wrong thing.



What can be even more tragic is when no one realises that the wrong thing is being done. Physicist Albert Einstein famously said that “perfection of means and confusion of ends seem to characterise our age.” Others have expressed the same concern. Management expert Peter Drucker pointed out the tendency of people to focus their efforts on “doing things right” at the expense of “doing the right things”.

Being purposeful requires a particular kind of thinking, which is why the Competency Section of Appraisal Connector™ has a specific item about the capacity to look up from what one is doing and ask the question “So what?” This is a thinking capacity that requires looking beyond the work itself to consider where it fits in a broader context and whether the activity leads to something of significance.

Like other thinking capabilities, this is one that some people will do naturally and effortlessly. Many others find it hard work; a discipline that has to be learned and practiced deliberately, or it will be neglected. Try asking people about why they do common activities. You may be surprised how few can explain the purpose these serve. You will hear simplistic answers like “I just have to” or “Because it’s important”. Clarity of purpose is rare.

What does it take to develop the capacity for purposeful thinking? And what difference can it make to your work?

Purpose and Self-Awareness

There are many reasons to do things. You could quickly fill a page, for instance, with reasons to teach. Thinking and acting purposefully involves knowing your reason to teach. Which reason makes the activity of teaching meaningful for you? What is it about teaching that you value?

Values are fundamental to purpose. To value something means you choose it ahead of alternatives, even when the alternatives may also be attractive. By increasing self-awareness and, in particular, understanding your own values, you are better able to express yourself with purpose. You increase your capacity to “join the dots” and explain how a particular activity leads to results and why these results are things we should care about.

At first glance, growing self-awareness as a basis for purpose may seem to be a self-centred approach. It works out not to be so. If I have a clearer sense of who I am, I have a more stable platform from which to think about you and your concerns. That means being less likely to insist that you should share my values. Rather, I become open to thinking about ways we could act that reconcile differences, so we all get outcomes that are important to us.

Clarity about what we value also helps us to understand why we may feel qualms about a course of action that has everyone else enthused. Likely we sense that there is something missing, and it is something we value. In this situation, self-awareness enables us to either incorporate what we value into what is planned. Or we could say 'no' to taking part in something for which we have no real commitment.

Purpose Makes a Difference

Leadership and transformation are closely associated with purpose rather than activities. There is something alluring about meticulous planning which determines in advance all the activities to come. It turns out to be the sure-fire way to get stuck in old ways. Instead, according to strategy consultants Peter Block and Allan Cohen, powerful change stems from a clear sense of purpose and the recognition that organisations and people are always adapting and learning

For this reason, effective leaders will often keep comparing the current reality that is emerging with the purpose they have in mind. In response to the emergent reality they pause, reflect, adjust and observe. They are prepared to be patient, realising that large scale change typically starts very small and grows slowly.

When purpose and values are clear, connections can be made with other small-scale efforts that share the same intentions. Bringing like-minded people together generates momentum that builds readiness to change throughout a community

At a personal level, clarity of purpose helps with "time management". Often what needs to be managed is energy and commitment rather than time. People find they don't have time to get things done because they say 'yes' to things they don't really care about, then find they don't bring the energy to the work that allows it to move through to completion. Understanding purpose and values allows you to negotiate your involvement in projects so you spend your precious time on work that is meaningful and energising

"So what?" is a question where you are being asked to join the dots between an activity and a meaningful purpose. It is a question that some find confrontational. Don't be daunted by it. Take it as a challenge that can lead to greater energy, with the potential for sparking transformation.

Purposeful Journaling

By Phil Ramsey

A feature of the Appraisal Connector™ system is the reflective journal users keep while pursuing their developmental goals. Reflective journals and portfolios are becoming a staple for people involved in professional development. So much so that many may lose track of the purpose of a journal.



The purpose of a journal can be easily missed. You might reason:

“Reflection is all about thinking, a process that is not readily observable, but which I do all the time. Writing thoughts down doesn’t make them any more significant than when they were rumbling around in my head. Why am I required to do this? It must just be to prove to those in authority that when I’m thinking I’m thinking about work.”

The monologue has some face validity. It is based, however, on a flawed assumption. Namely, that writing one’s thoughts down does nothing to improve the quality of those thoughts. Researcher Nancy Dixon has explained that we humans are hopeless when it comes to identifying flaws in our own logic. To us, all our thinking seems reasonable. Dixon advocates dialogue - conversation with colleagues - as a way of testing our thoughts.

When we talk through what we believe with an intelligent partner the flaws in our reasoning bubble to the surface, giving us the chance to identify them and to rethink. According to William Zinsser, writing provides the same opportunity, primarily when we re-write, clarifying our work to make sure it is coherent and unambiguous.

For a journal to have real purpose, then, we need to be disciplined in how we write. Follow rules of good writing. Use simple clear sentences. Don’t use a long word when a short word is just as good. Be direct and specific. Add details to illustrate and explain. Take out words and phrases that clutter. And make sure the writing goes somewhere. In the case of a journal, you are both author and reader, and the writing is taking you on a journey to the point where you tell yourself what you should do next to advance your own development. And make sure you include in your journal a clear explanation of why your developmental goals are important: answer the question “So what?”

BOOK REVIEW:

Writing to Learn

By Phil Ramsey

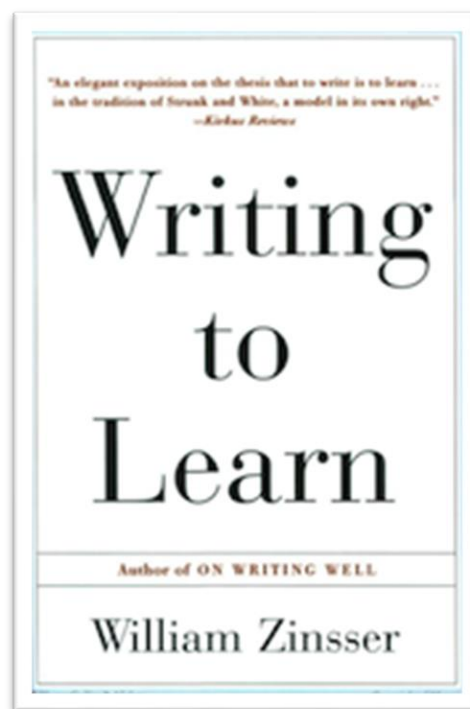
This book is a classic that I wish I had discovered when it was first published 25 years ago. A writer friend recently put me on to William Zinsser, who has published some of the seminal work on the art of writing. In 'Writing to Learn' he explains the close connection he sees between writing, thinking and learning. As you would expect, his writing is terrific. He has put all of his recommendations into practice to produce a work that kept me enthralled.

The book is in two parts. The first half outlines his thoughts on the connection between writing, learning and thinking. The second half illustrates his points drawing on examples of outstanding writing from a diverse range of fields including geography, the arts, mathematics, chemistry and music. He shows that good writing is not limited to a particular discipline; rather, it results from putting together a logical sequence of clearly thought sentences. Zinsser explains that, as a student, he was certain that he had no aptitude for chemistry or physics. All that changed when he discovered the writing of scientists like Albert Einstein and Primo Levi.

Zinsser explains that good writing is inextricably linked with clear thinking. Writers have to take their readers on a journey in which ideas are coherently linked together so that they lead to the intended destination. And good writing is really the art of re-writing. Writers need to be able to look back over what they have written, identify where the work is incoherent or ambiguous, and find a way to put it right so the reader will not get lost.

Of particular value is the chapter 'Crotchets and Convictions' in which Zinsser outlines his thoughts on what constitutes "good writing" of non-fiction. These include: the need to minimise 'noise' that shrouds the information you intend to convey; that clarity is always preferable to obscurity; your writing 'voice' and tone needs to authentically reflect who you are; that brevity is the mark of clear thinking; passive, generalised or abstract nouns are to be limited and, preferably, turned into active verbs; that concepts need to be illustrated with visible detail; and the need to convey to the reader that you are enjoying the process of writing.

'Writing to Learn' is a treasure, and a book I intend to make required reading for those I mentor. I am sure you will benefit from reading it, and likewise want to share it with others.

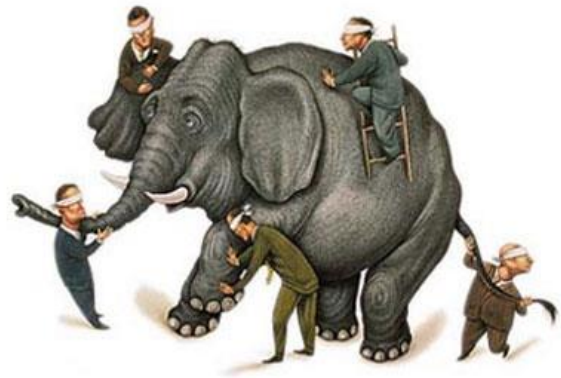


'In the Moment' Newsletter - May 2015

On the Other Hand

By Phil Ramsey

Starting at the time of our birth we learn very quickly that we are at the centre of the universe. As new-borns we discover that, if we dislike something about our current situation, we just need to start yelling and other people come running to put things right. When we are new-borns there is really no need to consider any perspective other than our own.



Of course, from about age two our parents and others decided that the rest of our lives would involve unlearning the “centre-of-the-universe” lesson. It turns out it can be hard work learning that other people have their own lives, experiences, feelings, values and intentions and these don’t coincide with our own. Given that each of us lives inside our own minds and bodies it is easy to slip back into thinking we are at the centre of the universe; seeing things from the perspective of others is a lesson we have to keep re-learning. Indeed, thinking of what something will look like from a perspective other than our own is a distinct mode of thinking all on its own. (For that reason, Appraisal Connector™ has an item to do with this kind of thinking in the section on Key Competencies for teachers.)

As you can imagine, seeing things from the perspective of another has real benefits to professional educators. When we are unable to see a situation as others do, it is difficult to empathise with them. When we get a glimpse from their perspective we not only enlarge our own understanding of a complex situation, but we are able to feel compassion and concern where otherwise we might feel disdain.

Let’s consider why taking a different perspective is challenging for most of us, and how we can take a disciplined approach to developing the capacity for such thinking.

Easy to be Right

The idea of different perspectives is captured in the story of the blind men and the elephant, where each describes the elephant on the basis of the part they have encountered. One insists an elephant is like a rope (having felt its tail), while another describes it as a pillar (holding the leg), and so on. The story has many versions, with the same basic message: when you encounter just one part of a system it is easy to be right, but difficult to be complete. I may be able to accurately describe my experience and when I do so I am confident that I am right. I get into trouble when I insist that your description, based on your perspective and experience, must be wrong because it is different to mine.

The English version of the story, a poem by JG Saxe, concludes regarding the blind men that “each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong.” And in this story the blind men were dealing with a stationary elephant. Leadership expert Peter Frost has described the complexities of life today as blind men trying to describe an elephant they are clinging to as it runs through a jungle during a storm.

The story has a wide appeal. Many philosophers have reworded it to emphasise the need to embrace a range of perspectives and move past the view that our own experience is the whole story. In other words, the story has meaning because most of us are so quick to believe we know the whole elephant when we only really know one tusk. Why is completeness such a challenge?

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson used the term “schismogenesis” to describe the vicious cycle that could quickly develop when people held differing perspectives. The term means the “splitting apart of ideas”. When one person describes the world from their perspective, the other feels compelled to correct matters, providing more balance with their own perspective. Rather than achieving balance, the first person feels the need to restate their point of view with more vigour. Over time, each becomes more insistent, and the points of view become increasingly polarised. No doubt you have experienced how easily you can find yourself expressing your own view point using extreme terms; you feel compelled to do so as you try to enlighten someone who just doesn’t get it.

Seeing the Whole

When we deal with complex situations we need to do more than acknowledge that there will be viewpoints different to our own. We benefit from taking a disciplined approach to adopting multiple perspectives. That means, (1) identifying a wide range of perspectives, and (2) taking time to develop a rich understanding of what the situation looks like from each point of view.

Consider a group that needs to make a decision. Not everyone affected by the decision is represented in the group. There are a range of other stakeholders who all have perspectives that will inform decisions that are made. In order to be disciplined in their approach to perspectives, what can the group do? One thing is to note each stakeholder on a card. These can then be distributed so each member of the group has a card, and has to describe something about that stakeholder’s perspective on the problem at hand. Once done, cards can be redistributed and a different group member adds something that has occurred to them about the stakeholder perspective that has been assigned. With repeated redistributions and discussion, the picture of what is involved in the decision gets richer and richer.

Native American historian and author Paula Underwood captured the importance of gaining alternative perspectives in her book *Who Speaks for Wolf?* The story relates to the practice of having someone share the view of those not directly participating in a decision. It illustrates what goes wrong when the person usually designated to speak on behalf of the wolf isn’t present when a group makes a critical decision. We are not limited to our own perspective. Developing our thinking capability includes the challenge of putting ourselves “in others shoes” to gain a richer understanding of how our actions will impact on the world around us.

Actively Seeking to Understand

By Phil Ramsey

Have you noticed how some conversations feel like Ping-Pong? Ideas can get battled back and forth so quickly it feels like there is no time to think. This can be because the conversation is an argument, and those involved are trying to win points. It can also happen when people appear to be agreeing with one another, bouncing from one idea to the next while feeling they are of one mind.



When you observe conversations carefully you will soon see instances where people are contradicting one another, while at the same time nodding and saying “yes, yes” to everything their companion is saying. Instead of listening carefully, each person assumes that others share the same perspective and are not really attentive to differences in viewpoint. There can be an implicit assumption that, because we have a good relationship we must be seeing things the same way!

So differences in perspective can disrupt a group in various ways. Differences can generate 'schismogenesis' and conflict, as with the blind men and the elephant. And groups can be fooled into thinking they are in agreement when they are not. The conversational practice of checking understanding will help avoid both of these problems.

The trouble with Ping-Pong conversation is that it happens too fast to spot differences in perspective, let alone allow them to influence your thinking. And because it is so fast, the conversation is based in the past. People put forward ideas they thought of before the conversation, and stick to positions they have always had. Nothing new emerges. The conversation needs to slow down in order to generate anything fresh. How can this happen?

One way is to establish a practice that, when anyone wants to contribute something to the conversation, they start by summarising what the previous person has said. It can be very brief, beginning with, “If I understand you correctly, you think...” or whatever suits your style. This summary allows people to either confirm that they have been understood, or clarify what has been misunderstood. Groups that adopt this practice find that conversations become more reflective and more generative: they generate greater empathy for why people hold different views, and often generate new approaches to solving tough problems.

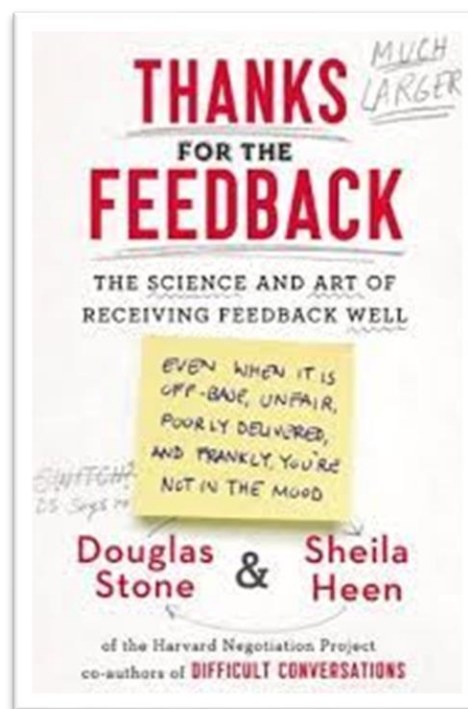
BOOK REVIEW:

Thanks for The Feedback

By Phil Ramsey

Authors Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen are part of the Harvard Negotiation Project, a group that has already produced the outstanding book *Difficult Conversations*. In this excellent book they unravel the complexities of feedback: why we have such mixed feelings about it and how we can become more skilled at receiving it well.

While there is some discussion of how to give feedback well, the book explains why there is greater value in improving our skills at receiving feedback. The authors explain that feedback is far better when someone who wants it, pulls it from the giver, as opposed to the situation where an enthusiastic giver pushes feedback on to someone else. The book becomes a powerful aid to help the reader think about their own view of feedback and to develop practical strategies for getting the feedback we need for growth.



'In the Moment' Newsletter - August 2015

Feedback is a complex topic, and the book helps us to make important distinctions. For instance, there are different kinds of feedback. Sometimes we are looking for appreciation, at other times, coaching or advice, and sometimes we want an evaluation of where we stand. One of the reasons we get hurt or confused by feedback is that we may be looking for one kind, and get another. The book provides a language that helps us to ask for the feedback we really want. And it does much more, discussing the common reasons why we reject feedback we might benefit from, as being unfair, poorly delivered, or just inaccurate. In each case we are helped to understand the dynamics involved by the authors' masterful use of examples. At each point as I read the book I could relate the explanations and examples to my own behaviour and identify specific actions I can take to apply the lessons being taught.

At times we all feel torn by competing goals. On the one hand we want to grow, and we value feedback that will help us develop as we pursue important goals. At the same time we want to feel accepted for who we are, which makes direct, honest feedback threatening. The book provides excellent direction on how to navigate through the tension produced by these competing drives. In doing so, we get to benefit from the perspectives that others have on our activity; a view that is often very different from our own, and able to address the blind spots we all have, that prevent us achieving what we really want.

Happy Talk

By Phil Ramsey

When was the last time you were involved in a dumb decision? It is sadly commonplace to be left wondering about how a group of intelligent people had decided to do something which, in hindsight, was clearly ill-judged. Even worse, we often have to admit that there were some in the group who thought it was wrong all along. While it is embarrassing, costly and annoying, poor decision making is not something best forgotten. Rather, we do well to reflect on why it happens and find practices that can help us make better decisions.



Business academic Jerry Harvey wrote a classic essay 'The Abilene Paradox' in which he described the challenge groups have when making decisions. While we often think that groups will struggle to deal with conflict, Harvey pointed out that the problem is often that they don't know how to deal with agreement. His essay got its name from a family decision to interrupt a pleasant day sitting around the house to take a car trip across Texas to visit a café in Abilene. No one enjoyed the trip: it was long, hot and boring. Upon return they discovered that no one in the group actually wanted to go; they all just assumed they were going along with what others were keen to do.

Situations like this challenge our thinking about what good decision making looks like. Everyone in Harvey's family had been involved in the decision. All views had been sought, people had been listened to, and respect was shown for the contributions of everyone. What went wrong?

People had strong opinions about what they thought was best. When the group was making the decision, though, they censored their own opinion and engaged in what some call 'happy talk'. Each person thought (1) that their preference not to go to Abilene was out of step with everyone else and maybe a little selfish, and (2) in order not to introduce discord they would act as if they were as keen as everyone else. Everyone looked and talked as if they were happy with the decision. Perhaps because people wanted to do what was best for the group they made an effort to be positive and masked any negativity.

Can you recognise the behaviour? Why does it happen?

The Risk of Being Negative

Social scientists, keen to understand how people behave in groups, have studied decision making processes for years (see the book review later in this newsletter). Behaviour described in the Abilene Paradox is completely understandable when you consider the risks people experience when they get together to make a decision.

All of us have experienced being involved in conflict, or involved in contentious interactions. It is no fun. Further, who wants to be a toxic, pessimistic nay-sayer! Given a choice, we would rather make a positive contribution to group deliberations. With that in mind, consider how things might play out as a group discusses possible actions it might take.

Let's say your leadership team, of which you are a part, is meeting to consider an important issue. You have some information, but you know you are nowhere near fully informed. Modestly, you assume others probably have a better understanding than you do. The Principal/Manager initiates the conversation, explaining the issue at hand, and giving an opinion of what seems a sensible way forward. But that opinion doesn't quite match your understanding.

Do you say something? If the Principal/Manager sounded certain, that probably indicates access to information you don't have. In a situation like this it is easy to assume that (1) others are better able to understand the issue because they undoubtedly know more, and (2) the best contribution you can make is to be supportive. Instead of questioning the direction suggested by the Principal/Manager, perhaps you are better to turn your attention to ways it could be implemented.

You would be deciding not to voice negative thoughts and just stick to 'happy talk' that moves the idea forward. And in this instance your decision is only based on risk associated with available information. The situation described doesn't even factor in social risks. What if in past meetings those who have voiced concern were met with rebuke or scorn? What if the Principal/Manager is known to hold a grudge when others disagree? It is hard to make a 'negative' contribution even in a safe environment!

Establishing Good Practice

The lesson from studying group processes is that it takes hard work to get things right. Left to chance, groups will default into dysfunctional habits that seem perfectly reasonable to those who take part in them. Leaders need to give thought to practices that will safeguard the quality of decision making in their teams.

At the heart of good group practice is a leader's self-knowledge. Imagine you are the Principal/Manager in the scenario described above. Are you in the habit of speaking first? Your talk accounts for what percentage of team meetings? These questions are easily answered, if you pay attention. Make an estimate ahead of your next meeting of how much time you'll spend talking, then have someone keep a record.

When you give an opinion, to what extent does your tone reflect how much you actually know? When you are tentative about your conclusions do you actually sound tentative? How often are you surprised when people give undue weight to your conclusions? How do you respond to the encouragement of happy talk? When this happens it is alluring to think that maybe your conclusions really reflect a depth of understanding you didn't realise you had! You may become less tentative the more you talk and the agreement you encounter, even though no new information is coming to light to warrant such confidence.

When you listen to views that are at odds with your own, what expression do others see on your face? What is it like to be on the receiving end of you? You might find it hard to imagine that others experience you as formidable or intimidating. Yet, this has been a surprise to leaders down through time. Ivan the Terrible may well have been perplexed when someone gave him that moniker, when he thought of himself as Ivan the Congenial.

Self-knowledge can move leaders to establish team practices that counter the risks people feel when contributing, and which enable the quality of interactions to rise beyond happy talk.

A Wiser Profession

By Phil Ramsey



Like many groups trying to operate in challenging times, New Zealand teachers are confronting the need to safeguard professionalism within the profession. Recent years have seen a transition from the Teachers Council to the Education Council, with increased emphasis on Teacher Appraisal. Greater emphasis is being placed on the Practising Teacher Criteria (PTC) as a mechanism for encouraging high standards of professional conduct. How can concepts to do with group wisdom shed light on the challenges facing the profession and changes being undertaken?

The question arises because changes to professional behaviour require both new structures and processes at a national level, and new thinking and action on the part of teachers making up the profession. The profession as a whole doesn't constitute a coherent 'group' that can review its decision making. Rather, it depends on smaller, local groups to work together to wisely deal with the challenges they encounter. Individual educators do well to ask, "What groups am I part of that contribute to the healthy functioning of the profession?"

In preparing this newsletter we cast a critical eye over the PTC, thinking about ways your groups may respond. We were reminded of the words of an old mentor, "Some are wise, and some are otherwise!" What are some ways you might respond wisely?

One way is in the application of specific criteria. For instance, the PTC include the expectation that fully certified teachers will engage in appropriate professional relationships. Criteria #1 is that teachers will "establish and maintain effective professional relationships focused on the learning and well-being of akonga". How will your group interpret this criteria? Acting wisely, a group would think carefully about the need for robust relationships that encourage people to express disagreement. Acting other-wisely, a group might establish norms that this criteria mandates dangerous happy talk: that people who express concerns are not maintaining the convivial relationships the group prefers.

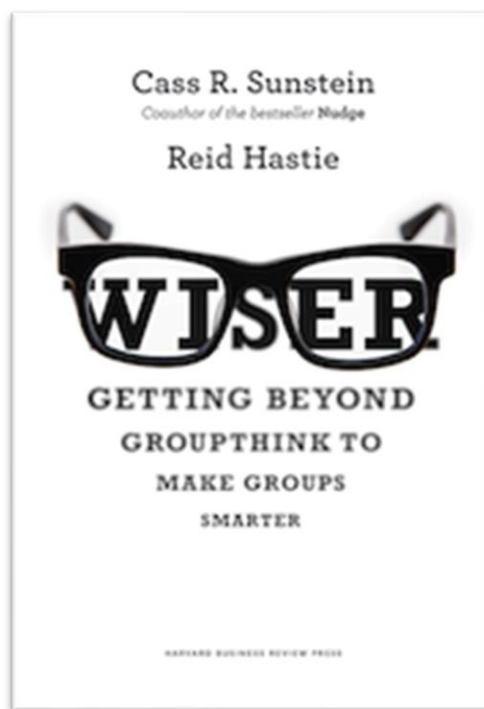
More broadly, groups will establish ways of relating to new structures and processes. To what extent will schools/centres take these seriously? Or will they treat appraisal processes as unnecessary compliance; an imposition that gets in the road of the real work of teaching? Acting wisely, a school's/centre's leadership group will challenge itself to understand the need for professionalism and think carefully about how processes can be actioned in a meaningful way that fits the local context. Acting other-wisely, they will join in happy talk that "we are professional enough already" and collude with those who want to sidestep professional accountability.

Consider your response to changes within the teaching profession as an opportunity to establish new practices that make groups in your school wiser.

BOOK REVIEW: **Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Better Decisions**

By Phil Ramsey

Authors Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie have written an excellent review of the growing body of research that explains, firstly, what goes wrong with group decision making, and then what practices will make a difference. It is the sort of book that the training profession enjoys: slightly too inaccessible to appeal to a casual reader, going into some areas that won't be of great interest to most work teams, and yet full of practical suggestions that can inform those looking to make a change.



'In the Moment' Newsletter - November 2015

Wiser is based on the clear evidence that groups consistently perform worse than we expect them to. We think that 'two heads will be better than one', yet in practice putting people in a group can just as easily amplify the mistakes that an individual would make. The book looks closely at the tendency toward 'happy talk' and how people are discouraged from contributing what groups really need. Then the book turns to a consideration of practices that can make a real difference: ways of thinking and acting that lead to groups getting wiser.

A key lesson from the book is the need for groups to understand the changes they must go through when making decisions. At different stages of a decision groups need very different practices if they are to get the desired results. It has long been understood that the divergent process of generating a range of options is very different from the convergent process of narrowing those options down and deciding a way forward. Then the process of implementation begins. A group needs to be clear about where it is so that everyone is doing the same process at the same time.

As processes change, what it means to be a loyal group member also changes. To disagree with a colleague and advocate strongly for an alternative to what has been suggested is a display of real loyalty before a decision is made: it is evidence of a desire to find the best way forward for the group as a whole, even though it means risking one's personal standing in the team. To behave the same way after the group has made its decision is different; that is a time for concerted action to make things work. Sadly, many groups establish norms that allow for only one form of loyalty, resulting in the prevalence of happy talk.

If you are pondering ways to increase the effectiveness of groups you are part of, or have a lingering sense that your own contribution to groups could be more effective, *Wiser* is well worth reading. And if you are a leader looking for ideas that can change how your leadership team approaches complex issues, the chapter 'Eight Ways to Reduce Failures' will be particularly useful.