



# in the moment

# 2018

## February

- Pick Up the Pace
- Haste vs Speed

## April

- What are you waiting for?
- Systems Leadership

## August

- Take an Organisational Check Up
- Cosmology Check Up

## October

- Questions for Leading, Liking and Learning
- Types of Questions

# Pick Up the Pace

By Phil Ramsey

**How will this year be different for you and your school or centre? What goals could you set for how leadership can be improved? Goal-setting is often a personal matter, or specific to the context in which your school or centre is operating. At times, though, organisations of all sorts face similar circumstances and leaders face similar challenges to one another. That seems to be the case now. Organisations everywhere operate in a context of high complexity and change. What are the implications for leaders?**



Complexity increases the need for quality decision making; simplistic thinking will cause future headaches, and what worked in the past may not be a reliable guide to the future. But where leaders have traditionally thought that quality decisions were ones that took time, now they need to be made quickly, before conditions change requiring more decisions. Leadership experts John Zenger and Joseph Folkman (*authors of 'Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution'*) highlight the need for leaders to improve their "time to value": getting to good decisions quicker. Usually improving "time to value" is not a matter of being rushed or hasty with decisions; rather, it involves not wasting time.

## A Culture of Speed

What leaders value deeply influences the assumptions people make and the actions they take. Often we give little thought to the value we place on speed, and the assumptions people make about how long it should take for something to be done. Leaders can choose to pick up their own pace, and take actions that encourage others to avoid time-wasting behaviour. This way they create a culture in which people value speed. Consider an example from our experience on InterLEAD courses.

When running a training session some years back, with participants working in small groups, I posed a question for them to consider. And, being a little impatient with how long it often took people on courses to start talking to one another, I said that the groups had 2 minutes and 18 seconds to answer the question. People laughed at the specificity of the time allocation - I later explained that it was my attempt to appear as if I am well organised, when I'm not- but then they moved into action and started talking. Two minutes later they were ready with answers.

I was intrigued that this worked, and have been doing the same ever since, specifying tight time frames for groups to have conversations and reach conclusions, and expecting them to have answers when the time is up. While they are never policed as exactly as the precision suggests, the time frames always add to the momentum of a session, never seem to diminish the quality of participants' work, and have never generated complaints (though at times I generously offer to extend the time allowance by an additional 30 seconds).

Accelerating the pace of a session achieves some valuable outcomes. It captures and holds people's attention. And it does so in a way that indicates that "this course is different" to some of the more languid PD experiences that participants may have had.

## Speed in Meetings

Meetings provide a rich opportunity to make changes to the pace of your school or centre. They represent a good proportion of any leader's time, so there is plenty of waste that can be reduced. People often complain about time spent in meetings, so pacier meetings are likely to be welcomed by most people. And they powerfully convey the culture of an organisation. Often people use meetings to delay action; when someone says "We need to have a meeting about XYZ" it can be code for "don't expect action anytime soon". Meetings that quickly produce action get noticed. So what can you do?

- ❶ ***Schedule shorter meetings.*** Work tends to expand to fit the time allowed. If a meeting is scheduled to last an hour, it will be filled with discussion. Often, the same outcomes can be achieved by scheduling a half hour meeting. For unplanned, one-on-one interactions, announce in advance that you only have 5 minutes and then stay standing. Doing that regularly encourages people to prepare in advance and to quicken their pace. It also means that when you decide that you need to sit down for the discussion it indicates that the matter is particularly serious or complex.
- ❷ ***Be purposeful.*** Be clear about the purpose of the meeting and make sure everyone knows what it is. When people want to go on tangents, acknowledge that what they say might be important and the basis for another meeting, and then return to the original purpose. Use an agenda to keep things on track and ensure people know that if they want to discuss a matter at the meeting it is their responsibility to ensure it is in line with the purpose of the meeting and that they get it on the agenda ahead of time.
- ❸ ***Give feedback on meeting behaviour.*** People are often unaware of the patterns of behaviour they have developed around meetings. You might know that someone has a useful perspective that is never shared. Someone else may monopolise the discussion. Another might interrupt others. As a leader, take the initiative to talk to people individually, to (1) explain the atmosphere you want to create in meetings, (2) describe the pattern of behaviour you see developing and how it affects the atmosphere of the meeting, and (3) describe the behaviour you would like to see. As you see people endeavouring to change their behaviour, give further feedback to acknowledge their effort and commend their progress.

Many people feel that they don't have enough time in their day and feel frustrated when their precious time is wasted. When others see that you are treating their time as valuable they will recognise, not only that you want what is best for your school or centre, but that you have respect for them personally. See if you can make this a year in which you pick up the pace for you and your colleagues.

# Haste vs Speed

By Phil Ramsey

As the old saying "more haste, less speed" suggests, it is important to distinguish between speed and frantic activity. If everyone in your school or centre doubled their current pace, what would be the combined effect? The answer depends on alignment. Increasing the pace of individuals may result in people crashing into one another, cancelling out each other's efforts, or reinventing the wheel more quickly. Effective leaders are interested in strategic speed: doing the right things at pace.



Your school or centre can't do everything. One of our colleagues who works in the business world tells us that leadership used to be about deciding what to make a priority based on evaluating the importance and urgency of alternative goals. Increasingly, it means deciding which important and urgent goal to sacrifice in order for others to be achieved. As complexity increases, particularly if people are left to decide independently what is important and what is not, the situation is ripe for people to head off in entirely different directions.

Extraordinary schools and centres, like extraordinary leaders, don't attempt to do everything superbly. They realise they need to focus their efforts in a particular direction; one that takes advantage of their strengths and which makes a real difference. Most leadership teams can identify a strategy that makes sense for their school or centre. Yet, having a strategy is no guarantee that people will pursue it. People -even the leaders who created it- can lose their clear strategic vision unless communication about the strategic direction is powerful and consistent.

Sometimes the way to increase speed is to avoid hasty decisions that lead in the wrong direction. Take time to pause and consider whether actions that have been suggested really contribute to the direction you want to head. Suggestions may be brilliant, exciting and attractive, yet still lead you on a tangent to where you really want to go. And pursuing a brilliant tangent may leave people confused about what you really care about.

Many leaders have found it beneficial to use a technique like **STOP**. The acronym stands for:

- **Step** back from what you are doing;
- **Think** about it  
(using questions like "how does this align with our strategic direction?");
- **Organise** your thoughts  
(for instance, reaching a conclusion about what is best and what needs to be done); and
- **Proceed**.

Writer Tim Gallwey suggests that leaders should "start each day with a STOP". Rather than let momentum carry you off your intended path, taking time to clarify your thinking will help you to pick up your pace for the rest of the day.

# What are you waiting for?

By Phil Ramsey

In times of transition, it is not unusual for people to bide their time before making important decisions. Why invest precious time and money pursuing goals when the goal posts could move at any time? Perhaps that is how you and your Senior Leadership Team or Managers feel at this moment. Major changes seem to be in store for education in New Zealand.

Waiting for things to unfold, while it seems like a sensible strategy, does create problems. Putting off professional development, for instance, can reinforce undesirable attitudes to work and learning. Furthermore, events never seem to unfold to the point where the best choice is obvious. At some point, leaders need to act even if the goal posts are already on the move. Indeed, we live in a time of increasing volatility and complexity; someone waiting for life to settle down may end up waiting forever.

What can help leaders to act in times of uncertainty? Partly, the answer is realising that action is necessary, even when there is not enough information. It also helps to understand the nature of strategic thinking, and the role you have in the system.



## Strategic Thinking

Leadership involves looking around corners, trying to see what might be coming in order to make sure your organisation or community are prepared. That naturally means that you are taking actions and making investments in readiness for something that is still around a corner. Things are changing even while you are preparing. This is the nature of strategic thinking. How do leaders handle the challenge?

Broadly, two approaches that leaders take are 'strategic intent' and 'try lots of stuff'.

Counter-intuitively, even though it involves preparing for the future, strategic intent involves looking backward. A leadership team with strategic intent use their imagination to put themselves in the future. They ask, "What sort of school or centre do we want or need to become?" This is a very different perspective. Most people stand in the present and look to the future. Strategic intent involves standing where you want to get to in the future, looking back to where you are now, and asking, "How do we get here from there?" This kind of thinking takes skill and effort.

'Try lots of stuff' sounds random but also involves high-quality thinking. It means that as you move toward the future your team takes a variety of actions, based on what seems likely to work and get the results that you want. As well as trying a variety of actions you also need to pay close attention to the outcomes being achieved, so you can learn from your experiences.

Of course, there is real value in trying to combine both approaches. If your team is clear about its intent you will have a shared basis for assessing the effectiveness of the 'lots of stuff' you have tried. Unexpected results from trying stuff—whether positive, negative or in between—can enrich the vision you have for what your school or centre could be in the future.

## **Roles**

The action you take also depends on the role you have in the system. Some people act with executive authority. They are responsible for shaping the system in which others operate. They may delegate some of the shaping work to change agents who act on their behalf. And all this shaping is designed to create the environment for those who deliver the work of the system.

If you have executive authority—perhaps as part of a team—shaping the system is your role. Others outside the school or centre may make decisions that create the context in which you operate. Still, you are responsible for what happens in your organisational system. If you are a change agent you may not have that authority, but you can still think independently about what the system needs, and keep those in leadership informed of what things look like from your perspective. And if your role is to deliver the work of the system, doing the actual teaching, then aim to do that as an expert, pulling the skills and tools you need from those with the authority to resource your efforts.

## **Moving to Action**

It is easy to get in the habit of waiting. Taking action involves risk. Perhaps you will head in the wrong direction. Maybe you will come up against criticism. Waiting for clarity seems like it should be sensible. However, it seems to be a general rule of thumb that those with executive authority for a system never have the complete picture. They are always in the dark to some extent and still need to take responsibility for shaping their system in preparation for the future.

How can you move to action? You are probably not as deep in the dark as it may feel. You will have plenty of data, collected over time. You have tried things in the past and seen the outcomes those efforts produced. And you have people throughout the school or centre with a view on what else might be done. When facing an uncertain future you can also ask, "What action could we take now that will make sense—will be good for us—whatever is around the corner?"



# Systems Leadership

By Phil Ramsey

Can you describe the way you typically behave in meetings? Like most people, you probably have a pattern of behaviour that everyone is used to. You may not have realised, but the people you work with can probably describe it with remarkable accuracy. Just as you can describe the patterns of other people.

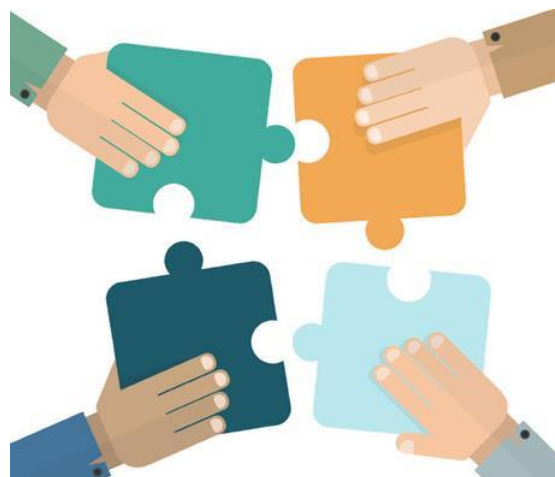
Patterns of interaction are easy to get into and hard to break. They are also comforting. I had a colleague whose pattern was to give inspiring speeches, complaining about poor quality work and urging excellence. It was so predictable, no one paid attention. Even though it involved plenty of energy and high levels of volume, it was always the same and it made little impact.

We are used to thinking of leadership as a special role in a school or centre. Barry Oshry challenges that idea, suggesting that anyone who changes the way the people in a system interact with one another is providing 'system leadership'. Comfortable patterns put people to sleep. Systems leadership is when someone wakes everyone up to what is happening and allows for a new pattern of thinking and action.

The challenge of systems leadership is realising that each of us contributes to unhealthy patterns. It wasn't just my loud colleague who was the problem, the way I responded enabled him to continue. Either of us could have provided system leadership by acting in a way that other people were not used to and which called on everyone to approach the work with greater awareness.

One way to think about patterns is to frame what you do in terms of 'love' and 'power'. Love is the drive to unite, heal and smooth over differences. Like anything, love can be taken too far: it can be expressed in a powerless way that comes across as insipid and needy. Power is the drive to express yourself fully, standing up for what is important to you personally. Taken too far it can quickly become abusive and repellent. The challenge is to keep power and love in balance. According to Oshry this is not achieved by half measures. Rather, even though they seem to be opposites, both drives can be pursued with vigour. We can strive for unity of purpose, with each person contributing what is important to them personally, while doing what is going to be good for everyone in the system.

Unhealthy patterns of interaction thrive when power and love are out of balance. Perhaps you have been giving one most of your attention and neglecting the other. This can happen because of the context: naturally warm and loving people may find themselves in roles that are all about power. Vigorously pursuing both power and love can change the way you and others think and act, creating new possibilities for the community as a whole.



## BOOK REVIEW:

# Context, Context, Context

By Phil Ramsey

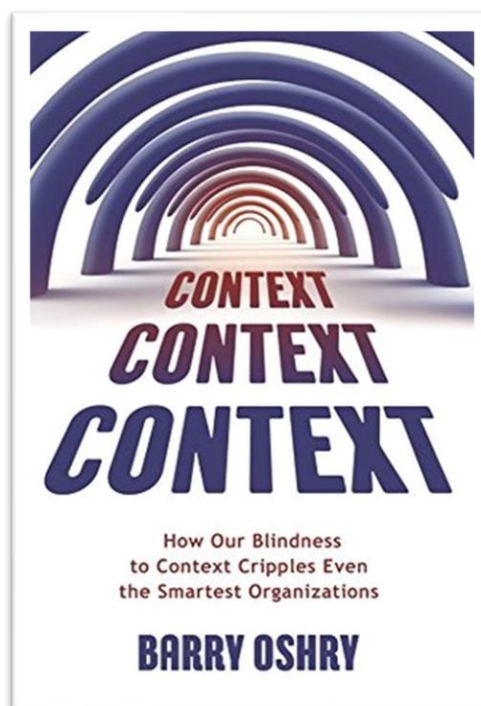
Barry Oshry is a remarkable researcher and author. He brings a unique perspective to topics such as leadership, organisation, and teamwork. It is a perspective based on close observation of how people really behave at work. In previous books like *Seeing Systems and Leading Systems*, he has outlined how our behaviour is shaped by the role we play in a particular system, and how we are often blind to destructive patterns that may be developing within our communities and organisations. *Context, Context, Context* is his latest book and feels like it represents an important advance, stimulating new ideas of what is possible.

If you have read any of his previous books you will know that Oshry has fun with his writing. They incorporate doodles, poems, and stories in ways that illustrate and amuse. *Context, Context, Context* is presented as the script of a dialogue between two people exploring how concepts apply to their work. It is fun to read.

The book covers some concepts that are familiar from Oshry's earlier work. Your view of the organisation is influenced by whether you are in a Top, Middle, or Bottom role. Roles have some predictable dynamics that will influence your behaviour. It is easy to find yourself in a 'Dance of Blind Reflex' where you contribute to interactions that hold the organisation back while holding others responsible or thinking that their personalities are the cause of our problems. As the title suggests we all need to be reminded of the important part context plays in shaping what goes on in a community or organisation, and that roles are a key part of the context.

The book offers some valuable new insights. As well as understanding how roles can go wrong, we need to know what the healthy, ideal expression of each role could look like. To do this, Oshry has drawn on the work of another of our favourite authors, Adam Kahane. Kahane's work on 'Power' and 'Love' provides a way of explaining what Tops, Middles and Bottoms can do to fulfil their responsibilities to the wider system, and work more positively with one another.

While it builds on his earlier work, *Context, Context, Context* can also stand alone for anyone new to Oshry. Reading it will help you to work out what your role is in the important communities you belong to, and encourage you to think about how you can provide system leadership for everyone's benefit.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter - April 2018*



# Take an Organisational Check Up

By Phil Ramsey

Did you make good use of your last school or centre holiday? Michael Williams, President of SPANZ, wrote to school principals recently urging them to make sure they get a break from school, both for their own wellbeing and as an example to staff. Williams pointed out that there are plenty of current reasons that educators in New Zealand will be feeling anxious or stressed. Many aspects of education are under review, schools are dealing with staff shortages, and young people are experiencing serious problems that affect their learning and behaviour at school.



This situation can leave school and centre leaders feeling torn. On the one hand, they feel exhausted and know that they need some time away. If they don't take a break there will be a cost to pay, either in terms of their general health, or relationships with family and friends, or just not being as "on the ball" at work. On the other hand, with so many issues in play leaders can feel guilty about taking a break. "Maybe", they think, "if I work through the holiday I'll be able to get ahead."

Recent work by Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford University (see the Book Review in this newsletter) has pointed out the need for leaders to get serious about the healthiness of workplaces. All over the world, work is killing people. And not just work that involves a high risk of accident or injury. If your workplace is causing you stress and anxiety, then it is dangerous.

This warning seems overblown to many people. They reason: stress at work is normal; everyone has to cope with it; and, plenty of people are worse off than I am. Treating stressful work as 'normal' does not change the level of danger. It actually adds to the problem, by encouraging people (including oneself) to stay in unhealthy situations, and encouraging leaders to ignore the issue and allow their staff to work in unhealthy situations.

## Stress and Health

Stress is the reaction we have when the demands on us exceed our capacity. If I am asked to handle more than I am really capable of doing I will feel anxious and stressed. Further, it is easy to get into a vicious cycle. I may choose to work longer hours to get everything done, which leaves me feeling exhausted and less effective in my work. The exhaustion and stress from work increases the amount of conflict I have with my family and friends. And all of this takes a toll on health.

Pfeffer summarises a range of studies that show the dangerous connection between stressful work and poor health. The connection is not always direct. For instance, when people are stressed they are more likely to "self-medicate" with alcohol, drugs or through over-eating, all of which have a negative impact on health. But it doesn't require statistical brilliance to see the connection described by US executive Bob Chapman, who says that the biggest cause of chronic illness is stress and the biggest cause of stress is work.

Many people talk about achieving work-life balance, yet struggle to make it happen. One of the reasons for that is that we assume it is the personal responsibility of individual workers to achieve balance. Yet the personal choices people make are shaped in part by leadership expectations, the culture of the school or centre, and the attitudes of colleagues. It is hard to prioritise personal health—even if you are acutely aware of the danger—if you are surrounded by people who are “going above and beyond” and expect you to do the same.

## **Making Work Healthier**

As pointed out by the SPANZ President, sometimes the context in which we work produces an underlying level of stress and anxiety that is hard to avoid. What can school and centre leaders do to make work healthier for those they work with?

One thing is to realise that stress is not normal, and aim to create conditions that make work joyful. People are at their best when they are in a state of relaxed concentration. Leaders can ask, “What am I doing to help people around me experience relaxed concentration?” That question can prompt leaders to consider such things as (1) is this the right time to introduce change, (2) what level of resourcing is needed to achieve our goals, and (3) does my approach to leadership produce unwarranted stress for those I work with?

Leadership behaviour is a source of stress for many workers. Of course, some leaders are abusive or abrasive in the way they interact with people. Some engage in bullying, where they target particular people at work and take pleasure from causing harm. More commonly, leaders who want to believe the best in others can tolerate or condone the bullying or abuse of others. But a leader doesn’t have to be hurtful to create stressful conditions at work.

When people are at work they can achieve a state of relaxed concentration if they are clear about what is expected, have some control over the decisions they make, are given support when they need it and can tell when they have achieved some success. When leaders give confusing directions, create feelings of insecurity, or when they micromanage by over-controlling and disempowering others, people experience stress.

Creating a healthy workplace does not happen by chance, especially in a world that treats stress as normal. Rather, it requires leadership skills and awareness of the impact that actions have on others. Make it your aim to create a workplace where relaxed concentration is the norm.

# Cosmology Check Up

By Phil Ramsey

The opening article of the newsletter discussed the connection between health, stress and the way that leaders choose to act. That connection raises a further question: why do leaders act the way they do? Why do some leaders act in ways that amplify stress while others find ways to generate relaxed concentration?

Clearly, skill plays a part. A leader may intend to produce relaxed concentration but, through ineptitude, create stressful conditions. If it was only a matter of skill, though, we would expect to see leaders learn—both from their experience and from training they seek out—and get better over time at achieving what they intend. Yet often leaders stay stuck in unhealthy patterns. Why?



This is not a new question. In 1960, Douglas McGregor published a classic book on management and leadership, *The Human Side of Enterprise*. The book discussed how leaders develop their own “cosmologies”: their views on how things work and how they need to act to get the results they want. Recent research generally supports the approach McGregor took.

## Theory X and Theory Y

McGregor illustrated his ideas by creating a contrast between two ways of thinking. One leader might hold to a set of assumptions about people that McGregor labelled ‘Theory X’. This theory or cosmology assumes that people are naturally lazy and driven by self-interest, generally dislike work, and are motivated to get rewards and avoid punishment. Theory Y, in contrast, assumes that work is a natural part of life, and that people will generally take responsibility, find enjoyment in what they accomplish and exercise self-direction.

Which theory is right? McGregor may have been personally more inclined toward Theory Y, but he did not set out to say that one set of assumptions was right and the other was wrong; if you want to you can find evidence to support either view. Rather, McGregor was most interested in how leaders respond to the assumptions they make.

Generally, we look for evidence to support or confirm what we already believe. The scientific method involves trying to find evidence that disproves what we believe to be true, but this is a method that has to be learned in order to overcome what we do by default. A leader who believes either theory will naturally notice evidence that supports their theory and will tend to overlook evidence that suggests their theory is wrong.

Further, theories tend to be self-perpetuating. If I believe that people are lazy and only respond to carrots and sticks, that is going to shape the way I go about exercising leadership. And, chances are, the theory will cause me to act in ways that make work unpleasant for others. People who work with me will become less engaged with work, more likely to slack off. My own actions will produce evidence to strengthen my assumptions.

Recent research has shown that another intriguing process is at work. If I believe that people cannot make good decisions for themselves, I will tend to 'micromanage', telling people what they should do about even insignificant details of their work. We know that micromanagement is frustrating and stressful to the person on the receiving end, but what is in it for the leader?

It turns out that when we have been involved in a piece of work we generally rate the results of the work more positively, whether they are or not. In other words, if we have had a hand in someone else's work, we will believe their work is better. Leaders think that their micromanagement pays off.

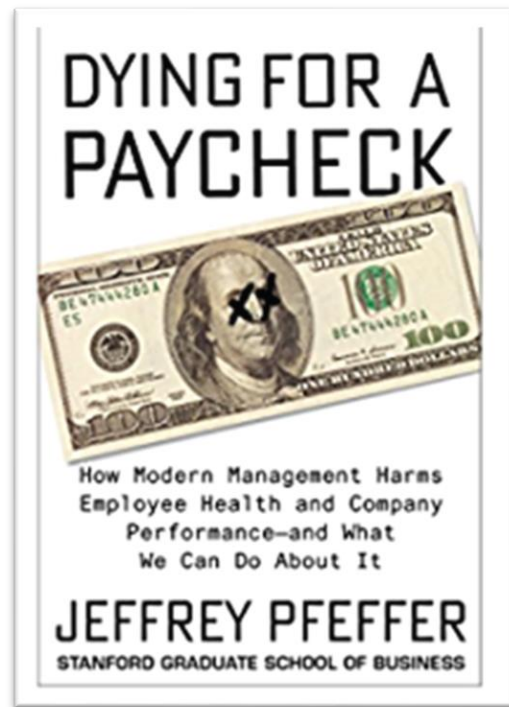
Leaders who want to create a healthy workplace in which relaxed concentration can thrive, need to go beyond holding others responsible for their own well-being. The challenge for leaders is to examine your own assumptions and the real outcomes they are producing. Given the impact that leadership has on health, the stakes are high.

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Dying for a Paycheck

By Phil Ramsey

Jeffrey Pfeffer is a professor of Organisational Psychology at Stanford University, and has written influential work on high performing teams and organisations. His latest book, *Dying for a Paycheck*, results from some of his frustration that organisations of all sorts have been so slow to adopt healthy practices that are good for workers, customers and the organisations themselves. Indeed, rather than becoming healthier, Pfeffer's research and analysis suggest that many people now assume that workplaces are by nature stressful and toxic, and this attitude is a large part of the problem. It encourages leaders to treat toxicity as normal.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter – August 2018*

As the title of the book suggests, the situation is serious. Since the 1970s, the Japanese have had a word – karoshi - for death by overwork. Knowing the danger, however, has not changed the way people and organisational leaders think about working too hard. Pfeffer estimates, on the basis of an extensive review of relevant research, that in the US at least 120,000 people each year die as a result of the stressful, toxic or insecure conditions in which they work.

Pfeffer's compares the situation to the issue of second-hand cigarette smoke. Because of the connection between second-hand smoke and increased risk of illness and death, governments around the world have legislated to keep environments smoke-free. Yet the risks associated with workplace factors are higher than those of second-hand smoke.

How can change come about? Pfeffer suggests we consider how business leaders have changed their attitudes regarding pollution. Two or three decades ago, many organisations gave little thought to damage they might be doing to the physical environment through pollution. Societal attitudes changed, however, leading governments to establish higher standards for environmental protection, and organisations today are very different, being much more thoughtful in decisions that might damage the physical environment. Pfeffer hopes that the same process can bring about changes to how we all think about the social conditions in which we work and the impact organisations have on the social environment.

*Dying for a Paycheck* reviews compelling research that outlines key areas that need attention. Pfeffer makes the point that we typically try to make individuals responsible for their own work-life balance, but it is really a responsibility of leaders and organisations. Organisations, for instance, develop cultures in which long hours, toxic interactions and feelings of insecurity are treated as normal, and these cultures need to change in order for individuals to make healthier choices.

The book deals primarily with the US context which, according to Pfeffer, stands out as a particularly unhealthy example. Even so, there are important lessons for every workplace. This is not a book that will leave you feeling cheerful or upbeat. However, it sounds an important and urgent warning to leaders. Don't accept unhealthy attitudes and practices as normal. Take action to protect the people you work with. There are plenty of examples - which Pfeffer also reviews - of organisations that have acted to make work healthier and better designed for humans.

# Questions for Leading, Liking and Learning

By Phil Ramsey

Questions are among the most important tools of leadership and teaching. While most people in education would readily accept that questions can be powerful, this importance is not always reflected in how they are used. Because questions can make such a difference to our professional practice it is important to regularly review how we use them. Let's use this time to consider:

- ❖ ***Why are questions important in education?***
- ❖ ***How do they work?***
- ❖ ***How can we increase the power of our questions?***



Questions play an important role in leadership in part because of their close - and complex - connection with emotional intelligence. Leadership in schools and centres involves more than getting things done and bringing about important change. These visible results are clearly important, but lose their value if they are achieved in a way that undermines the future of the school or centre. An emotionally intelligent leader finds ways to challenge people to achieve important results while strengthening relationships. What part do questions play in this?

## Two Birds, One Stone

Leaders have long struggled with the dilemma of how to navigate the dual demands of 'tasks' and 'relationships'. Some leaders are inclined to push for results while others naturally seek to maintain positive relationships. Questions, when used well, provide an important mechanism for "killing two birds with one stone".

Research consistently shows that we respond positively when people ask us questions. In job interviews, for instance, the person being interviewed is generally expected to give information and focus on "selling themselves". But job candidates who ask questions of their interviewers build rapport and come across as more competent while also finding out important information about the position. Questions help the 'askers' learn, while also making them more likeable to their conversation partners.

This is more than making a good impression. Asking questions is the basis for developing emotional intelligence. Questions will help you to pay attention to others, making you more aware of their emotional state. You get to see the impact of your words and actions. And, because you are listening when people describe how they feel, you are more likely to empathise and express compassion. In this way, questions set up a 'virtuous cycle'. Emotionally intelligent people tend to ask more questions, and the process of asking questions helps people develop their emotional intelligence.

The virtuous cycle of emotional intelligence depends on the quality of the questions being asked. No doubt you have been on the receiving end of questions that did not generate any positive feelings. To understand what makes a good question, we need to know how questions work.



## Tension and Resolution

The most basic form of motivation is the process of tension and resolution. When there is a gap between what we want and what we have we experience tension. When the gap closes, we get a satisfying feeling of resolution. We enjoy novels when the author creates tension and then resolves it. We enjoy sports because of the tension created and the feeling of resolution once the outcome is decided. Questions work because of the same process. A good question creates tension that answers can resolve. So questions provoke a search for a satisfying answer. And questions set up the possibility of something humans love: the feeling of resolution.

How can questions go wrong? Sometimes they create tension that cannot be resolved. If you are asked “Why are you being so stupid?” or “Couldn’t you see that would never work?” there is no way to answer while preserving your dignity. Some questions are too complex to answer. And if you are asked a series of questions and your answers are never acknowledged, you feel as if you are being interrogated. Tension quickly leads to more tension, rather than to any feeling of resolution. Questions sometimes feel as if they are being used as weapons, and those on the receiving end sometimes learn to stay quiet rather than risk being hurt by the tension they create.

Leaders and teachers who use questions thus need to develop their awareness of the tension being created and the degree to which others are experiencing satisfying resolution from the question and answer process.

## What Questions Reveal

Questions are truly powerful. When we ask them well, they challenge people to learn and give us valuable information about how they feel and what they think. The answers people give can shake up our own thinking and provoke us to go in new directions. What many find most fascinating is that, when we ask good questions, people tend to like us more. Why should that be the case?

When people use questions to make judgements about our ‘likeability’ they are doing so with good reason. The use or non-use reveals important things about how we think about ourselves and others. People who spend the majority of time in conversation ‘telling’ rather than ‘asking’ reveal that they are primarily interested in themselves. If they use questions to make a point, rather than genuinely seek information, it reveals an unlikeable tendency to be controlling. Genuine questions reveal an interest in a different point of view. And follow-up questions that dig deeper into answers given, reveal the questioner is attentive and curious, important signs of being respectful.

Consider the implications. Questions are revealing, and they are a lever for change. If we can change how we ask questions we change our leadership. We become better able to bring about change while strengthening relationships. People like us more. We convey respect for others and grow in our emotional intelligence. Clearly, these are important reasons to give attention to how we use questions.

# Types of Questions

By Phil Ramsey

How can you expand the range of questions you ask?

It is important to recognise different types of question and understand the impact they have. As you become more discriminating about various types of question you will be able to use them more effectively. Before reading on, try making a list of 10 questions you could ask a colleague about a current work problem. You can then use the list to explore the types of questions we discuss.



It is important, for instance, to understand the difference between **open** and **closed** questions. Closed questions are those that can be answered with one word, usually a 'yes' or 'no'. Open questions create an opportunity for people to answer at length. Imagine you have a story to tell - one that would put facts into a meaningful context - but you are only asked closed questions. You would feel frustrated. And sometimes people are frustrated that they use questions but only get brief answers. On reflection they realise that they have been using closed questions and getting what they ask for.

Look at your list. How many of the questions are open and how many are closed? Closed questions are not 'bad'; they can be very useful in pinning down important information that you need, for instance by asking 'Do you mean...' or 'Are you saying...'. Relying on them reduces your effectiveness. How might you reword the closed questions on your list to make them open?

Edward DeBono suggested that another important distinction is between **shooting** and **fishing** questions. DeBono creates the image of a hunt for information, and shooting and fishing are different approaches to hunting. Shooting involves identifying your target, taking aim and then firing. So, shooting questions are aimed at finding a specific piece of information. Shooting questions are used to 'bag' the information you have decided in advance that you are after. The person you ask either has the information or does not. A shooting question might be "What does research show is the primary reason for...?"

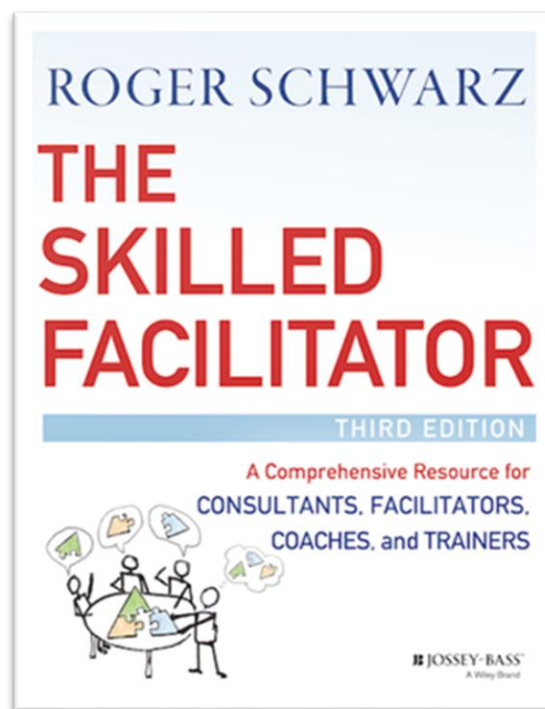
Fishing involves a different approach. You throw your line over the side of your boat, put the hook where you think there are fish. You may hope for a particular kind of fish, though (in most cases) you are not aiming at a specific fish. Whatever you catch is going to be interesting, even if it isn't what you expect. A fishing question might be "Why do you think that happened?" or "What could we do to solve this problem?"

This is intriguing to think about. Sometimes the questions we asked are designed to lead someone to the answer we want or expect: we are shooting for the right answer, or checking that our conversation partner knows the information we want them to. Fishing questions hold the possibility of surprise. The answer we get might be something that changes how we think. When asking fishing questions we make ourselves vulnerable, ready to learn from our conversation partner. We are no longer in a position of 'expert'; our questions make us partners in the conversation. Perhaps this is another secret to leadership, learning and likeability!

## BOOK REVIEW: **The Skilled Facilitator**

By Phil Ramsey

In the opening article we considered what our questions might reveal about us, and sometimes what is revealed isn't very attractive! It is tempting to turn a blind eye to information about ourselves that is embarrassing or threatening. But this blindness, whether deliberate or unintended, makes us less effective - and less likeable - especially when working in groups. Helping groups and individuals understand the implications of the way they work and develop healthy team processes requires skilled facilitation. Roger Schwartz's book *The Skilled Facilitator* is a fascinating and comprehensive resource for people concerned about helping groups function well.



*'In the Moment' Newsletter - October 2018*

Like many leading thinkers and practitioners in this area, Schwartz was trained by Chris Argyris at Harvard Business School, and builds on Argyris' concept of double-loop learning and the core values of effective facilitation and group process. Schwartz outlines a robust model of the way group effectiveness is built upon the group's context, structure and process, and discusses what the contribution skilled facilitation can make to strengthening these elements.

Schwartz powerfully illustrates what is involved in facilitation work by using Argyris' "left-hand column" technique. A page is displayed in two columns, with the transcript of what people say to one another shown in the right-hand column. The left-hand column is used to show what the facilitator thinks while listening to others. It graphically shows how when we treat our thoughts as undiscussable, group processes quickly get distorted. It also helps the reader see how values of (1) valid information, (2) informed choice, (3) internal commitment, and (4) compassion can be put into practice to minimise embarrassment and threat while discussing the 'undiscussable'.

This is a book full of gems, particularly for readers who want to take facilitation and group process to an advanced level. It shows how skills and values can inform 'third party' facilitators\* in their work, while also considering how they might be used by group members and leaders. The chapter 'The Facilitative Leader' provides terrific insight into what school and centre leaders can do to empower the individuals and teams they work with.

*\*A third-party facilitator is a person who helps the group from the outside: a consultant rather than a group member.*