



in the moment

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Tipping Over to Positivity

By Phil Ramsey

Positivity and negativity are both possible. Either spiral can become dominant in your life or in the life of your school or centre. A fascinating part of Barbara Fredrickson's research is that she has established the tipping point. Because we have a bias for negativity, just having an equal amount of positive and negative emotions isn't enough. Even having twice as many positive emotions doesn't start a reinforcing spiral. The tipping point seems to be 3:1. So if your school or centre seems characterized by negativity, what can you do to tip things over into positivity?



An important rule of thumb is that awareness is curative. When we give no attention to something - we stay unaware - we leave it to chance. As we start giving it thoughtful attention, we're in a better position to build the kind of life we want for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students. We are also able to act 'forensically': if we find ourselves having a negative overreaction we can reflect on questions like:

- Why did this affect me so strongly?
- Is this part of a larger pattern? And
- What could I change to reduce the chances of feeling this way in the future?

The book *Positivity* has a rich variety of suggestions for tipping past the 3:1 ratio: some relate to reducing negative emotions, and some to increasing positive. One thing we do well to avoid is gratuitous negativity. It is normal to experience negative emotions when bad things happen to us. But sometimes we choose to wallow in our gloomy feelings. We extend the negativity by ruminating on questions like 'Why does this always happen to me?' or 'How could I get back at them?'

As a leader, pay attention to the quality of the questions you ask yourself and others. Do they encourage people to dwell on the negative? Or do they invite them to look at the reality of their situation and think of actions they can take? Better yet, learn to ask questions that help people appreciate what already exists that provides a foundation for further progress.

On the positive side of the ratio, make it a point to extend the good feelings that come from making progress. Make it a point to look for what people have achieved, comment on it, and celebrate successes. Share stories of their success with others, so that you allow positivity to spread. Working at replacing judgement with curiosity, and argument with inquiry sets people up to feel respected and appreciated. And recognize that you will feel good about what you are doing when it resonates with your personal values and utilizes the strengths that are your unique contribution. So make the effort to reflect on your personal values and strengths and then incorporate them in whatever you are doing. Of course the complement to this is to identify the values and strengths of your colleagues and help them use these to make their work more personally meaningful.

We live at a time when it is easy to give in to negativity, and it takes effort to generate positivity. Still, you can make a difference with actions that tip the balance toward a spiral of positive emotions.

The Emotional Challenge of Leadership

By Phil Ramsey

As we start the new school year, many people have a mix of emotions. Many are glad that 2020 is over and are hoping that 2021 will not be as disruptive. Many are also anxious that they may have to go through something similar, and more disruption lies ahead. Educators might be proud of what they achieved in really difficult circumstances, yet frustrated at what couldn't be accomplished, and perhaps worried about how to undo the damage.



Did you notice the various emotions that featured in the opening paragraph, some positive, some negative? Even in a relatively short paragraph, there was plenty of emotional complexity. How you deal with the emotional complexity can make a big difference to you personally, to the teams you work with, and to your school or centre. Why can we say this?

There is a growing body of work on how we are affected by emotions, both those that are positive (such as hope) and negative (such as anxiety). Leading researcher Barbara Fredrickson has highlighted that there is a contagious aspect to emotions we need to consider. Paradoxically, that means that while on one hand the pandemic may be generating emotional turmoil in our lives, it is also teaching us lessons on how we should deal with those emotions.

Contagious Emotion

Sadly, because of the pandemic the world has become very familiar with contagious processes. One person catches a virus and spreads it to two more. They each spread it to two people. One of those people travels into a different community and the contagious cycle continues there. This is sometimes called a reinforcing cycle: one that feeds itself. We've seen that when it comes to disease, it takes dramatic action to slow and then break the cycle of growth.

Some people might be reluctant to change their behaviour. They may feel that it's just a matter of luck whether you catch a virus, and changing how you live isn't worth the inconvenience. Others feel that while they can't altogether eliminate the risk, by deliberately changing their everyday practices they can minimize dangers to both themselves and those around them. What is your view? Does it apply just to this situation where lives are clearly at stake? Or do you think it applies in a variety of aspects of life?

Well, the research shows that understanding reinforcing cycles is especially important when it comes to emotion, that being deliberate about what you practice can make a big difference to how you feel, and that doing so is vitally important. The leadership challenge, though, is that it is actually a little more complex when it comes to emotions, because there are two contagious processes involved, not just one.

No doubt you have seen how negative emotions are contagious. Something happens that you find really irritating. Your emotions are affected, but that's not all. Your irritation comes through in your next interaction, and you offend someone you care about. Now you have passed negativity on to them and because you are aware that you have behaved badly, you've added some feelings of guilt to the irritation you already had.

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.

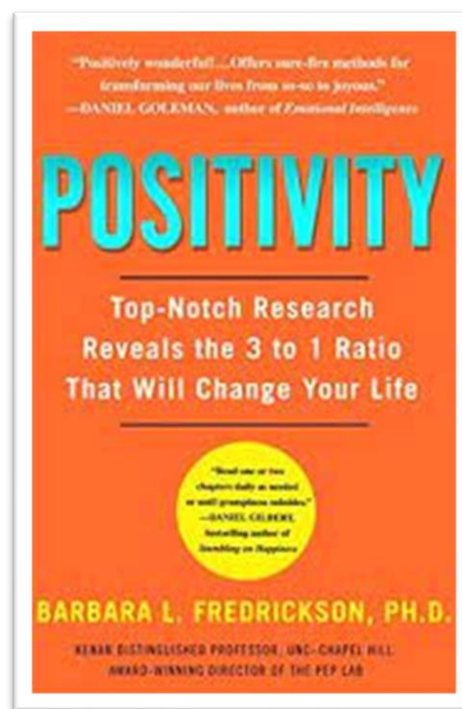
In times of crisis, then, leaders face an emotional challenge. Crisis is a time when there seems to be a crescendo of bad news. Everyone has plenty of reasons to feel bad. To get out of the crisis, though, people will need to work at their best, and that means that positive emotions need to dominate. 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: **Positivity by Barbara Fredrickson**

By Phil Ramsey

Barbara Fredrickson is a Professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina in the US. At a time when most psychological research was focused on the impact of negative emotions, she did pioneering work to explore what happens when we feel good. And while her work is in an area that many consider academically loose and imprecise, she has taken a very rigorous and scientific approach to building substantial theory based on evidence.

Fredrickson's book *Positivity* brings together much of her work, providing an excellent foundation for understanding why positive emotions are so important, while also explaining what we can do to manage our emotions effectively. For leaders who want to be able to take deliberate actions that benefit themselves and others, her work gives valuable guidance on practices that can make a difference. Importantly, while it has a solid foundation in academic work, it is very readable. She writes with an engaging style and brings concepts to life with personal stories.



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Early chapters review research findings that led to the key contribution she has made in this field: the understanding that positive emotions “broaden and build”. In this they operate very differently from negative emotions, which prompt us to take some action to fix what is going wrong in our lives. Positive emotions, like joy, compassion and love, broaden our mind. When we are experiencing positive emotions, we gain a new outlook. We open up, becoming better able to see the big picture and expand our thinking. They also enable us to learn and grow, building our capability so we have more resources with which to engage in life.

A key finding from her research is that we can find ourselves in spirals of either positive or negative emotions. As mentioned in our opening article a spiral, or reinforcing cycle, or positivity is clearly preferable, but we have bias toward the negative. Eliminating the negative from life is impossible. Instead, Fredrickson has found that if we maintain a ratio of 3:1 positive emotions to negative emotions, we'll be able to keep our overall level of positivity healthy and experience the benefits her research shows are possible.

The later chapters in the book are all about what you can do to achieve the 3:1 ratio. Because it is a ratio, we can work on two fronts. We can increase the number of times we experience positive emotions in the day, and we can decrease the number of times we experience negative emotions. And because emotions aren't just momentary responses to the world around us, we can change the time dedicated to the various kinds of emotion. We can learn to savour positive experiences for longer and we can reduce the amount of time dwelling on the negative.

One of the things I really appreciated about *Positivity* is that it provides a way of piecing together an array of insights that we have learned over the years, and which have been featured in this newsletter and in InterLEAD workshops. Some of the practices Fredrickson advocates are techniques that will be very familiar: she draws on work of people we have long appreciated like David Burns, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Martin Seligman. At the same time, putting concepts and techniques in a new context - that of creating a reinforcing spiral of positivity - gives them added importance and meaning for leaders. This is a book I thoroughly recommend.

Experimentation and Failure

By Phil Ramsey

A powerful way that innovation changes the way we work together is by giving permission to take different views of failure. For some people, fear of failure acts as a real obstacle to what they can try and how effectively they can work together. Shifting from a focus on performance - where failure is a disaster - to a focus on learning, allows people to see failure in a new light. It becomes evidence that you are trying something new, and not everything new is expected to work straight away.



Yet that raises qualms for many leaders: do we really want to be completely accepting of failure? Even when you are learning, failure is not necessarily something to be embraced. How can we be more discerning when it comes to failure?

Not all failure is the same. When your work involves a combination of performance and learning, a more nuanced view of failure makes sense. Amy Edmondson suggests that leaders need to become think carefully about the types of failure they encounter. She outlines three categories of failure which each call for a different response from a leader.

Preventable failures are ones that happen when we should have known better.

We knew what to do but didn't do it. This could happen for different reasons and the leader needs to find out what was going on and correct the problem. Occasionally - though not often - there was a deliberate violation of good practice. Sometimes failure happens because those involved weren't paying sufficient attention, or perhaps the person taking action didn't have the necessary level of ability. Leaders can find out the reason and generate solutions.

Complex failures happen because the world is 'messy'.

In a complex world, not everything is under our control. We may have systems or procedures that work fine until we need to deal with a student or parent who challenges us in a way that we hadn't realized was possible. Complex failures are usually handled best if we identify and correct them while they are still small. Things go wrong when leaders get stuck in denial, frustrated because "this shouldn't have happened", rather than getting on with the solution.

Intelligent failures are those which we have designed for, as a deliberate way of establishing a new way forward.

Let's say we face a situation that is new and we can't know in advance the best way to proceed. We move forward through experimentation. We design a trial knowing that there is a good chance of failure. We make sure our design is on a scale so that the damage caused by failure isn't going to be catastrophic and we recognize that we can embrace failure because we are learning something important; a foundation upon which we can build.

As a leader it is good to know what you know and what you don't know. If someone just doesn't want to do what you know to be established and effective practice, make it their job to tell you why they think there needs to be a change. At the same time, be vulnerable: ready to acknowledge when there is a need for a new way of doing things. That's the time to experiment, embracing the possibility of failure that will help you to learn your way into the future.

'Let's try This'

By Phil Ramsey

While most of us want our workplaces to be positive and productive environments where people can work at their best, often we find ourselves engaged in contentious debate. Someone we work with has what they believe to be a great idea and it runs contrary to what we know to be true. Or we might see an opportunity to improve how things are done, but others only see problems with what we suggest.



Disagreements are common, yet often those involved are blind to the patterns of behaviour that emerge. One of the biggest challenges is our own behaviour. As we have discussed in this newsletter many times, when we are interacting with others we find it easy to spot the problems with their decisions or actions and are quick to ignore the part we might be playing.

When two people can see the flaws in each other's thinking, and minimize their own, it is easy for things to get heated. A conflict of ideas can be either healthy or damaging, depending on how it is handled. Expert on teamwork, Amy Edmondson has discussed how the difference between productive and unproductive conflict often has to do with the emotions involved. A 'hot' conflict sees people react with little regard to what others are saying. A 'cool' conflict allows people to explore one another's thinking.

One way to move from a hot and contentious debate to a cooler exploration of options, is to make a deliberate decision to frame the conversation in a new way: to choose to view it as a need for innovation. Innovation gives people permission to hold on to strongly held opinions, while actively seeking new ways to work with the views held by others. It also holds the possibility of finding solutions that are better than those anyone had been considering up to that point.

In practical terms, if I am in a hot conflict with you over how we deal with one of the challenges we face, I'm unlikely to respond positively if you say, "Just do it my way." Deciding to innovate, however, changes the conversation. If your invitation to me is, "Let's try this" I am more likely to cool down and engage with you in finding a way forward.

Getting Set for Innovation

Many organizational processes are based around managing in predictable conditions. We often assume that tasks are clear, standards are stable, and what worked in the past will continue to work in the future. For this reason, most teams organize themselves to perform. In a world of complexity and change, though, what worked in the past may not work tomorrow. Instead, according to Edmondson, teams need to organize themselves to learn.

How can you organize yourself and your colleagues to learn? Or, in other words, how can you get set to innovate in a way that reduces contention and encourages learning?

Establish shared purpose: As a leader, one of the most powerful tools you can have is a vision that unites people. People enjoy working together toward something that is important to all those involved. Achieving this requires that you take time to work out what common purpose you share. Contention tends to highlight our differences. I think we should focus on X, while you think Y is a priority. It takes effort to think in terms of a common purpose, but leaders find it is something they can learn with practice.

Usually contention is an indication that the people involved both care deeply about the same issue; they differ, though, in how it can be achieved. Establishing shared purpose involves agreeing on what that issue is - and establishing that an effective solution needs to deliver both X and Y. Rather than argue over which is most important, challenge yourselves to learn how to combine the concerns expressed by different people.

Create a climate for incubation: When you nurture something, you need to give special attention to the climate in which it is growing. As a leader, if you want innovative thinking you need to create a climate of serious fun. The shared purpose has to be serious, otherwise people will not be engaged in finding a solution. At the same time the process of generating ideas works best when people are being playful.

A key element that shapes climate is how you deal with failure. If you are overly serious, any failure is a disaster. If you are overly playful, failure doesn't matter at all.

Take some time to audit the current climate in your team. Do people find it more serious than fun? Or more fun than serious? What actions could you take to add more of what is missing without diluting what you already have?

Manage emotions wisely: Studies of innovation highlight that emotion is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is often the driving force for change. Innovators feel empathy for people who are missing out or frustrated that the current situation disadvantages people they care about. On the other hand, colleagues who don't have the same reaction can feel disconcerted by the passion of the innovator. Innovators may find themselves directing their frustration at those who are not as sensitive to the need for change.

So, innovators need to harness their emotions, using them wisely. Allow emotion to provoke experimentation. At the same time, deliberately choose to control reactions in order to manage the climate and keep conflicts cool.

Learning and Practice

The All Blacks achieve a remarkably consistent level of performance when they play test matches. But they don't have to perform every time they get together. They spend more time on the practice field than they do play tests. The practice field creates the opportunity for experimentation, fun and learning. Not everything has to work.

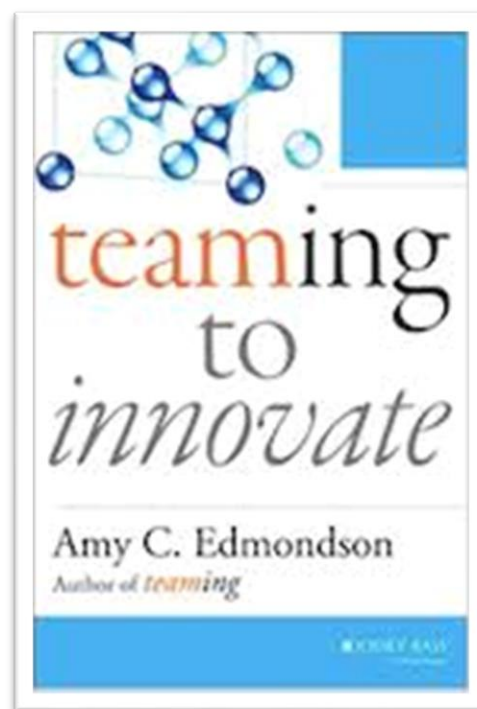
Likewise, there will be some things and sometimes when performance is what really matters. There are known solutions which people are expected to employ. At other times there are good reasons to look for new solutions, and disagreements over what is best. Look for opportunities to use a "Let's try this" approach to your next conflict.

BOOK REVIEW:

Teaming to Innovate

By Phil Ramsey

Amy Edmondson is a Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School and has specialized in the study of teamwork and organizational learning. Her earlier book *Teaming* introduced the important idea of organizing teams to learn rather than to perform and highlighted the importance of creating psychological safety for teams to function at their best. Along the way she championed use of the word 'team' as a verb. In this her latest book, Edmondson uses her 'teaming' concepts to provide leaders with a pathway for innovation.



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Teaming for Innovation is a shorter, more focused book. While it clearly draws on the concepts of her earlier work, it doesn't take them to greater depth. Rather, the emphasis is on application and making recommendations for leaders supported by stories from her research into innovative organizations. Special emphasis is placed on getting a shared understanding of the language of culture change as a foundation for shared action.

I particularly enjoyed the clarity with which Edmondson writes. She outlines key ways that leaders have leverage with teams: through efforts to establish a motivating vision, by modelling the behaviour they want, and by personal coaching of those they work with. She shows how these can be used to work through the process of innovation.

And her description her recipe for innovation also makes good sense. Edmondson explains how leaders need to: Aim High (ensuring the team has aspirational goals that stretch); Team Up (creating a climate that is both safe and diverse with clear guidelines as to process); Fail Well (by being discerning and responding effectively to failure); and Learn Fast (avoiding the barriers that can slow down the learning process). Further, Edmondson discusses the need for innovation to be an on-going repetitive process if it is going to really make a difference to an organization.

While *Teaming to Innovate* is best read as a follow on from the earlier book, it still works as a standalone guide for leaders keen to generate change. Further, it challenges leaders to develop qualities that strengthen the learning process, including curiosity, courage, imagination and discipline. The process of innovation is very different to that of standard management. Rather than being straight forward, innovation is often paradoxical, such as when leaders want to encourage an environment of 'serious fun'. That calls for a broader range of leadership qualities than we might be used to thinking about. I'm confident that most leaders will enjoy the challenge!

Skills for Complex Times

By Phil Ramsey

A friend of mine has started to make some important changes in his life, but things keep getting in the way. He knows what he wants to do, is highly motivated, but is just waiting for life to get a little simpler. That's a natural reaction; one that most of us can understand. The problem is that - if the last 100 years are anything to go by - life isn't getting simpler. Things are just going to keep on changing around us.

One reason we are tempted to wait for things to settle down is that our skills may be better suited to simplicity than complexity. Thinking and communicating is easier when the world is black and white, tougher when we have to deal with shades of grey. Psychologist Adam Grant deals with some of the leadership challenges of complexity in his book 'Think Again'.

So, what skills are needed when there are no easy answers?

If Life Was Simple

What skills are needed when the challenges we face are simple? It is as if we are faced with a puzzle that has one right answer. The puzzle might be tricky, but a smart leader can identify the right answer and then mobilize people to work together on the solution. Leaders also need to “nip in the bud” wrong ideas that could distract or derail the team as it works things through.



If we long for simplicity, then, we value leadership that keeps things black and white: a straightforward choice between right and wrong. That means forcefully advocating for what is right, and clearly pointing out what is wrong with ideas that run contrary to our own. In a simple world the leader would strive to come across as expert, knowing for certain what the right way to act will be. And you might expect that leaders who act in this way would be more persuasive than those who express any doubt.

As you will know from experience, leaders in schools and centres need to make decisions that are more than ‘tricky puzzles’. Often decisions involve dilemmas: to get one aspect of the work right seems to require making things more difficult in another area. What might look black and white from one point of view looks completely different when you take an alternative perspective. Leaders need to deal with ‘social complexity’, where the value of a decision depends on whether other people go along with it. Further, as world leaders have experienced with the COVID pandemic, often decisions need to be made before you have a full understanding of what is going on, and then be readjusted as more information becomes available.

When we treat the world as simple, we quickly become over-confident in what we believe. We might have to make the same mistake multiple times before we are prepared to change our minds. But we can also feel trapped into sticking to what we believe. We may fear that admitting a mistake will destroy the confidence that others have in our leadership and make us less credible or convincing.

As it turns out, the risks involved in changing our minds are worth it if we can do it skillfully and gracefully.

Embracing Complexity

Rather than treat the world as black and white, many successful leaders are learning to seek out complexity in order to generate new insights. When presented with an 'either/or' choice, they deliberately "complexify" the situation by adding extra issues to consider that prompt people to think in new ways. And rather than fearing being proven wrong, like the best scientists down through time, they take pleasure in having to rethink their basic assumptions.

Consider how readiness to rethink your beliefs can help you and your team. If someone is insistent on a viewpoint that is very different from your own, even when your own opinion feels well thought out and reasonable, it makes sense that they are seeing something in the situation you haven't considered. Your own view will be enhanced if you can see what they see. Further, there may be a blind spot in your reasoning that is more obvious to others than it is to you.

An alternative to going into battle over right and wrong is to:

1. Acknowledge the complexity of the situation and the likelihood that the best way forward has yet to be found.
2. Put your own reasoning out front so others can see why you believe what you do.
3. Encourage others to question the assumptions you are making; and if that questioning highlights errors in your thinking.
4. Find joy in being proved wrong.

Rethinking Conflict

One reason we can get trapped in simplistic thinking is that we prefer it when people agree with us. When someone takes a different viewpoint to ours an automatic and simplistic response is to think that they are being difficult and unreasonable, probably with some evil intention. While the conflict may be based around different ideas of how to get a task done, we can easily frame it as one based on personality and relationships.

In a complex world we need different and even conflicting perspectives, to get a complete picture. To do that requires the skill of untangling these two types of conflict. If someone disagrees with you, embrace the idea that they are doing so to help you get to a better result. Put aside the fear that they are trying to undermine your leadership or make you look bad and use their perspective to test out and improve your thinking.

We live in complex times. We might wish for simpler times when we get to solve tricky puzzles and be consistently proven right. But our schools and centres and the communities in which we work are complex rather than simple. It will be better for them and for us personally if we develop skills appropriate for the challenges we face.

Persuasive Listening

By Phil Ramsey

While it is important for leaders to rethink their assumptions, a related challenge is how to encourage others to rethink theirs. Likely you have experienced the frustration of finding people resistant to ideas they should embrace and seen how your best efforts to convince can sometimes make people more staunchly opposed. Where you are prepared to embrace complexity, they may be determined to keep things overly simple, where they are right and you are wrong.

Psychologist Adam Grant explains that when reasoning with others we often overplay the evidence we have at our disposal, piling it on past the point where it does any good. It turns out to be more effective to limit yourself to one or two reasons and then try some 'persuasive listening'.



Just as our ability to deal with complexity increases when we respond to questions, others are more likely to rethink their assumptions when they hear themselves articulate what they believe. According to management communications expert Nancy Dixon all our ideas seem wonderfully logical so long as they stay inside our own heads. When people hear their own reasoning in conversation with others they are able to see the gaps they were previously blind to.

Persuasive reasoning starts with respectful curiosity. If people sense that you are only interested in finding where they are wrong they won't feel safe enough to express themselves, let alone reconsider their beliefs. So instead, embrace the idea that you want to find what things look like from their perspective: that their viewpoint will enrich your understanding of the situation. And be curious and appreciative about the values that shape how they think.

People will often defend their beliefs based on principle. They can passionately articulate why something needs to be done. Rather than question these principles, ask people about how something can be done. Usually several principles are involved in any course of action. It is easy to make a speech about any one principle and make the case that it should be the priority. When people are challenged to think about how to get things done, the complexities involved become more apparent, along with the need to address a variety of issues, not just one.

Finally, recognize that people - including you - often haven't got all the evidence they need to change what they believe. Rather than simply asserting that they are wrong and that there is plenty of evidence to prove it, try using a question. Ask something like, "What evidence would change your mind about this?" In this way you encourage people to pull evidence from the world around them rather than having you push evidence they don't want onto them.

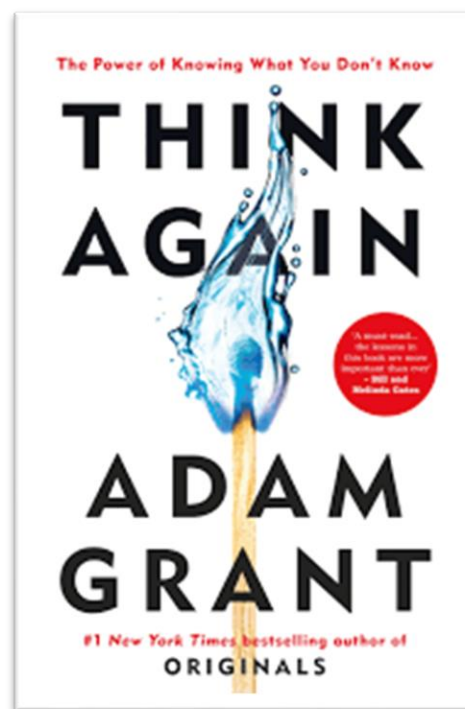
Humans value choice. Sometimes the way we talk suggests that we think others have no choice other than to listen to us and accept what we say. Persuasive listening dignifies the ability of people to choose for themselves whether or not they will adjust their beliefs.

BOOK REVIEW:

Think Again

By Phil Ramsey

Adam Grant has rapidly become a favourite author for me, and for many others interested in organizational leadership. In earlier issues of '*In the Moment*' we have reviewed his earlier books, '*Give and Take*' and '*Originals*'. Grant is a Professor of Psychology at the Wharton School of Business in the US, and his work is great to read. He makes sure that it is based on solid research, with a focus on ways the reader can put ideas into practice, and he uses examples powerfully to illustrate concepts. What's more, he writes on subjects that are topical and valuable to those in leadership roles.



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Grant brings all that talent to 'Think Again'. It is a great concept for a book at a time when people are quick to get stuck in conflict with one another because they don't step back and examine the basic assumptions and behind what they believe. The complexity of life today means each of us needs to personally become skilled at re-thinking long held assumptions. And we need to find ways to interact with others that helps them do the same rather than making them more defensive and rigid in their views.

A great feature of the book is the 'Actions for Impact' section at the end. In this Grant summarises his top "practical takeaways" the reader can use for further development. These include both 'skillset' and 'mindset' issues: there are techniques or skills that will enhance your practice. And there are ways of thinking that make a difference to how you use those skills and how you come across to others. I particularly enjoyed the mindset issue of embracing the joy of being wrong; using it as evidence that you have learned something new and are now in a better position to achieve the things that are important to you.

While I thoroughly enjoyed *Think Again*, I didn't find it to be as much of a page-turner as Grant's earlier books. On reflection, this may be because it didn't feel quite as novel, covering concepts that are similar to those I have encountered in other areas of leadership practice. In previous issues of '*In the Moment*' we have reviewed books that deal with the same challenge, but from different disciplinary perspectives, such as negotiation, organizational culture, and teamwork.

Even so, I happily recommend *Think Again*, particularly for leaders involved in the challenges of change. For those who are new to the challenge, it will give a fresh perspective that can make a big difference to how you approach your work. And for those who are further down this developmental track, it can deepen your understanding with a different perspective and some new tools you can put to work.

Am I Missing Something?

By Phil Ramsey

Do you sometimes worry that you are not noticing important events or developing problems? We sometimes use the phrase, a “wake-up call” to point out that something we probably should have been giving more attention has suddenly started to demand our attention. Sadly, these wake-up calls often involve tragic results: recognizable problems were ignored when they were small, but obvious, but forced us to pay attention when they turned into disasters. While we often see this at a national or global level, as a school and centre leader it is valuable to consider how you might become more skilled at noticing things, and less prone to what decision-making expert Max Bazerman (see the Book Review in this newsletter) calls “predictable surprises”.



The world is a complex place and keeps on throwing up unexpected problems that leaders need to deal with. But leaders have an extra challenge. If you are in a leadership role you probably got there because of your ability to focus. In previous roles and in your current position there were things that needed to be done, and extraneous stuff that needed to be ignored in order to get those things done. Being able to focus on the work at hand has probably led to your success. It's challenging to consider that focus may also create problems.

So, leadership involves dealing with the challenges that are already the focus of our attention and at the same time noticing what else is happening that deserves more attention than it has been getting. By default, leaders are probably better at focused attention than they are at noticing other stuff. Let's consider what some of the challenges are, and the capability that can help you get better at noticing.

Why Noticing is Difficult

To become an effective 'noticer' you need to meet some challenges that most people find difficult. Let's consider three. Some you are probably already familiar with. Others might be new thoughts. It's good to reflect on when you have been caught out by something you could have predicted, if only you were better able to meet the challenge involved.

- **Challenge No. 1 is the 'slowly developing issue'.**

No doubt you have experienced having to respond to a dramatic crisis. When the government announced the 2020 COVID lockdown, schools and centres had to notice. There was no choice. What is more difficult is when something starts small - easily categorized as an irrelevance - but slowly builds. It takes an effort to reassess it as worthy of attention.

- **Challenge No. 2 is misdirection.**

There are plenty of people with vested interests in our work, and some of them don't want us to notice important issues. Like magicians who try to get the audience to look where the action is not, some people will deliberately try to ensure you don't notice. For instance, adult bullying may go unnoticed when the bully is skilled at having others look the other way.

- **Challenge No. 3 is our own preference not to notice what we would prefer not to see.**

When something seems too good to be true, it probably isn't true. Still, if we really would like it to be true, we may not want to dig deeper. And if noticing poor performance or unethical behaviour is going to mean confronting someone in a difficult conversation, many leaders are tempted to think that "ignorance is bliss" and not look too closely.

So there are understandable reasons why leaders don't automatically notice what might be of critical importance to them and their organizations. Because the capacity to notice is important, it makes sense to develop your skills in this area. What can you do?

Becoming a Better Noticer

Most of the reasons we don't notice things involve very human tendencies. It is hard to face unpleasant realities. We prefer to hold on to positive views of people and the future, even if they are unrealistic. And while we may talk as if we deeply care about the future, most people are reluctant to make the short-term sacrifices now that might prevent a disaster sometime in the future.

As with many aspects of leadership capability, awareness is curative. When you notice yourself 'turning a blind eye' so you deliberately don't notice a problem, hold yourself to account. When disaster strikes, rather than putting it down to unforeseeable events, examine carefully whether it was predictable and consider why you didn't pay attention at an earlier stage.

Many effective leaders also recognize that people outside their organization are more likely to point out what seems odd to them but looks 'normal' to insiders. You can take advantage of outsider perspectives by asking people outside your school or centre to audit what you do and share their views with candour.

Finally, as a leader you have a responsibility to realize that the people you work with are also prone to not noticing what might be important to them and the organization. More than that, you may have designed aspects of the school in ways that focus attention narrowly rather than encourage people to notice what is really important.

So, it is likely that you are missing things. We all do. But with effort you can do more to notice things for yourself and help create a community of noticers around you.

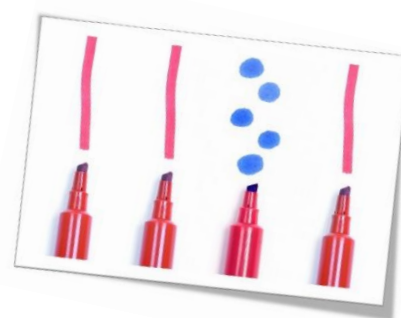
Valuing the Divergent Noticer

By Phil Ramsey

It is peculiar how inconsistent we can be. We can see one thing and do the opposite, while being oblivious to the hypocrisy involved. One area where this is makes a big difference to noticing is when we make decisions in groups. What goes wrong, and what can we do about it?

Most leaders will agree that it is good to have a variety of people involved in a decision. Leaders know that each individual is limited in what they understand. Different people take different perspectives on the same problem. Where one person is quick to think about how to solve technical problems, another might be more sensitive to the impact on the people involved. Someone else may think about financial bottom line, and another be concerned about the ethics of proposed actions. One person alone is unlikely to see as much as a group.

But what happens when we are working in a group that is mostly in agreement, and one person voices a divergent opinion? It is a natural reaction to feel frustrated: the divergent view is out of harmony with everyone else. It feels like they are being deliberately obstructive, especially if they disagree with our own views. Even though we believe in the importance of different perspectives in theory - we may have even invited divergence by putting the decision to a group - when we encounter a divergent opinion we may treat it as an obstacle to progress. And we question the intention of the person behind it.



We all have this tendency to be inconsistent. What can we do about it?

Rather than have divergence arise as the exception to group process, we can design group work so that different opinions are deliberately brought to the front of mind. Some leaders insist that decision-making includes a step of “qualming”: people are encouraged to express any qualms they have about a situation or suggested action. A qualm is a ‘gentle discomfort’ rather than a fully formed concern; so qualming allows people to express divergent views without feeling they have to make a strong case in support of their opinion.

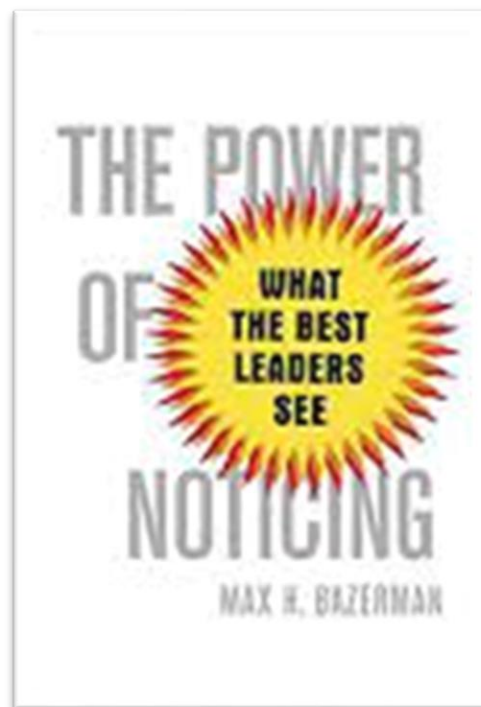
Leaders can also assign people to speak for perspectives of stakeholders not currently represented in the group. This approach is captured in the Native American story “Who speaks for Wolf?”, which was transcribed into English by Paula Underwood. One member of a tribe took it upon himself to learn all he could about wolves to the point where others gave him the name ‘Wolf’. At a time when Wolf was away from the tribe and a decision needed to be made on relocating the camp. The tribe mistakenly selected a site that put them in conflict with local wolf packs. On debriefing the decision they realized they wouldn’t have got into trouble if Wolf had been present for the decision. So in future they would always check that if an important stakeholder isn’t available, someone is assigned to speak on their behalf. In your school or centre, the question might be ‘Who speaks for...parents?’

Finally, because inconsistency is so common, as a leader it also pays to learn to laugh at yourself when you realize you have engaged in hypocrisy. If you don’t laugh you might start to pretend that there was nothing inconsistent and you were right to blame others. Better to find a way to enjoy your own imperfect humanity.

BOOK REVIEW: **The Power of Noticing**

By Phil Ramsey

Max Bazerman is a Professor of Leadership at Harvard, specializing in negotiation and decision-making. He is a careful observer of how people really behave and some of the traps we encounter in life that can prevent us from being rational. As well as teaching, he has consulted with major companies and governments, and seen up close how crises come about. His book *The Power of Noticing* goes into depth on some of the dynamics that have led intelligent people to miss obvious signs that catastrophe was imminent.



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Bazerman makes very effective use of well-known examples to bring his ideas to life. He clearly comes from a business background, and he goes into depth on examples like the financial crisis of 2008. These examples have powerful lessons to be learned by leaders everywhere. The financial system had whole organizations or people whose job was to notice when things were going wrong and virtually all of them didn't notice. And you'll know if you have seen the movie *The Big Short* that noticing was possible: the few people who did became very rich as a result.

Bazerman gives some fascinating advice on how to become better at noticing. He goes into depth on the skill involved in noticing things that don't happen. He draws on the Sherlock Holmes story of the dog that didn't bark in the night: how Holmes solves a mystery based on evidence that wasn't there. And he challenges leaders in his discussion of how common it is to not notice when people are behaving in ways that are unethical.

When things go wrong in a small way, without serious consequences, we have a choice how we respond. We could think, *"Nothing disastrous happened, and I have other things on my mind, so I can treat that event as an irrelevance."* Alternatively, we might think *"The way we work just got tested in a small way. While we got away without real trouble, the test showed we are vulnerable. The next test might be bigger, so I'd better pay attention now."*

We can't effectively work on things unless we give them our attention. The first step in that is to notice. *The Power of Noticing* points out that not seeing what is front of us is remarkably common; you could say it is our default setting when we are focused on getting things done. The book is a valuable resource in helping leaders build the uncommon skill of noticing.