

A close-up photograph of yellow fern fronds in the top left corner.

# in the moment

# 2020

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# Building Resilience for an Uncertain Future

By Phil Ramsey

What are you expecting of 2020? What is the year likely to hold? What development will be of real value to you and your colleagues?



Making predictions is a fascinating business. On the one hand it is notoriously difficult. Years often end up very different to what we thought they would. On the other hand, when it comes to things like professional development we need to look ahead and ponder what might be around the corner. Serious development takes time, so the efforts we make need to produce some benefit at a future time. If we wait to see how things turn out, we'll be too late to develop the skills we need to cope. We are preparing ourselves and our schools and centres for an uncertain future. One prediction that is relatively easy to make - at least for most people - is that the year ahead will involve unexpected demands. For many, the demands they are already dealing with feel overwhelming. Increased resilience is, therefore, near the top of the list for many people when it comes to professional development.

But how do you develop resilience? Many people acknowledge that it is an important quality. They may even be determined to be more resilient, yet still find themselves struggling with stress and anxiety. It doesn't help that some of the commonly accepted ways of thinking about stress leave people feeling helpless. For example, commonly accepted theories of stress include the idea that stress is connected with events: some of the things that happen to us are minimally stressful, and some events involve a lot of "stress points". The implication is that we should keep track of how much stress we are under and keep it within reasonable limits. The problem is, of course, that we aren't in control of the universe, and can't predict the events and demands that are going to come our way. And we can't always turn down work, just because we have lots already going on in our lives.

Psychologist Derek Roger (*author of 'Work Without Stress: A Resilient Mindset for Lasting Success'*) provides a new approach to understanding resilience and stress that addresses these concerns. His ideas about stress fit with common sense, and they have implications for specific practices - new ways of behaving - that can make a difference to our resilience.

## Stress and Common Sense

While we may like to think that our behaviour is sensible, often it doesn't stand up to careful scrutiny. For instance, most of us spend time worrying about the challenges that confront us. But if worrying was effective, InterLEAD would offer courses on how to do it better. No one runs "Effective Worrying" courses, because no one would enrol in them. Common sense tells people that worrying doesn't help.

We can take common sense even further. Worrying not only "doesn't help"; it makes things worse. Worrying distracts us from what we need to be doing. Meeting the challenges we face in our schools and centres involves doing things: gathering information, evaluating data, making decisions and taking action. To get things done we have to focus our attention and get on with it. The real solution to feeling under pressure is to get work finished so the pressure goes away. Common sense and observation of ourselves and others tells us worrying just interferes with this.

Roger's research into the physiology of worry led him to some important conclusions. First, there is no such thing as "good stress". When we are stressed our bodies are preparing us for "fight or flight", which is a useful immediate reaction to a threat. However, if we prolong these reactions by worrying, the results are bad for us physically.

Secondly, it is useful to distinguish between "pressure" and "stress". The demands of work put us under pressure. Everyone is under pressure, and an increase in the demands placed on us means added pressure. Resilience is the ability to focus attention and get on with the work that will address these demands. Stress is what we experience when, instead of getting on with it, we ruminate: allowing our minds to get caught up with negative thoughts around questions like "Why has this happened to me?", "Who's to blame?" and "What disasters are going to come upon me if I don't get this right?"

## **Changing Behaviour to Build Resilience**

This means that there are actions you can take to reduce stress. All of us have had the experience of allowing thoughts to drift and then pulling our attention back to the work at hand. Start noticing when this happens. This is a situation where awareness is curative: the more you notice, the less you'll do it.

There are also skills involved in controlling your attention. Worrying or rumination always involves having your thoughts go to either the past or the future. Notice how that is the case with the questions in the earlier paragraph. Focusing our attention on what needs to be done always means being in the present, the here and now. One way that we can gain control of our thoughts is to "come to our senses" by actually focusing on what our eyes, ears and other sensory organs are telling us. If you catch yourself staring blankly out the window, make sure you look at something that is out there. Doing so focuses your attention again, allowing you to direct it to the work that needs to be done.

A further healthy practice is to find a "stress buddy"; someone who also wants to reduce the amount of time they spend in unproductive worrying. When we inevitably experience negative emotions at work, we need an alternative to drifting off into personal rumination. It is much more effective to go and talk to someone about how we are feeling, particularly if both parties to the conversation are working at being skilled listeners and coaches for the other.

Some years ago we decided to call this newsletter 'In The Moment' because we realised that being present - attentive to what is happening here and now - is a key to effective leadership. It turns out that being in the moment may also be a key to reduced stress and productive work.

# Leading a Resilient Team

By Phil Ramsey

It makes sense that anxiety and resilience should primarily be considered personal issues. Derek Roger's work has emphasized that people can adopt practices that enable them to control their own attention, and that this is the key to resilience. At the same time, leadership practices can have a powerful impact on the extent to which those in a school or centre experience stress.



Another way of viewing it is that, while people throughout a school or centre can take responsibility for their own resilience, leaders can do their best to make sure that resilience comes easily to others. If you are a leader, what can you do? What leadership practices make a difference to others?

Management historian Art Kleiner has written of how organisations of all sorts act as amplifiers of executive personality. People look to leaders for clues as to how they should act. This is why it is so important to have emotionally stable in leadership positions.

Perhaps you have been in a high stakes situation, with pressure seeming to come from all sides. If you look to people in leadership positions and see them freaking out, you have fertile grounds for your own stress to go wild. If leaders are stable, calm, and communicating clearly you will be far less likely to get caught up in negative rumination.

And it is not only a matter of when the stakes are high; some leaders adopt ways of communicating that take others out of the moment just in day-to-day interactions. Some leaders resort to threats, thinking that the motivating power of fear will produce results.

Roger's work explains why fear and toxic leadership does not work. Toxicity generates negative rumination, undermining the ability of people to keep their attention focused on their work. Worrying simply interferes with performance, preventing people from meeting their potential.

Research into effective leadership consistently highlights the need to both (1) have high standards in terms of what you expect from people, and (2) engage with people in ways that are respectful and relationship-building. Where there are problems that need to be addressed, effective leaders de-personalize issues by discussing behaviour that needs to change rather than focusing on the personalities of the people involved.

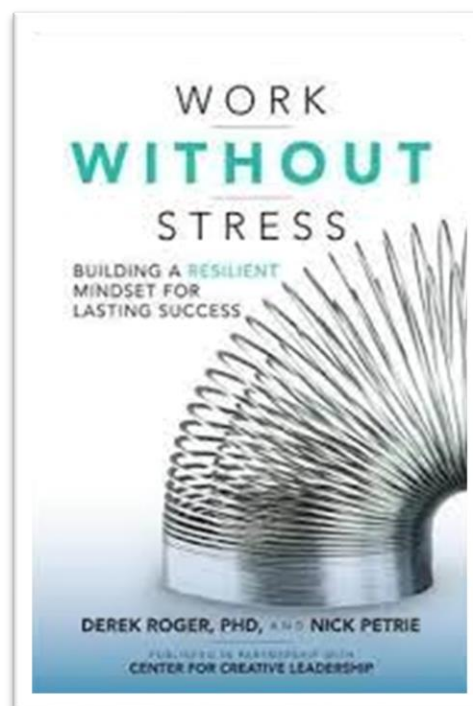
Roger's research has highlighted a key competence associated with leadership that encourages resilience: detached compassion. Achieving the kind of balance discussed in this article requires that leaders are empathetic: sensitive to the emotions of others. The danger for leaders is that emotional sensitivity can involve taking on the emotions that others are expressing. When someone is anxious and upset, they certainly want a leader who will listen and understand. If listening causes the leader to become anxious and upset, however, little good can be accomplished. Leaders need to stay calm and stable, helping people to bring their attention under control and take the action or make the decisions that can improve the situation. Detached compassion involves seeing things from the other person's perspective, while remembering that it is their perspective.

Resilience is highly likely to be important for your school or centre in the year ahead. Take some time early on to consider what you can do to develop personal and leadership practices that will encourage resilience in yourself and others. As you dwell on it, you decide that it is not really your fault, and you start getting angry at the person you offended for being overly sensitive. You decide to vent your feelings by talking about the situation to colleagues, which does little to make you feel better, but makes them feel depressed.

# BOOK REVIEW: **Work Without Stress: A Resilient Mindset for Lasting Success**

By Phil Ramsey

I was initially sceptical about the promise that authors Derek Roger and Nick Petrie appear to make in the title of this book. We live at a time that many commentators are calling a “new age of anxiety”. It is clear that plenty of the anxiety and stress people experience stems from work, and I have talked to many leaders who feel overwhelmed by the complexities they face. Given that the demands on people continue to grow, is it reasonable to suggest that work can be stress-free? If the book hadn’t been recommended by a respected colleague, I might not have bothered to read it.



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As I read I got a clearer understanding of the authors’ intention. Plus I was impressed with the quality of writing and the evidence on which the work is based. I don’t think Roger and Petrie are really suggesting that we can totally rid ourselves of stress. Work is often demanding and overwhelming. But given that is the case, it makes sense to become skilled at practices that really make a difference. I may not be able to perfectly control my attention, to the point where I altogether avoid negative rumination and worry, but by aiming to do so I can get a lot better at it and make some important gains. If we do live in an “age of anxiety”, then current approaches are not making a difference and we really do need better ways to address stress.

‘*Work Without Stress*’ is based on research into the psychology and physiology of stress, which Derek Roger began publishing in the 1980s. Nick Petrie was an early student of the work who found it personally beneficial and has been teaching the course in businesses for over 15 years.

This background is evident in how the book is written. Both authors have years of experience in explaining complex ideas to a variety of people. They have found ways of developing ideas and draw on examples that they have found to be tried and true. While they don’t hold back from showing, for example, how biological systems - such as the action of adrenalin and cortisol - are involved, they explain it in terms that are readily accessible, or developed in depth in appendices so it doesn’t interfere with the flow of the book. My sense is that most readers will find the work accessible, interesting and thought-provoking. Plus, as a reader you will come away with some practical steps you can take to manage your experience of work.

The work resonates with some of the concepts we have used for some time at InterLEAD: for example, it encourages being in the moment, ensuring that leadership is non-toxic, using questions that focus attention on learning. Discussion of the impact of micro-management and perfectionism is clearly aligned with what we have learned in our work with school and centre leaders. At the same time, it has challenged me to think about some of the traditional approaches we take to change management and issues of resilience. It is a book I am happy to recommend, especially to those who find work stressful and are looking to build their resilience.

# Leading Through the Unknown

By Phil Ramsey

What unusual and uncertain times we live in. We haven't ever faced this situation before. At the time of writing, New Zealand is in "lockdown" and schools are about to begin a period of teaching students at a distance. How long will it be before things get back to normal? We don't know. We haven't been here before, yet we need to act.

School leaders may know that they are by no means 'experts' at what is now required of teachers, yet they still need to provide direction in this uncertain situation. At the same time they need to manage their own emotions; as the Prime Minister has said, this is a time to be kind, both to others and to yourself.

At InterLEAD, we have long worked with school and centre leaders to help them find ways through the challenges they face; challenges that usually involve a mix of the familiar and the new. We have drawn on a variety of concepts, techniques and principles from experts in organisational learning like Adam Kahane, Amy Edmondson, and Adam Grant (see the Book Review in this issue of *In the Moment*), to provide useful ways of thinking about leadership. Let's review some of the guiding ideas that can help leaders when they are supporting others as they navigate in an unknown territory.



## Experimentation

It is one thing to skilfully follow a well-travelled path. It is quite another to move into the unknown. Perhaps you've had the experience of wading across a shallow river, feeling for the next stone before committing yourself to forward movement. On the well-travelled path, you can work out your route in advance, keep your eye out for familiar patterns and travel confidently ahead while looking out for the unusual. In the river you take an action—perhaps tentatively—leading to learning and more action.

Imagine a group of teachers, anxiously pondering how they can go about teaching students online. How can they be helped to experiment with a new way of connecting with and teaching their students?

Reassure them that there are principles of learning that do not change. Fundamentals of teaching and learning still apply. Rather than become prescriptive about what you might expect to see in their lessons, discuss with them the three or four fundamentals you would want to see in a lesson. Then encourage them to take the first step and learn from it. Bells and whistles can be added later. First steps might not engage with the entire class, but initial efforts can be expanded in the next iteration. You are organizing for learning through multiple iterations, rather than organizing people to perform.

An initial first step is sometimes termed a 'foray'. Keep a look out for people taking small steps into the unknown. Be curious about what they have tried, how they think it worked and what they have learned. If you see people trying out similar forays, connect them with one another. People will naturally feel anxious if they feel they are doing something quite different to their colleagues, and even more so if they



are physically isolated and only imagining what other teachers are up to. Knowing that someone else is trying a similar experiment can be profoundly reassuring.

Creative experimentation is typically a blend of old and new, but because of a process psychologists call 'anchoring', getting the sequence right has a big impact on the outcome. Whatever you start with typically acts as an anchor that determines how inventive you allow yourself to be. If you start with the old and familiar, then try to add something new and dramatic, often the result will be not that much different to what you have done in the past. The alternative is to start with something radically different, then stabilize it by adding on something familiar. Of course, for most teachers the shift to an online classroom is radical enough on its own, so the challenge becomes how to add what they and their students are already familiar with.

## Organizing for Learning

While teachers are at the forefront of experimentation, leaders have a key role to play in keeping the process moving forward. Part of that is providing support and encouragement, as we will discuss in the following article. And a large part of the role is to make sure learning by teachers is not left to chance; the school needs to be organized for learning.

Being organized involves having a sound process for reviewing:

- ❑ What has been tried?
- ❑ What outcomes were achieved?
- ❑ What will be done differently in the next iteration?

It is also good to question:

- ❑ What standards and goals guided the process of learning?
- ❑ Are these are still appropriate or do they need tweaking for the new context?

Whatever process you use, it needs to be one that is easy to communicate. We have had good results using Tim Gallwey's **STOP** process. The mnemonic stands for the four steps of:

1. Step back from what you are doing;
2. Think about it (using questions such as those mentioned earlier
3. Organize your thoughts (in particular, work out what action needs to follow and who will take it); and
4. Proceed.

This can become a familiar way for you to review progress with your teachers as they work through this unfamiliar learning landscape.

Keep in mind that you need to be kind, not only to teachers, but also to yourself. You may be much more familiar with leading a school where planning and robust systems are normal. Leading in unknown territory may be entirely new. Like your teachers you will be engaged in experimentation, so recognize the challenge, celebrate progress, find supportive people to talk to, and be reasonable in what you expect of yourself.

# Supporting Innovators

By Phil Ramsey



At times as leaders we find ourselves drawn more toward those who “fit in” with the well-established processes and culture we have built over years, rather than those inclined to experimentation and change. Leadership is so much easier when you are dealing with “good soldiers” who happily go along with your plans (even if they are flawed), rather than with non-conformists who seemed to question everything. The need for experimentation calls on leaders to examine their own reaction to people who think outside the square. Realistically, leaders need to encourage everyone to get more comfortable outside the square.

In his book ‘Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World’, Adam Grant has explored what is involved in encouraging people to be original. Principles Grant discusses can help school and centre leaders reflect on how they approach experimentation. Some key ideas you might consider include the following:

**Over-Communicate:** Many leaders are surprised at how often they need to repeat important messages until they get taken seriously. Usually leaders have spent hours pondering what they are going to do before they act. When communicating it is easy to assume that others - who have not done the same amount of pondering - will quickly understand what you say. Further, the first reactions to hearing about something like a “Zoom platform” are anxious thoughts like “I’ve never heard of this”, “Should I know this already?” and “What if I can’t learn to use it?” Just using a term like “Zoom” multiple times helps people get used to the idea that it exists and is not something completely foreign.

**Rigour Through Explanation:** Experimentation will always involve failure. People try things that don’t work, or which fall short of important standards. Often, they do so without realizing; they might consider their efforts to be a success. The leader gets the tricky task of reviewing the failure to ensure that lessons are learned and adjustments get made, all the while trying not to crush the spirit of those involved. Ineffective reviews tend to be rule-based, emphasizing what to do and what not to do. Effective reviews involve explanation. They might follow a process of:

1. This is the standard that we need to achieve; and Here is how you did in comparison to that standard.
2. Let me explain why this is important to our students.
3. What could you do differently next time?

When people understand the principles that underpin the judgements a leader is making, especially when the leader acknowledges the effort they have been making in their work, they feel they have greater freedom to try new approaches.

**Encouraging Emotional Intelligence:** Experimentation is an emotional process. An empathetic desire to make a difference for students often drives educational innovation. Along with that can be anxious thoughts about what might go wrong. Encouraging people to be calm may mean both less anxiety and less motivation to experiment. An alternative approach is to help people reframe their feelings. Being ‘nervous’ and being ‘excited’ feel pretty much the same. As a leader, you can acknowledge that we are trying something new and it’s good and normal to feel excited as you try it for the first time.

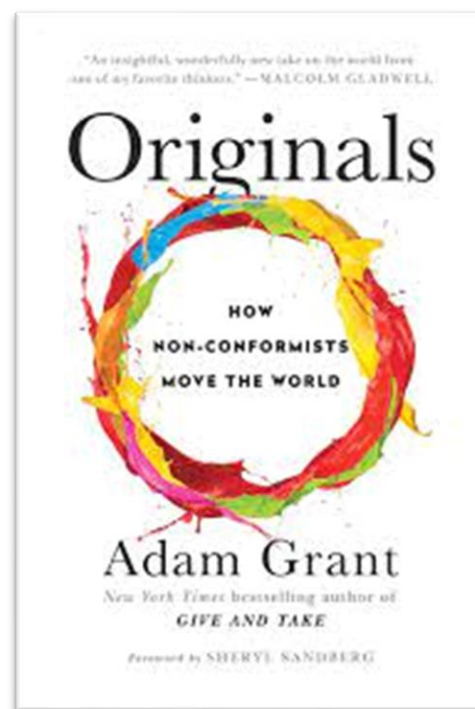
Give some careful thought to how you provide a supportive climate in which innovation can grow.



## BOOK REVIEW: **Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World**

By Phil Ramsey

I picked up Adam Grant's book *Originals* because I had been so impressed with his earlier work 'Give and Take'. Grant is an outstanding academic writer: he makes complex ideas accessible and practical. In 'Give and Take' he explained how "Reciprocity Theory" could help people understand how they could have a balanced view of generosity and giving. With his latest book he explores why some people are more willing to embrace risk-taking and innovation, and what it takes to be successful when you don't conform to accepted ways of working.



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*Originals* is also an excellent book. It is evident that Grant is a very good teacher, used to helping people get their heads around complex ideas. He makes good use of illustrative examples and cases as he brings ideas to life. And he draws his stories from a range of fields including sports, politics, entertainment and business. He includes his own experiences drawn from working as a consultant for a range of leading companies.

*Originals* uses these stories to address a range of issues, including: what is at the heart of creativity; how successful innovators can communicate in ways that make it easier for others to consider their ideas; how to foster creative risk-taking in others; and how to encourage innovative cultures in organizations. Grant has a clear desire to go beyond theory and make a difference to how readers will put ideas into practice. The clearest evidence of this is the final chapter, where he summarizes "Actions for Impact": practices that can make a difference for innovators, leaders, teachers, parents, and others who want to encourage creativity. You will have seen some of these practices referred to in other articles in this newsletter.

The book is strongly evidence-based. Grant enjoys taking intriguing research results and drawing out the implications for practice. For instance, one chapter explores the impact of birth order in families, why many creative risk-takers tend to be later-born rather than first-born. How does birth order influence how you are parented? And how can we use this knowledge to consider how the impact of our interactions on the creativity of others?

Like any good teacher, Grant makes effective use of distinctions. Many of us are used to thinking about procrastination as detrimental to work. Grant seems to take real pleasure in overturning simplistic views. In this case he shows that there is a difference between perfectionistic procrastination, which achieves very little, and strategic procrastination practiced by many innovators. Similarly, he shows how research requires us to rethink simplistic ideas about 'groupthink', to gain a better understanding of how leaders can simultaneously encourage dissension and group cohesion.

The result is a challenging book that prompts careful reflection, especially in a time when we need people to take original approaches to emerging challenges. I found it took much longer to read than 'Give and Take'. It took more work to work through the examples and draw out the implications for personal practice. All in all, it was well worth the effort.

# Leading in Crisis: Assumptions, Emotions and Ethics

By Dr Phil Ramsey

What an emotional and exhausting time we've been having. COVID-19 has turned the world upside down, required us to make dramatic changes to how we work, and created incredible disruption for the entire educational community. While we would love for it to be over, this worldwide pandemic will undoubtedly continue to be the source of trouble, concern and frustration for some time. So it will continue to leave its mark on our schools and centres, whether we have active cases in our communities or not.



As an educational leader, how have you coped? No doubt there were times in the last few months when you felt like you had endured enough. The situation presented one challenge after another. Often it seemed overwhelming, as we tried to make wise decisions when everything seemed so confusing and complex.

While working your way through a crisis, one of the ways to safeguard your resilience and protect your school or centre is to reflect on what is happening, seek to understand some of the processes that are taking place, and see what lessons we can formulate for inevitable crises in the future. For this reason, we decided to take some time to review what we know about leadership in times of crisis, drawing on the work of Crisis Management expert Ian Mitroff (see the book review in this newsletter). Mitroff's work is especially valuable because it helps leaders understand why crises are such an emotional challenge.

## Crisis of Assumptions

Something is a crisis because it demands new ways of thinking. In a crisis the old approach just gets us further into the mess. But thinking in new ways means challenging some of the assumptions we hold on to most strongly. This is what makes them so emotionally challenging.

Some of the assumptions that get shaken up in a crisis include deeply held beliefs that: the world is safe and people are basically good; the world is good and just, so bad things won't happen to good people; that crises are limited in scope, so shouldn't affect our part of the world; and that I am a good person who doesn't deserve to be on the receiving end of what is happening. Of course, most disasters happen in other parts of the world, and over time that further embeds these ideas of how things should be.

How do people, communities and organisations react when a crisis lands on them? One of the first and strongest reactions is denial; because we didn't deserve the crisis, it can't be happening, and it certainly can't get any worse than it is now.

Denial is an equal opportunity reaction. Everyone who isn't emotionally prepared can be affected, and that includes those in leadership roles. Of course, time spent in denial is time that can't be spent actually working on the crisis. Leaders who are in denial - a completely normal and understandable reaction - may get caught up in looking for others to blame or reassuring everyone that the problems aren't real. Leadership denial allows things to go from bad to worse, leading to another emotional response: betrayal.

When people have their deepest assumptions shaken - when the world isn't just, when crises are right at home - they feel betrayed. Their leaders should have been prepared. The world isn't meant to be like this, and those in charge were meant to make sure of that, to make sure we were protected. With betrayal comes diminished trust.

Perhaps you have seen these emotions on display at a national and international level in response to the pandemic. Have you seen denial - by leaders and people in general - leading to inaction? Was there a feeling of betrayal when systems that were meant to protect the New Zealand border were shown to be more fragile than people expected?

Keep in mind, it might be easier to see these reactions when it is other people's leadership under the microscope. The same interplay of assumptions and emotions may be happening in your school or centre. What can you do?

## **Being Proactive With Crises**

A crisis is certain to affect the emotions. As a leader, efforts you make to prepare for crises ahead of time, reduces the amount of time everyone spends in denial. Preparation involves thinking through the rich array of things that can go wrong; working out troubling scenarios enables leaders to confront fears ahead of time. The challenge is, doing so may seem like a waste of time: it's easy to think, "That will never happen to us, so why spend time contemplating it?" Getting past that view is a key to being proactive.

Further, preparing for crisis involves getting serious about ethics. Earlier we considered the role assumptions play in emotions. When the world is not safe or fair and when people are not basically good, deep assumptions are shaken. But why? We assume these things because we want to live in a world that is safe and fair, and filled with good people.

Now consider: what happens in a crisis - with people already feeling stressed and exhausted - if they find that those in their own school or centre are not being safe, act in ways that are not fair, do bad things to good people, tell lies or bully others? At the time when people feel a desperate need to move toward a better world, they find they are part of an organisation that is moving in the opposite direction.

You may be hoping that the COVID-19 pandemic is over and life can return to normal. While New Zealand had early success in responding to the virus, it continues to be a global crisis. How will your school or centre deal with a re-occurrence, or a crisis of a different sort? Any crisis requires new ways of feeling, thinking and acting. A key to preparing your school or centre is to prepare in advance, and at the heart of preparation is examination of the ethics that shape the decisions you make as a leader.

# Undoing the Splits

By Dr Phil Ramsey

Like many people, you may feel a little uncomfortable discussing the role spirituality plays in leadership. Yet, Ian Mitroff considers 'Spiritual IQ' a key factor in effective leadership. What he means by spirituality is based on decades of research into how people react to crises and what they look for in leaders. How he defines spirituality may be quite different to what you expect; he is careful, for instance, to distinguish between spirituality and religion. And what he has to say has been reinforced by leadership experts like Adam Kahane. Let's consider what it might mean to develop your Spiritual IQ.



We live in a world that is marked by fragmentation. People are divided in all sorts of ways. Current protests around the world highlight the feeling many have - that communities are fragmented on the basis of race. Political divisions cause fragmentation. Citizens of one country feel disconnected from those of others. And fragmentation happens at a personal level as well. Many people feel they can't bring their whole selves to work; that they are expected to compartmentalise their feelings and their values, separately from the decisions they have to make to get work done.

The nature of a crisis is to widen this feeling of being split apart. Things feel more split apart than ever. People feel separated from one another, from their organisations and community, and from the sense of purpose they may have had.

At times leaders respond to crisis with actions that make the splits worse. They might demand that people make decisions without consideration for emotions, as though it is best to split apart thinking from feeling. Or they may set aside ethics in order to get things done. You will have seen the debate in various countries about when to open up the economy, emphasising a split between what was good for health and good for business. Many leaders seemed surprised that people weren't prepared to ignore their fears and emotions and just go back to work.

Spiritual IQ is about having the capacity to help people feel integrated - that their emotions, thinking, and ethical standards are all of a piece - and to be connected with everything else. A key ability is to think systemically, understanding that things are connected and working for the good of the whole. At a time of crisis, it means understanding that people need to grieve over what has been lost in order to restore meaning and move forward.

Adam Kahane expresses the same idea as Mitroff by calling for the need for leaders to balance power and love. Power is the desire to achieve what is important to you. Love is drive to undo the fragmentation or splitting that leaves people feeling isolated. Either one without the other is unhealthy and unsustainable. Learning to balance the two involves giving attention to whichever drive is weakest and being prepared to 'stumble' before you can move fluidly between the two.

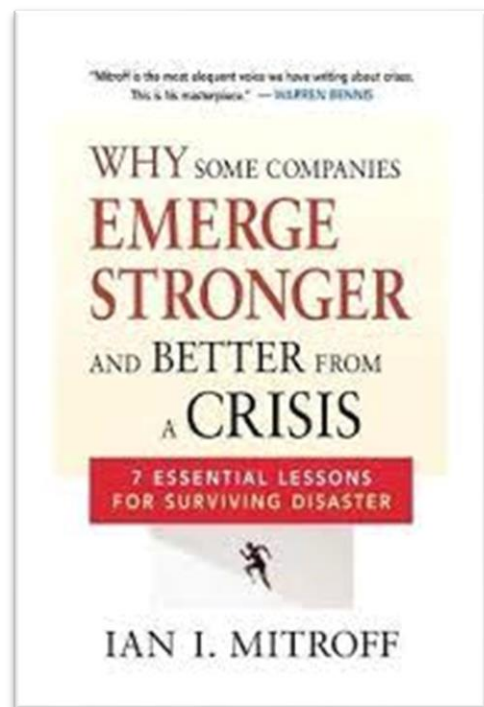
What does your school or centre need? Have recent crises left people feeling fragmented or disconnected from one another? Look for an opportunity to practice healing the splits that stand out to you. And as you do, keep in mind that you don't have to be brilliant at doing so; like most people you will probably need to build this important capability over time.

# BOOK REVIEW:

## Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better from a Crisis

By Phil Ramsey

Ian Mitroff is the person to turn to if you want to learn about crisis management. It is a business discipline that emerged in the 1980s when companies started having to deal with unexpected disasters, and Mitroff led many of the early efforts to understand what it takes to be successful. Many consider him the founder of the discipline of crisis management and he has been a prolific writer on the subject. This book is one he wrote several years after the 9/11 attack in the US, summarizing key lessons organisations of all sorts can learn about crisis preparedness.



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*'Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger...'* deals with the complexity of crises in a way that leaders will find seriously challenging. You may have got a sense of this from the opening article in the newsletter. Dealing with crisis, Mitroff says, really tests a leader's emotional IQ. Denial is an easy trap to fall into. Responding to the emotions of others is particularly challenging. Yet leaders need other forms of IQ as well. There is an intellectual and creative challenge as leaders seek workable solutions. Political IQ is needed to generate engagement and movement forward. Leaders need to be able to redesign their organisations to give crisis management an effective voice in decisions. And Mitroff highlights the need for Spiritual IQ to address the damage crisis does to people's assumptions about life.

As well as drawing on the experiences of leaders and organisations he has worked with, Mitroff also reflects on the nature of US culture. He discusses the fears and myths that shape US society and how these make the country crisis prone. While Mitroff doesn't discuss New Zealand society, it's useful to reflect on how our own culture might play a role in shaping our responses to disaster.

The book reflects work Mitroff has done with a variety of organisations. It is clear that sustained hard work is involved. For many, crisis management is reactive only: managing the bad publicity once a disaster has already struck. Others prepare for a very limited range of potential crises, thinking that they will be sheltered from all but the most obvious threats. For crisis management to be more than superficial, Mitroff outlines the kinds of effort that can really make a difference.

Of course, that makes it a challenging book for a leader. There are sure to be areas where you can see there is work to be done, both personally and organisationally. As Mitroff argues, the frequency and complexity of crises is increasing, so crisis management has become central to effective leadership.



# Framing for the Future

By Dr Phil Ramsey

Like many leaders in schools and centres you may be wondering how you will wrap up 2020 and set up for 2021. Having endured a disruptive and often chaotic year so far, this is a bigger challenge than ever, and calls for some important though relatively subtle skills.



Ending the year is always a challenge for leaders. You want people to finish the year feeling good, despite the ups and downs they may have experienced. The degree to which people feel positive about the school or centre, the work they do, the people they do it with has a significant impact on the quality of their work, their creativity, and their willingness to contribute to change. And if they end the year feeling negative, they have plenty of time to ruminate and worry, so that gloominess can turn to misery!

In previous years the challenge might have been that individuals have had ups and downs with their performance or their personal experiences at work. This year everyone is at risk of ending the year with morale at a low ebb. How do you help people to take a positive view of a disastrous year?

As we've discussed in previous newsletters, credibility is important to leaders, particularly in times of crisis. So distorting the truth, while tempting, is a poor option. It will be hard to convince people that 2020 "wasn't so bad".

An alternative approach - framing how information is presented - comes from the business discipline of negotiation. Framing takes skill and self-awareness, but if mastered can become an important tool for leadership.

## Different Viewpoints

Information is always presented to us from a point of view, or within a particular "frame". It can usually be seen differently, and the shift in how it is framed makes a big difference in how we feel. Imagine you are buying an electric toothbrush and you have found the one you want at a store; it costs \$70. While you are looking at it, a friend comes by and tells you she has seen the same item in another store, 2 blocks down the street, for \$40. Would you walk to the other store to save \$30?

How about this situation? You are buying a mobile phone and the store you are in is selling it for \$1200. A friend tells you she has seen the same phone in a store 2 blocks down the street, for \$1170. Would you walk to the other store?

In both cases, the question could be thought of as, "Will you walk 2 blocks to save \$30?" But most people frame it in terms of the discount: the toothbrush is nearly half price, while the phone is only reduced by 2.5%. They will walk for the toothbrush but not the phone, even though the \$30 doesn't change.



At the university where I work, students will occasionally dispute the grade they received for an assignment. They might say something like: "I got 75%. The marker said I did XYZ incorrectly, but I don't think I should have lost so many marks for such a minor error!" How is framing involved here?

We naturally like to hold on to what is ours. In this case the student, perhaps based on marks given in the past, thinks they begin with - and somehow they "own" - the full 100 marks that are possible for the assignment, and the person grading the assignment has the job of taking their marks away from them. There is a sense of loss that many students feel deeply. Often the strong emotions will change when the student is helped to frame the situation differently. The student could think that they started with 0 marks, and the person doing the grading was convinced they had earned 75. To earn more they would have needed to do some things differently. In the first frame 25 marks had been lost. In the second frame 75 marks had been gained.

## Views of the Year

In the same way that a student can be helped to reframe how they view a grade, people in your school and centre - including you - can reframe what they have achieved. Left to chance, it's natural to think about how much less has been done this year than previously, or all the experiences and learning that have been lost. This 'default' approach is based on an expectation that things should at least be the same as they were last year, if not a little better. It is typical to take where we were a year ago as the 'referent point' against which we compare how well we are doing now.

Helping people feel more positive is not about convincing them that things have improved when they have not. It is helping them find a better referent point. Rather than compare where we are now to where we were in pre-COVID times, help people to make a comparison that is more reasonable.

What might that be? You could compare where you are now to what the most basic function of the centre or school has been: to provide a place where children are safe and supported. Perhaps you have gone beyond that to ensure that - at least for some - a fair amount of learning has also happened. And rather than think about how far short of 100% you have fallen on key measures, think in terms of how far you have built school life back up from the lowest point of the year.

Thinking in this way gives you a basis for reality-based positivity. You can be appreciative of the gains you have made. And you can also use that as the basis for setting goals about where you head for the rest of the term and heading into the next year. Make it your aim to have a positive impact on how people feel as the year wraps up.

# The Appreciation Formula

By Dr Phil Ramsey

A particularly positive thing leaders can do is express appreciation for what others have done. Yet this is not as straight forward as most leaders expect: it takes skill to deliver words of appreciation that have the impact you want. This can be difficult to accept. When your words of appreciation are based on genuine feelings of gratitude, it is perplexing when the recipient brushes them off as if they were of no consequence.



A skilled approach to expressing appreciation is to use the 'appreciation formula' (1) ; a three-step approach to making sure your words have the impact you desire. Before examining the approach, think about times you have brushed off compliments of others. It is easy to do. We can quickly decide that we are not sure of their motives, or whether their view of your accomplishments is realistic. We can also become cynical about appreciation, feeling wary that it is being given as flattery or as a distraction from bad news. Sadly, we can get used to viewing appreciation as fake, and criticism as more realistic.

Many others feel the same way. The challenge is to ensure they see words of appreciation as valid, based on substance. The appreciation formula does this by following these three steps:

1. Describe behaviours you have observed, which are the basis for the appreciation.
2. Explain what those behaviours reveal about the qualities you appreciate.
3. Say 'thank you'.

Let's demonstrate - as best we can - with a behaviour you've displayed (even though I'm not there to see it). *You've read this far in the newsletter. That shows you are committed to finding practical ways to improve your leadership skills, and to really help your staff. Thanks for the attention you've given this.*

Notice that the expression of appreciation is to the point. That can be important, especially when expressing gratitude to someone who is quick to brush it off. Even though it is brief, it takes work to construct. If you have to be able to specify behaviour over which there is no dispute. That establishes the validity of the feedback. Then you have to make a clear link between that behaviour and positive qualities. By the time you have got to "thank you", both you and the recipient are in no doubt that this is real appreciation.

Like any skill, following the appreciation formula takes practice. Happily, there are plenty of opportunities to work on it, and by doing so you'll be adding to the positivity of your workplace.

*(1). We think this approach was developed by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson.*

As you dwell on it, you decide that it is not really your fault, and you start getting angry at the person you offended for being overly sensitive. You decide to vent your feelings by talking about the situation to colleagues, which does little to make you feel better, but makes them feel depressed.

This cycle of negativity is working both personally and socially. At the personal level, your negativity is growing. At a social level it is spreading to more and more people.

The good news is that positive emotions are also contagious, both personally and socially. When we feel good, we may take actions that are of real benefit to others. They feel good as a result, and we get a healthy dose of pride, knowing we have done the right thing.

Emotional life would be easy if we only ever experienced joyful events and encouraging experiences. But that's not how things work. Every day brings both good and bad, triumphs and disappointments, successes and failures. What's more, it seems we have a bias toward the negative: criticism seems louder than praise; we tend to dwell on failure more than success; bad news gets shared more enthusiastically than good news.

So, our emotional lives are complex. We are going to experience both positive and negative emotions every day. The danger is that the bias toward the negative will mean that, if left unmanaged, negativity will be more contagious than positivity.

## **Positivity Matters**

The practice of handwashing has always been important. In a pandemic, it needs special attention because of the added risk. In the same way, it has always been a good idea to manage your own emotions and try to spread 'good cheer' through nourishing interactions. In a time of crisis, however, when people are regularly confronted with bad news, extra effort is needed to deepen one's own positivity and actively spread it to others.

Why so important? The research is clear: we work at our best when we experience positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, serenity and hope. Our thinking expands, so we can see more options and make better decisions and we become more resilient, able to bounce back from disappointment.

In times of crisis, then, leaders face an emotional challenge. Crisis is a time when there seems to be a crescendo of bad news. Everyone has plenty of reasons to feel bad. To get out of the crisis, though, people will need to work at their best, and that means that positive emotions need to dominate. Make it your aim not to leave emotions to chance. Find ways to get the reinforcing cycle of positivity growing, and to put the brakes on negativity.

## BOOK REVIEW:

# Negotiating Rationally

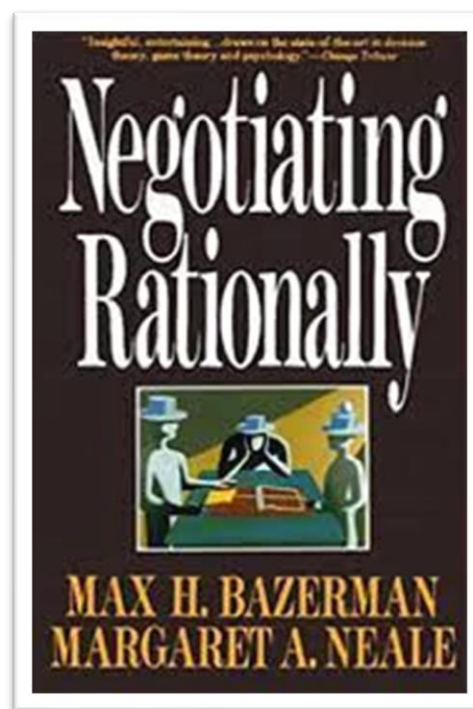
By Phil Ramsey

Framing, which we discussed in the opening article of the November 2020 newsletter, is one of many ways irrationality affects negotiations. Max Bazerman and Margaret Neale wrote this classic and fascinating book on what goes wrong and how to get negotiation right. Whenever I dip into *'Negotiating Rationally'* I am reminded of the tight coupling between leadership and the skills involved in negotiation. It makes sense that leadership fundamentally involves finding - through negotiation rather than force - a shared purpose, even though those in the leadership relationship may have very different interests and concerns.

In the early days of the discipline, scholars generally assumed negotiations were carried out by people acting rationally and that psychology did not play an important role in the process. Max Bazerman worked with Daniel Kahneman in helping to overturn this idea; Kahneman went on to win a Nobel prize for his work in behavioural economics. *Negotiating Rationally* is a very readable introduction to many of the traps we can fall into when negotiating. These include how we are prone to irrationally escalate our commitment to something when we meet resistance; the tendency to be overconfident; and the way that thinking primarily from our own perspective can lead to "the winner's curse".

Throughout the book Bazerman and Neale present negotiation problems that provide opportunity to test out the reader's rationality. The problems are beautifully constructed so that (1) they focus directly on the trap under consideration, (2) give you the chance to fall into it, and (3) provide the opportunity to see what was going on and why the irrational option was so tempting. I have happily incorporated many of their negotiation problems into courses on all sorts of topics. They work well because people find it both illuminating and fun to discover how easy it is to be irrational, even when you are trying to think carefully.

A good portion of the book is focused on negotiation techniques that are applied to financial aspects of negotiations and may not appeal to a general audience. Throughout the book, however, there is a real sense that the authors see the danger of relying on experience alone and are encouraging the reader to add a disciplined rationality to their experience in order to generate learning and real expertise. That approach is a nice recipe for leadership development in any field.



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