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Reluctant Leadership

By Phil Ramsey

The New Zealand Parliament has a tradition, adopted from the British, of pretending to force a newly appointed Speaker of the House to take their position. With plenty of bad acting on display, the Speaker is dragged to the Speaker's Chair, even though it is a privileged position they may openly aspire to achieve.

It feels quaint to see someone being given a leadership role that they are reluctant to accept. Too often, leadership roles are sought after by people who are ill-suited for positions of power. In his book *Corruptible*, Brian Klaas of University College London has explored the question of why power is so often abused *(see the Book Review in this issue)*. Why are the wrong people attracted to leadership, and why do so many people choose leaders who turn out to be abusive?

The world is full of examples of corrupt leaders who get into and stay in power. Some are corrupt to begin with, while others seem to be corrupted by the position. While we may be drawn to examples that happen at a national or international level, corruption happens throughout all levels of society and in organisations of all sorts. What should schools and centres know about how to protect themselves against corruption?

Dynamics of Corruption

Ian Mitroff, an expert on how organisations get into crisis, has lamented that most management books act as though all leaders and managers are rational and sane. Corrupt, abusive leaders get treated as exceptions, even though experience may tell us they are more common than we would like to imagine. Thinking of corruption as an exception to what is normal traps us into viewing it as something that works only at an individual level. Klaas, on the other hand, encourages us to think about corruption from a systems point of view. In other words, we need to consider whether the leadership systems we have in place are designed to attract corruptible people, or are they designed to protect our organisation from corruptible people.

At the heart of the issue is the fact that leadership is hard. It involves making difficult decisions that often involve finding a balance between what is good for the organisation as a whole and the impact decisions have on the people involved. All leaders must sometimes make decisions that are going to hurt others; often circumstances require that these decisions are made without a full understanding of how things will work out. All leaders will make decisions that turn out to be wrong in hindsight.

People who are aware of the responsibility, empathetic so that they care about the impact they have, and modest enough to realise their own limitations would naturally feel some reluctance about taking on the leadership role. Sadly, this means that some of those best suited for leadership don't put themselves forward. On the other hand, people lacking empathy and modesty, and who don't take the responsibility seriously, may think of themselves as natural leaders or relish the opportunity to tell others what to do.

Adding to the challenge is how we go about selecting leaders. All manner of biases come into play. We might be drawn to the person who is tallest, best looking, glib, or most outwardly confident. Of course, there are plenty of people who will happily take advantage of our biases to get into positions that allow them to advance their own interests even when it may cause lasting harm to other people or to your school or centre.

What can you do to safeguard your school or centre? Keep in mind that choices you make about who is able to exercise power may have a long-term effect on the health of your organisation. Leadership involves the exercise of power. But as Adam Kahane has pointed out, the healthy exercise of power is when people think about their "power to…" accomplish important purposes. Power becomes abusive when people concentrate on their "power over…"; when the exercise of power becomes an end in itself.

Good Design

Klaas outlines some important lessons that have been learned about the design of leadership systems. And good design starts with the selection process. Imagine you are looking for someone to join your Senior Leadership Team. When talking to prospective leaders about the role, what will you emphasise?

Sometimes, perhaps because we have encountered reluctance in the past, we might focus on some of the 'trappings' that go along with the position. We might downplay the responsibility and talk up the opportunity to exercise power.

Think, too, about the selection criteria you use when evaluating candidates. Character matters. Think carefully when you encounter self-promotion. Consider why someone is eager, to take on a role that requires skills they are yet to develop.

When people are in leadership roles - and this includes existing members of your SLT - expect them to live by the same standards that apply to others. Be concerned if leaders feel entitled to take shortcuts that aren't available to others. Leaders should feel responsible rather than privileged. A healthy expression of reluctant leadership is to feel the need to model the behaviour that is expected of others.

Good leadership is vital to healthy schools and centres. Sadly, because of how we think about leadership, the design of our leadership systems can be left to chance and be easily exploited by people who are best kept away from power. Find time to discuss with your Senior Leadership Team how you can safeguard your school or centre from corrupt leadership practices.

Acknowledge People

By Phil Ramsey

Leadership involves making tough decisions. As we discussed in the opening article, the impact of decisions can be hard on people within our school or centre. Because leaders have to make these tough decisions, they can get used to setting aside the feelings of others. The danger is that as leaders, our empathy for others - including concern over the impact our decisions have had on them - is a safeguard. It holds us back from abusing the power we have.

There are some vital conversational practices we develop that both strengthen our empathy and help us to be more effective in conversation. In particular, we can learn to acknowledge the person we are talking with. What does this mean?

Conversation is multi-layered. When I talk with you about a particular problem or task, much of the conversation will be focused on whatever that issue is. We may notice, however, that as we speak our feelings are engaged. I might see that you are frustrated by a lack of progress. You can tell that I feel shocked at one of the options you suggest. We may be tempted to think we should put these emotions to the side and just concentrate on the task at hand. In particular, I think *you* should put your emotions aside, and you think *I* should put my emotions aside. That isn't likely to happen.

At another level, these emotions come from an even deeper level: who we are as people. Each of us has a unique set of values and strengths. Your frustration may come from the value you place on professionalism and your desire for effective action. A strength you have as a teacher may be your determination to solve problems with innovative solutions that produce student outcomes. My reaction to your option might be due to the value I place on ethical behaviour, and I may see something in what you suggest that hasn't occurred to you.

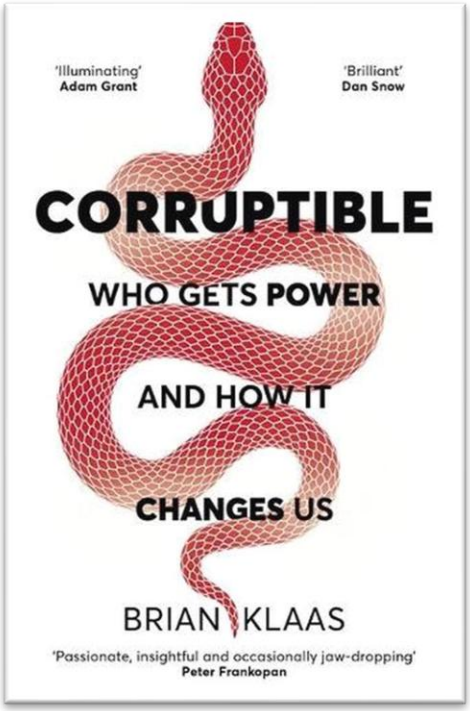
How we respond to one another can determine how the conversation proceeds. If we concentrate just on solving the problem we may get into a hot conflict. As a leader you can connect empathetically with others and keep conflicts cool and focused on issues by acknowledging the person you are talking with. All leaders know they need to be good listeners. But what are you listening for?

If you just listen to the elements of the problem or issue, that is what you will respond to. Instead, try listening for the feelings involved, and for the values and strengths on display by your conversation partner. Doing so enables you to, firstly, acknowledge how they are feeling, with something like, "It looks like this is really frustrating you." You can also show that you can see and that you appreciate what they value: "It seems to me that professionalism and improving learning outcomes are really important to you; that's going to help us find a solution here."

Listening in this way and responding to what we hear prompts us to be empathetic. It reminds us of the humanity of our conversation partner. Don't worry - you will also hear what is said about the problem or issue at hand. And rather than take more time, acknowledging people usually helps conversations progress more smoothly and rapidly.

BOOK REVIEW:
Corruptible

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – February 2022

Brian Klaas' book addresses a fascinating topic: Why do so many people in authority abuse power? Is it just a fundamental truth that "power corrupts" anyone who has it?

To answer these questions, Klaas has interviewed leaders from around the world, including despots who have committed atrocities and caused lasting damage to whole nations.

Corruptible respects the complexity of the question. Some people are more easily corruptible than others. Some people are held in check by the systems in which they function rather than because of any personal standards. Others have to accept the leadership of people displaying clear indicators of corruption; why do they do so? The book provides a range of perspectives on the topic leading to useful lessons that you will be able to apply in your organisation.

In past issues of this newsletter, we have reviewed books by Adam Grant, and it felt like Klaas was adopting a similar approach, with plenty of examples and stories to illustrate concepts. Despite the approach, which I usually enjoy, I found *Corruptible* an easy book to put down. It may have been that it was summer, and I was in a more frivolous mindset when it came to reading. I suspect, though, that my reaction was more to do with Klaas' choice of examples.

Corruptible takes a point of view that the psychology of leaders and followers can be understood with reference to evolutionary biology. Many of the examples involve comparing human behaviour with that of chimpanzees, hyenas, fiddler crabs and plenty of other animals. It is somewhat like Margaret Wheatley's brilliant book *Leadership and the New Science* where insights into leadership are extracted from advances made in our understanding of physics.

Klaas instead draws on insights from biology. To me, though, the examples seemed forced and overwhelming. It made it easy for me to lose track of how everything was meant to fit together. If you have a special interest in biology perhaps you will enjoy the book more than I did. While I didn't find it to be a page-turner, it addresses a critical topic in a fresh way, and I'm sure I'll have plenty of opportunity to dip back into it and end up using Klaas' ideas in future teaching.

Personal Diversity

By Phil Ramsey

How does the Leadership Team of your school or centre manage when faced with complex problems? How effective is the decision making of the team?

Growing complexity has made leaders in many organisations realize that issues of diversity are central to effective decision making. Diversity creates the opportunity for teams to find breakthrough solutions to problems they have never faced before. But why is diversity important? And what is 'personal diversity?'

Organized to Learn

If we lived in a simple, stable world, we could get by with the management practices of the past. What worked before would be likely to work for us again. Leadership could be the job of one clever decision maker who worked out what needed to be done, set a clear direction, and then made sure the school or centre was "organised to execute" the leader's plan.
What if the world is not so stable? What if brilliant plans are constantly being upset by unexpected events? What if we face challenges that are new to us, and there is no tried and tested way forward? What if the best we can do is to make it up as we go along? Then, flawless execution is no longer the key to success. We might be doing an outstanding job of something that should not be done. As Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson says, complexity requires that we are "organised to learn."

As you can imagine, people who are organised to learn requires very different capabilities, both for leaders and team members. When the path forward is clear, you want people to follow establish rules, focus on their particular area of expertise, and use discretion to choose between established best practices. Performance gets measured by asking "Did you do it right?" When there is no clear path, we want people to experiment, understanding that we move forward by probing in the dark, sensing what is working, and responding to what we find. Performance is measured by asking "What did you learn?"

The approach of "Probe, Sense, and Respond" works best with a diverse team. You have probably heard the definition of insanity is when you keep trying the same thing but hoping for a different result. A non-diverse team can easily fall into that trap, relying on a limited range of strategies, usually ones with which they are all familiar. And as they 'sense' what has resulted from a trial, members of a non-diverse team will pay attention to the same things.

Diversity generates different strategies, unusual combinations of ideas that have not previously been tried, and a sensitivity to a broader range of signals informing the team of the impact of their actions.

How Diverse Am I?

Usually, we think of diversity as the differences between people. When you ask, "Is my team diverse?" it is easy to focus on observable differences between people on the team. When we think of diversity as the capacity to use different perspectives new possibilities arise.

David Epstein, author of the book *Range (see the Book Review in this issue)* has discussed how we can personally increase our ability to embrace diverse perspectives. We can work on our ability to be open-minded, rather than limited by the tools we are comfortable with, or the concepts held in high regard in our area of specialist knowledge.

Epstein contends that we live in a hyper-specialised world, where people become experts about a particular tree, while missing the big picture of the forest as a whole, or even of other trees nearby. Learning and innovating our way in a chaotic world comes more easily to those who have learned to see both the forest and the trees, making connections between fields of knowledge that specialists do not consider.

As an example, Epstein tells the story of 17th Century German astronomer Johannes Kepler. He had learned specialised principles of astronomy established over centuries, that emphasized that the universe was a giant, unchanging machine, that worked like clockwork. As he studied, though, Kepler realized that the accepted model didn't explain some important data: the movement of some planets and the appearance of a comet. A new way of thinking was needed, but how do you create a completely new model of the universe when the knowledge that you need for it does not exist in your field? Completely new concepts were needed - like the idea of gravity - but how do you generate a concept when nothing like that exists?

Kepler employed analogies. Maybe the planets in the solar system could be like boats in a stream. Maybe they act as magnets. Perhaps the sun emitted a power that behaved the same way as light. He would keep coming up with analogies that provided new ways of thinking. When they failed to account for astronomical data he would move on to a new analogy, filling journals with his ideas. In doing so, Kepler invented astrophysics, a field of science that did not previously exist.

One thing we can learn from Kepler's example is that we can generate our own diversity by deliberately stepping outside our usual way of perceiving the world. We can link what we know about apparently unrelated things - concepts we have gleaned from hobbies, conversations with friends, or fascinating facts we have encountered - in order to provoke new ways of tackling old problems.

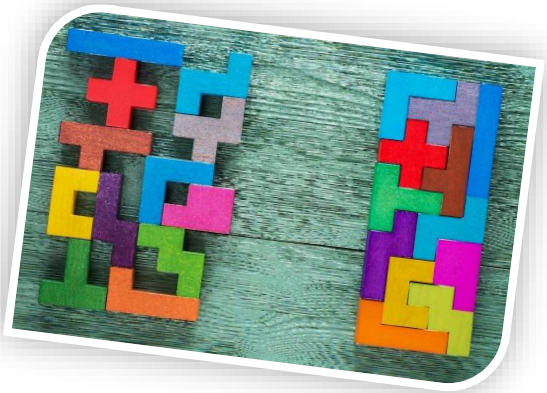
Leading Diversity

For leaders this is particularly important. You may need to give yourself permission to consider outlandish perspectives; ideas that might make experts in your field roll their eyes and snicker. Further, you need to encourage others within your team to broaden their thinking and make connections that may initially appear far-fetched. And you need to make it safe for people to share innovative thinking, when they may be reluctant to speak up in front of specialised 'expert' peers.

It makes good sense to highly value the expertise of those we work with, and our own specialist knowledge. It is also good to acknowledge that many of the tools we use and the concepts we take for granted may not be sufficient to meet new challenges we encounter. You can help your leadership team be better organized to learn by developing your personal diversity.

Thinking Systemically

By Phil Ramsey



According to David Epstein, specialisation creates a trap for experts which turns out to be an opportunity for generalists. Experts tend to keep moving on to new technologies and discarding tools and techniques of the past. These "withered technologies" get ignored because they are out of fashion rather than no longer useful.

This phenomenon seems to be alive and well in the field of management and leadership. Academics keep moving on to new areas of expertise and allowing some very effective leadership tools to wither. In the 1990s, for example, Systems Thinking was wildly popular, thanks to books like *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge. Systems diagrams were viewed as a powerful tool - virtually an alternative language - for exploring complexity.

Fashions change, however, and Systems Thinking is no longer cutting edge. Yet systems principles can still help leaders untangle complex problems. They also help leaders do what Epstein advocates: see non-obvious connections between diverse areas of knowledge. Instead of looking closely at each of the parts of a complex system, systems thinking encourages you to look at how the parts interact with one another. When you do that, you start to notice that different types of system share some common patterns and dynamics.

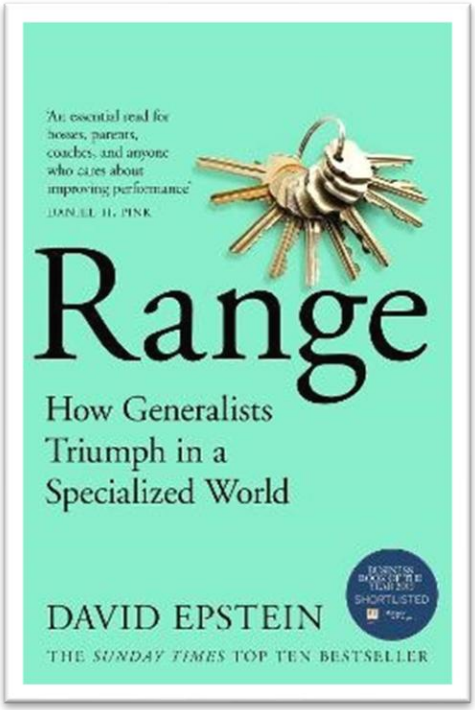
As an example, if something is going wrong in a system, there is usually some kind of symptom that signals there is a problem. It takes time and effort to find and fix the underlying problem. It is much easier to just treat the symptom. But if the problem still exists, the symptom just comes back. This is also why, when you make fundamental changes, things get worse before they get better.

You can see this same pattern in ecosystems, with organisational systems, with individuals, with families, and in classrooms. When you learn how to deal with a system like this in one area, you see how principles apply further afield. And you can quickly add to your systems thinking vocabulary by finding out about other common patterns through 'withered' systems thinking resources.

BOOK REVIEW:

Range

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – May 2022

Specialist knowledge versus general knowledge is a dilemma that educators have always had to contend with.

David Epstein's book *Range* seeks to counter some of the forces that drive people - students, teachers, parents, and employers - toward over-valuing specialization.

Likely you have heard of research that shows it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become masterful in a discipline. The implication is that the earlier you start with specialized practice, the quicker you will achieve success. Epstein shows that, while this may be true when it comes to chess or golf, it does not hold in occupations where what it takes to be an expert keeps changing.

Part of the problem, as Epstein sees it, is that we are surrounded by stories of people who have specialized early and achieved remarkable success: prodigies like Tiger Woods.
We might be a bit embarrassed if we had a later start than others, or took a while to find what we were really interested in. Epstein has realized the power of personal stories and tries to create a more balanced understanding of the value of generalists. *Range* is full of stories of extraordinary people who broke with the expectation of specialisation and expertise; people like Vincent Van Gogh and Thomas Edison.

Range challenges the reader to rethink some of what we might take for granted in education: the danger of over-helping; how much 'grit' we expect students to show; and the superiority of professionals over amateurs.

The book was excellent to read, with powerful concepts illustrated by great examples.
I thoroughly enjoyed it and expect to be referring to it regularly in my future work. This is a recommended read for anyone in education.

The STOP Technique

By Phil Ramsey

People everywhere find it hard to stop fighting fires and focus attention on where their problems might be coming from. It seems counter-intuitive that this should be so. Surely, we would all prefer it if problems did not happen in the first place. Why don't we commit more time and effort into preventative action? Oddly, having a routine of high performance can prevent us from finding better ways of designing our work.

This is, of course, a particularly serious issue for people in leadership roles. You typically don't get into a leadership role without first demonstrating that you can perform well at an operational level. But what if the routines that make you effective as a high performer make you less capable when it comes to system redesign? Let's consider how that might be, and a technique to help you find a healthy balance.

Firstly, what is wrong with high performance? In short, the key to doing something well is focused attention. To perform at a high level, people need to concentrate on what they are doing. What is the work at hand? What needs to be done to get the desired result? What technique is best suited for what I want to accomplish?

When attention is focused on solving problems, it takes a real shift in mind to ask, "Why do these problems keep occurring?" We develop what Tim Gallwey calls "performance momentum", where our success and satisfaction at solving the last problem carries us on to the next problem that is waiting for us.

Performing well and having the ability to work with focused attention are not problems in themselves. These are healthy routines that contribute to effective work. We need to ensure, though, that we can put the brakes on our performance momentum when needed, so we can change direction if required. To do that, Gallwey proposes we use the STOP technique.

STOP is an acronym for

1. **S**tep back from what we are doing
2. **T**hink about what's most important
3. **O**rganize our thoughts so they make sense, and
4. **P**roceed when your purpose and next steps are clear

It is a work habit designed to create space to consider questions that will prompt us to dig deeper into the real causes of problems.

This is a tool designed to help people become aware of what they might otherwise miss. Routine or habit may give us momentum, yet blind us to what really needs attention. The STOP technique requires you as a leader to take a disciplined approach to decisions about where you will focus your time and energy. Try it!

Digging Deeper

By Phil Ramsey

We regularly hear complaints that leaders are acting as "the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff" or that they "spend all their time putting out fires". Perhaps as a school or centre leader you feel that comments like these describe a lot of your activity. Many leaders regret not having more time to think deeply about long term solutions to the problems they face. What would it look like to go deeper into problems? How can leaders go from fighting fires to building a fire-resistant organization?
This question has intrigued leadership experts like Jim Collins, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer and Dan Heath *(see book review in this newsletter)*. Consider what is involved when we work to get beneath the surface of the problems we encounter.

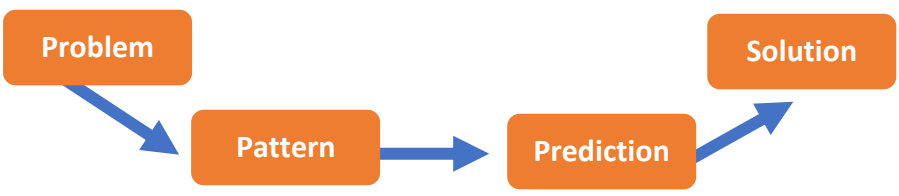
Fire Fighting

As a leader it makes sense to put out fires. You don't want your school or centre to burn down, so problems need to be addressed. Our first diagram shows the straightforward response to a problem. When you see it, it prompts you to do something about it.

Moving from problem to solution is a natural reaction. It gives us a deep sense of satisfaction to know that a dangerous fire has been put out. There are dangers, though, in a surface level response. You might be reacting to a symptom and not addressing the real issue. You might start treating fires as 'normal'. Rather than questioning why there are so many fires, many organizations put in place a costly infrastructure or use the most talented people to deal with them. Going deeper requires taking a fresh look at what is happening.

Detecting Patterns

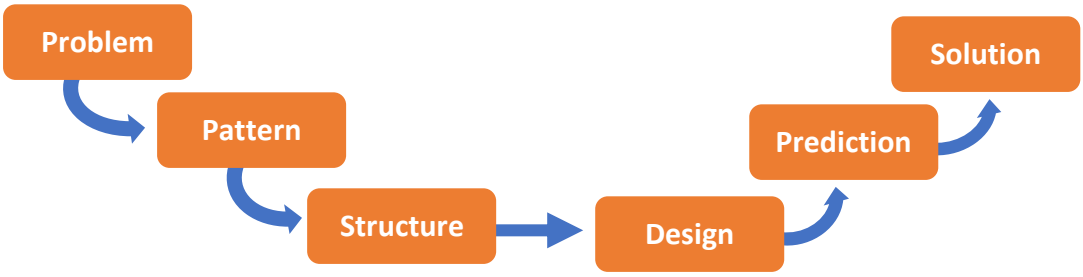
Making sense of problems involves a shift in perspective. Rather than treating each problem as a one-time event, leaders need to step back and try to identify patterns to what is happening.
The 'fires' are probably not random. When leaders investigate, perhaps by plotting how events or behaviour is changing over time, patterns emerge.



Identifying the pattern allows you to be more 'proactive'. You can predict in advance when the next fire might occur. Because you are ready for it, you can put it out with greater efficiency. The real value in finding a pattern, though, is it prompts you to go even deeper, to find what is behind the pattern.

Seeing Structure

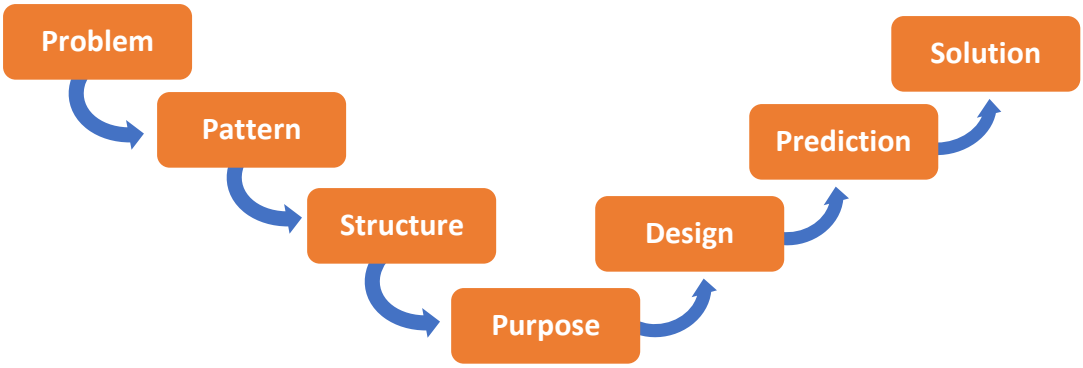
When a fire breaks out, it is natural to respond by thinking "That's not right. That shouldn't happen!" We may treat the fire as if it has no right to exist. People who study complex systems, though, generally take a different view. They operate off the rule of thumb that a complex system is perfectly designed to produce the results it is currently producing. If there is a pattern to the fires, they aren't happening by accident; somehow your organization is designed in a way that produces these fires. Systems experts call the basic design of a system the system's "structure". The term structure refers to whatever shapes how the system behaves. It can be anything from the physical layout of a place to people's attitudes. The pattern that you have identified acts as a window into the system structure.



With insight into the structure behind patterns, leaders often realize they have been leaving critical aspects of the organization unattended. Rather than allowing things to happen by default, they start to see how they might redesign the organization to produce a different set of results. The outcome of working at this deeper level is that we no longer get so many fires. The leader's job has shifted from solving problems to making sure problems don't occur.

Generative Intent

Digging deeper was prompted by a concern with fires, the realization that they are destructive, and a desire to keep the organization safe. As leaders go deeper, seeing the patterns of behaviour that characterize the school or centre, and understanding the structure that gives rise to these, it is natural to want to go down one more level. Leaders start to wonder about how they come to the judgements they are making about structure. What makes a system's design right or wrong? What is the point of system in the first place? These are questions about your generative intent; what results are you trying to generate? What is the purpose that should drive the design of the system?



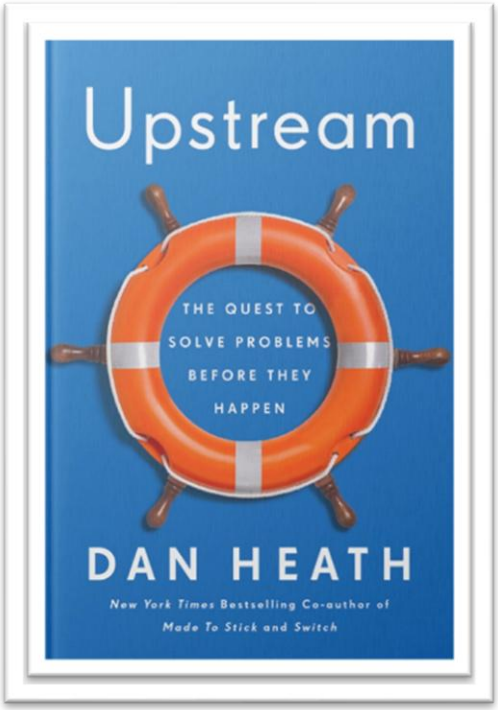
If people in the school or centre are at odds over how the system is designed, or what results are acceptable, it's likely that more time needs to be spent clarifying and articulating your purpose.

Sometimes leaders take for granted that they know what their purpose is and may wonder why it is that others are not as clear. The process of exploring problems, finding patterns, then understanding and redesigning structure, encourages leaders to think about and clarify their purpose in new ways. It is one of the added benefits of digging deeper into the challenges that you face. So, while there may be good reasons to fight fires, you also need to fight the urge to stay at the surface level of problem solving.

BOOK REVIEW:

Upstream

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – August 2022

Some of the books that deal with the need to dig deeper, as outlined in the opening article, get very dense very quickly and seem to be written primarily for management academics. Otto Scharmer, for instance, helps to keep me employed because I can be reasonably confident few people will pick up his book *Theory U* and understand how it can inform their leadership efforts. *Upstream: How to solve problems before they happen* by Dan Heath, on the other hand, is both enjoyable to read and full of very accessible lessons on how to dig deeper into organizational problems.

Heath frames the challenge as heading upstream on a river to see where current problems have come from. It is a useful metaphor, because it highlights that as a leader you can choose how far upstream you go if you want to make a real difference. And the book is full of outstanding examples of people who have brought about change after questioning whether they really had to accept current problems as normal.

Heath starts out by exploring some of the thinking traps that encourage us to solve existing problems, rather than prevent problems from occurring. Sometimes problems have become so 'normal' we are blind to their existence - or we think that "it's not my problem". In both cases, we can overlook how our organizations are designed to encourage the trap. It may be that no one has the job of addressing a particular problem, while others are kept very busy treating its symptoms. The hard work of the symptom treaters keeps them busy and allows the rest of us to get on with other pressing issues.

What if we do decide to go upstream? Heath provides thoughtful advice based on successful change efforts from around the world. These emphasize the need to put effort where it really makes a difference. For instance, leaders need to give careful thought to who needs to be involved in change, how to understand the structure of systems, where to focus effort, and how to measure progress.

Upstream draws on concepts and techniques from organizational learning and systems thinking, which have been a powerful influence on our thinking at InterLEAD for many years. I thoroughly enjoyed how the book presents this work in a fresh and usable way. The examples Heath uses give some valuable insights into how leaders can move from surface level problem solving, to seeing patterns of behaviour, and on to understanding how systems need to be redesigned.

Are You Listening?

By Phil Ramsey

Leaders need to be good listeners. We value good listening in others, and people appreciate it when we listen well. But there's a catch: most of us think we are good listeners already. And we may have learned some important skills that encourage others to talk: staying silent, paraphrasing what was said, and giving affirming nods. What if there was more to it? What might good listening look like if leaders in schools and centres took it to another level?

These are questions that have challenged people interested in leadership and change. To answer them, it pays to be able to see both "the forest and the trees". Imagine you were in a helicopter flying overhead a patch of bush. What can you observe? Dropping to a lower altitude gives you an up close and detailed view of one or two trees, but you would miss the bigger picture. Increasing your altitude enables you to see the whole forest, though you might miss out on much of the detail.

When we focus on listening skills, it is like we are lowering our altitude to look in depth at one part of the conversation process. When we do that, we can miss the connection to the broader picture: where listening sits as part of a robust conversation. When you are in a leadership role, you certainly want to be engaging in conversations where others say what's on their mind because you have listened in a way that helps them to express themselves freely. But that is just part of the picture. You also want conversations to challenge old ways of thinking, to lead to action, and to stimulate a greater level of awareness. Staying silent at the wrong time might make your listening better, but the conversation worse.

Conversation Dynamics

To see both the big picture and the detail it is good to think about the background to work on conversation dynamics. Why has there been such an emphasis on the part listening plays? As conversation facilitator Adam Kahane says, conversation involves talking and listening, and for many people the default way of talking is "telling", and the default way of listening is "not listening". If that is the starting point, it makes sense that emphasis on really listening is a good place to start when it comes to improving conversational quality.

Good listening behaviours signal to others that we are really paying attention. It signals our respect for them, that we are not allowing distractions to disrupt our conversation and that we really want to understand what they have to say. Asking questions and paraphrasing help us make sure we understand the point of view being expressed.

This is a great foundation for a healthy conversation. We wouldn't want to think, though, that all people want from us is that we listen without comment. People value the input leaders make to their thinking, especially when they know it is based on a real effort to understand. Injecting new ideas or challenging old assumptions can energize others, so long as you don't hijack the conversation or revert to the "telling and not listening" default setting.

Listening for What?

In his new book *Facilitating Breakthrough (see the Book Review in this newsletter)* Kahane draws on his experience facilitating high stakes conversations to explore a new way of seeing both the forest and the trees of conversation. We can see where listening fits in effective conversation and learn skills that raise the quality of both listening and talking. Conversations are complex, and we can listen for several things at once. As well as listening to the content of what people say, we can listen for deeper issues as well. What can you listen for?

As a skilled facilitator, Kahane listens for obstacles that prevent people having healthy conversations that make a difference. He assumes that collectively people will be able to find a way forward, unless some predictable obstacles interfere with how they talk together. Careful listening helps to identify obstacles and limit their impact.

All humans share common concerns for love, power, and justice. Love is the desire we have to connect with others, and to bring together relationships that have been divided. We also want to contribute powerfully to the world around us. And we want to be treated equitably; we will be frustrated if love and power are enjoyed by some but unjustly withheld from us.

So, facilitating healthy conversation starts with the assumption that talking and working together will come naturally to people if obstacles to connection, contribution, and equity are removed. We can improve the quality of our listening by paying attention to these three areas. Even if someone is not currently talking, we 'listen' by noticing that some obstacle might be limiting the part they play. Do they feel that they are disconnected from you or from others? Are there reasons they think they cannot contribute to the conversation? Do they feel they are being unfairly excluded from connection or limited in their contribution?

Listening for obstacles to connection, contribution, and equity helps you gain a better understanding of the conversational forest. You get to see the whole picture of how conversation is flowing. Plus, because it helps you to focus your attention on each individual with whom you talk, you see each tree in the forest in greater detail: you hear what each person has to say and listen with greater empathy. Try taking your listening to a new level by building your awareness of connection, contribution, and equity.

Better Conversation with a Worse Vocabulary

By Phil Ramsey

You might assume that a good vocabulary makes for good conversation. But is that so? If everyone involved is confident that they understand what words mean, will the conversation flow more smoothly? Will people be able to explore challenging topics more effectively? While it seems that improved vocabulary should lead to richer conversation, paradoxically the opposite is often true. Let's consider how.

It is tempting to think that any given word has a specific meaning that will be understood by anyone who knows it. Yet consider the number of times when you have experienced confusion because people attached different meanings to the same word. Words are symbols. What a word symbolizes might be different for me than for you. Earlier today I "tidied" my desk, but some people might look at my desk and not even consider using the word "tidy" to describe it.

Think of times when you have had conversations around questions like, "Are you prepared?" or "Is the work finished?" If asked, we might define "prepared" and "finished" using much the same language. In practice, though, we find that we have different expectations of what each of these looks like.

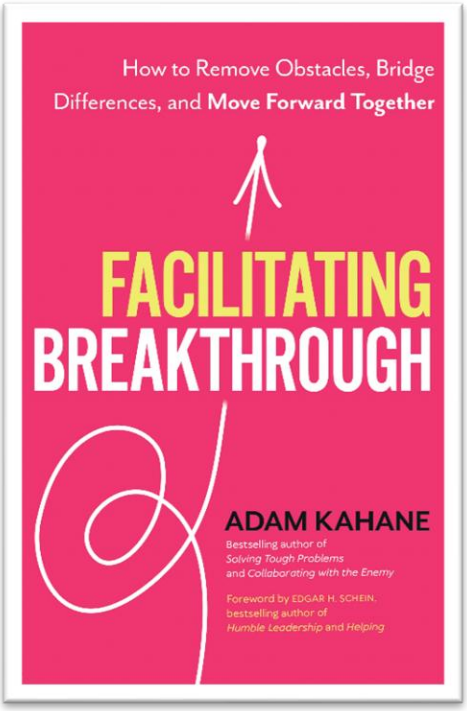
Using language with precision means not taking it for granted that we give the same meaning to a word. Rather, we will see it as a necessary part of the conversation to build shared meaning by checking how we are using words. If the meaning of the word is going to have an impact on the quality of the conversation it is worth taking time to talk about it.

Anything worth doing is likely to involve practice to get it right. At first you might just become more aware of when confusion over meaning causes things to go wrong. Even that is a good start. Increased awareness will prompt you to remember to discuss shared meaning early in an interaction. First efforts may feel clumsy. But look for phrases that make it natural to you; perhaps phrases like, "Can I just check we mean the same thing when we say…", or "When you use the term…what do you include in that?"

Keep in mind, your tone of voice matters. Assuming that there is one right meaning for a word and that you know what the word really means, leads to frustration, and that frustration will be evident to others. Keeping in mind that differences in meaning are natural and that sorting out shared meaning is an essential part of important conversations, will help you to bring a positive and engaging spirit to your interactions.

BOOK REVIEW:
Facilitating Breakthrough

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – November 2022

For over 20 years, Adam Kahane has been facilitating high stakes conversations, often involving people who have been at war with each other.

And over that time Kahane has written as series of books detailing what he has learned about what it takes to hold conversation that really make a difference. So, about every four or five years we get to see how his understanding has developed and how we can benefit from the insights he has gained. Kahane writes with refreshing openness. He articulates how he discovers that he has missed crucial elements needed for success, and what it took to find a way forward.

His first book, *Solving Tough Problems*, grew from his realization that just being smart wasn't sufficient to get people to listen to what he had to say. He needed to be able to connect in order to move conversation to empathy and dialogue. Later, when he realized that connection needed to be balanced with contribution, he wrote *Power and Love*, in which he explores how these basic drives can both be expressed enthusiastically.

In *Facilitating Breakthrough* Kahane adds another missing piece, the need for justice. More than that, he goes into detail about the strategies a facilitator can use to keep a conversation moving forward. To do that, he gets the reader to think about two different ways that people can relate to one another. Sometimes relationships are vertical, where those in superior positions provide clarity and certainty for others. At other times relationships are horizontal, where people relate to one another as equals, working alongside rather than giving direction.

According to Kahane, vertical and horizontal relationships work best when used in tandem. If a group is stuck because of too much verticality, it is time to shift to a more horizontal approach. And vice versa: too much horizontality gets groups mired in indecision and it is time to go vertical. A skilled facilitator learns to sense the movement between these approaches and adopt strategies for keeping the conversation moving forward.

The word 'facilitation' means to make things easier. And Kahane aims to teach the reader how to make it easier for people to have healthy conversations. *Facilitating Breakthrough* feels like a very practical handbook in which he is systematically outlining a complex theory of how you can approach the work of facilitation.

At InterLEAD we look forward to any new book by Kahane. We know it will help us in our work, and it's always fascinating to see where learning journey has gone. Now we are waiting expectantly on the next instalment.