



in the moment

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Leading in an Undignified World

By Phil Ramsey

What was your greatest leadership challenge of last year? For many it involved the scramble to make sure the school or centre had the staff needed to keep running. Finding staff was a headache. In a lot of schools, so was holding on to people. Was that your experience?

When good people leave there is always a lurking concern that maybe “we are doing something wrong”. When people leave to go someplace else, it is natural to assume that the other place must be doing things better. Of course, that can often be the case. But the last couple of years have seen something different. Organizations everywhere have been seeing the same thing: people have been leaving their jobs to try something different.

This has been called the “Great Resignation.” Perhaps prompted by the COVID pandemic, many people have been looking for a better work-life balance and decided to try something new. As employers became desperate to fill job vacancies, more and more people had good reason to consider a change. This snowball of worker movements led some to rename it the “Great Reshuffle”.

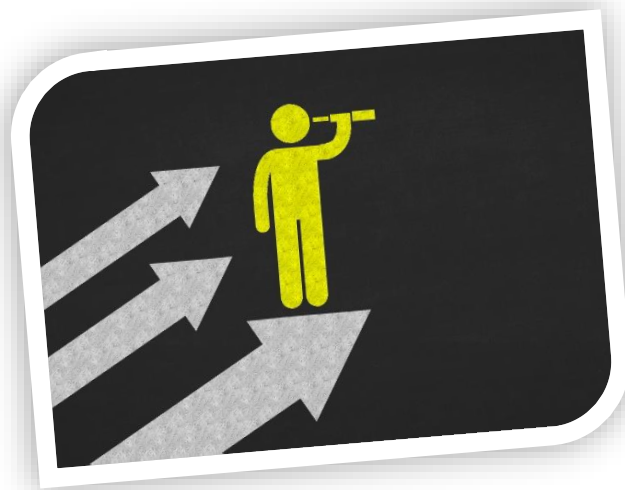
It’s tempting to think that this was a one-off weird set of circumstances, and to hope that everything will go back to normal. It is also useful to reflect on what was involved and what leaders can learn. The most common explanation for people wanting to change jobs was that they were dissatisfied with their work. The global nature of the ‘Great Resignation’ suggests that maybe there is a pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction, affecting people everywhere. If that is the case, then leaders have to make an extra effort to make their organizations different.

In *Leading with Dignity* (see the Book Review in this newsletter) Harvard educator Donna Hicks provides a way of understanding what lies behind dissatisfaction, why it is so pervasive, and what leaders can do to make a difference. She encourages people - and leaders in particular - to understand the crucial role that dignity plays in our lives. Let’s consider the link between dignity and satisfaction. It could be that creating a culture of dignity within your school or centre might be the key to creating a workplace that people truly value.

Honouring Dignity

According to Hicks, dignity is the inherent worth or value that all humans have. We are born with it and it is precious to us. We notice when people honour our dignity, by acknowledging and accepting us, recognizing what we have done, and treating us fairly. When people make it safe for us to contribute, make an effort to understand us, and give us the benefit of the doubt we can see that they are treating us as worthwhile. People everywhere want to be treated with dignity. When people honour our dignity, we notice and our relationships are strengthened.

The ‘Great Resignation’ showed that many workplace relationships are fragile. Perhaps this is because, rather than honouring dignity, the nature of our interactions at work will often violate dignity. If we feel we are not acknowledged for work we have done, or unfairly blamed by someone who does not take responsibility for their own mistakes, we all experience these as toxic because our dignity has been under attack.



Sadly, violations of dignity are so common that we can be part of a toxic culture where they are treated as a normal part of life. Some leaders may convince themselves that practices which violate people's dignity are actually good for motivation. When we are surrounded by others who routinely violate our dignity, we can make things worse by retaliating, covering up our mistakes, or blaming others. When we do this we violate others dignity and, without realizing it, our own.

Where to Start?

In this article we have mentioned a couple of important snowballs. In the 'Great Resignation' the number of people changing jobs snowballed, making life challenging for leaders. And behind that was another snowball: people who violate dignity can provoke others to retaliate, so the workplace culture goes from bad to worse. By learning about dignity, each of us can make the effort not to contribute to the cycle of dignity violations. The personal payoff is that we will feel better about ourselves, having honoured our own dignity.

The key to this is understanding the nature of dignity. The word *dignity* is from Latin and means "worthiness." While others can *give* you respect, admiration and praise, those don't *give* you worth or dignity. Instead, dignity is something you have inherently. You are worthwhile because you are human. When people give praise or respect, they honour your worth, and when they are toxic they may treat you as worthless. Leaders need to understand that whether they are treated with respect or not, praised or unfairly criticized, they are inherently worthwhile people. And everyone else is also worthwhile, deserving of having their dignity honoured. So, recognizing one's own worth is not arrogant. It is part of realizing that there is dignity in everyone.

If our background makes it difficult to acknowledge our own worth, connecting to our personal dignity can be a challenge. We can be quick to do things that leave us feeling we have let ourselves down by the way we have acted. There is work to do to become grounded in the view that we are people of dignity. Because we live in a world where dignity violations are common, it requires an on-going process of learning.

Perhaps this is an important goal to set for yourself in the year ahead. It can be the basis for creating a workplace in which others also feel they are people of worth.

The Next Step: Honour the Dignity of Others

By Phil Ramsey

Making sure that others feel valued is complex, yet it is the key to leadership success. Take a moment to consider what is involved in working with a team of people.

Firstly, everyone has two internal drives that are often at odds with one another. People want to learn and grow, finding ways to extend themselves, making a positive contribution. They also want to be recognized and valued for who they are at the moment, even if their contributions are limited. Leadership that focuses on one drive and ignores the other cannot be sustainable.

More than that, some in your team will come from a background that makes them doubt their own worth. Some will make comments about you that violate your dignity. Some will gossip or criticize teammates. And this will often happen when those in the team are already feeling stressed because the work they do is demanding. So, what can you do?

The complexity of work requires a range of qualities from a leader. And, of course, these won't all come at once; they need to be developed. So be determined to be a learner. Keep working at your leadership capability. Pay attention to what works and what does not. Embrace feedback.

Aim to combine accountability with empathy. Give people tasks that stretch them, allow them autonomy in choices about how to proceed, and hold them accountable. Explain the big picture that others may not see; that the goals they achieve make a difference. People feel worthwhile when they see themselves reaching meaningful goals that they have had to stretch to achieve. When they also receive recognition from a leader for their achievements, they sense that their dignity has been honoured.

At the same time, understand that people need to know you empathize, particularly when things go wrong. Make the effort to interact, communicate and connect. People want to experience the powerful feeling of satisfaction that comes with personal achievement. At the same time, they also want to be in caring relationships with others. Make it a routine to treat people well.

Honouring dignity is no simple task. As a leader, it requires attention and persistent learning. It may not come naturally to you to express empathy or to hold others to account. But you can develop skills that allow you to bring these into balance. In future newsletters we will look more closely at a further challenge: creating a culture of dignity.



BOOK REVIEW By Phil Ramsey

Leading with Dignity

By Donna Hicks

We are always on the lookout for ideas that extend our understanding of leadership and organizational change. Sometimes a book will deepen our understanding of how to address a perplexing issue. Another book may introduce a concept we hadn't really considered previously. And occasionally, as is the case with *Leading with Dignity*, a book will help us see how the pieces of the leadership puzzle all fit together.

In *Leading with Dignity*, author Donna Hicks shows why dignity is a key organizing principle for work. She makes the case that we are all motivated by the desire for dignity.

Understanding this helps us to understand why some leadership practices work and others don't. It gives us insight into why people react the way they do to events or interactions that violate their dignity. And it helps us build a clearer picture of the kind of school or centre we are trying to create.

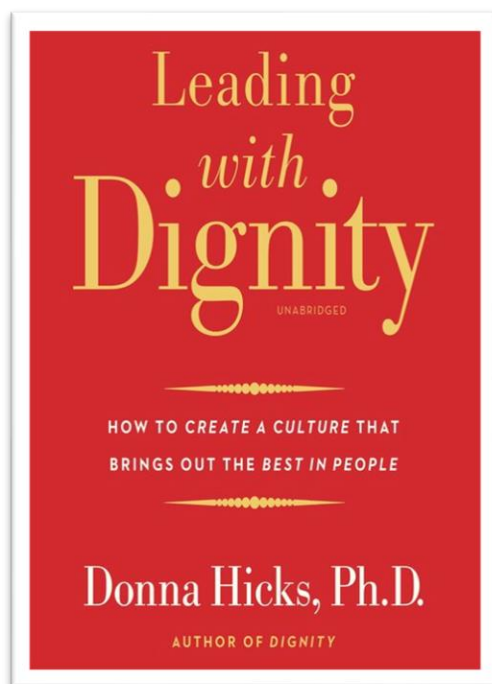
In the book, Hicks starts by explaining her model of dignity: how it can be honoured; how it gets violated; and how we are often tempted to create a false sense of worth with actions that leave us or others feeling violated. She also discusses how to lead with dignity and the massive work of creating a culture of dignity. In doing so she brings together a range of concepts that we've discussed in this newsletter over the years: creating psychological safety in a team; the art of effective feedback; the growth mindset; and the need for empathy in the workplace.

A rule of thumb in leadership development is that a good model needs to be:

- (1) relevant to the actual decisions leaders need to make;
- (2) teachable, so learners can understand it and apply lessons in a practical way; and
- (3) transferable, so that lessons can survive the shift from the learning environment to the workplace and from one workplace to another.

Will *Leading with Dignity* meet all of these criteria? It is certainly relevant and teachable. And the examples Hicks describes show that it can be transferred to challenging situations and make a real difference. It seems like the big question is whether leaders are up to the challenge of doing the on-going work needed to really embed a culture of dignity in their workplaces.

We thoroughly recommend *Leading with Dignity*. It will give you a new way of viewing the work you do and the impact you have on others.



'In the Moment' Newsletter – February 2023

Coherent Change

By Phil Ramsey

Like many leaders in education, you may feel that there is an endless list of demands you and your school or centre need to respond to. While each change may be important, when added together it can feel confusing and overwhelming to everyone.

Making sense of a confusing collection of apparently important demands requires good leadership judgment. You can't respond to everything. According to leadership experts Noel Tichy and Warren Bennis (*see the Book Review in this newsletter*) good judgment involves making important decisions - or judgment calls - that are informed by context.

As you can imagine, when faced with complex decisions poor judgment comes easily. Complexity, in tandem with feeling overwhelmed, makes it easy to ignore context and look for an easy answer. Perhaps you can just do what has worked in the past or give in to the loudest voice. Grabbing at quick solutions becomes an attractive option, even when you haven't thought through the implications.

Tichy and Bennis have been involved in leadership development with international business organisations for decades. They have studied the impact of good and poor judgment calls and seen what it takes for leaders to get things right. Some of their insights provide valuable guidance for educational leaders, even though the organisational setting may seem very different.

Having a Teachable Point of View

While making a judgment call is important, so is following through by convincing others that they need to support the decision. For this to work, leaders need credibility. Others in the school or centre need to trust that decisions are realistic, and worth getting behind. They don't want to feel that decisions are made on a whim, or that leaders are following a fashion that will quickly blow over.

Think about what that involves. As a leader, you need a way to judge which demands are worth pursuing and you need to be able to explain this judgment in a way that is consistent and credible. Given that the context keeps changing, you also need to be prepared to learn and adjust as you go.

Tichy and Bennis suggest that the key to this leadership puzzle is having a **Teachable Point of View** (a TPOV). A TPOV is your way of explaining what is important for success in your school or centre. It is a broad outline that remains relevant as the context shifts, rather than a detailed plan that quickly becomes redundant. And because it is broad, it is a way of thinking that you can teach to others, enabling them to make good judgment calls that align with the direction you are setting. One colleague used to describe a good TPOV as being like Swiss cheese: full of holes that other people can fill in for themselves.



Of course, having a TPOV is only going to be of value if you teach it. The more often you incorporate your TPOV into discussion of what you are doing around the school or centre, the better people will understand that it is a stable and enduring aspect of your leadership. How might you do that?

Localised Curriculum

Encouragement to establish a localized curriculum, based on consultation with the community, provides an opportunity to develop a meaningful TPOV. The localized curriculum should capture what is important to the school, doing so in a way that makes it memorable, easy to communicate to students, staff and other stakeholders. In other words, an effective localized curriculum has the same function as the TPOV described by Tichy and Bennis. It operates as a way to help you make good judgment calls, and as a way to frame your decisions when explaining them to others.

Further, if you have ‘boiled down’ your localized curriculum into key elements, make sure you put these to use in as many ways as you can. Through repetition you will establish them as a stable direction and a basis for cutting through complexity.

For example, you may have established that there are four or five key values that capture what the school or centre aims to achieve with children. If these exist only in the form of posters in hallways and classrooms students will learn to ignore them. On the other hand, if staff regularly refer to these as a basis for judging student work or behaviour, they grow in significance. Similarly, if you build them into the systems you use for judgments related to staff, everyone - including you - will be consistently reminded of their importance.

This effort to integrate localised curriculum into all aspects of your work pays off when making judgment calls around change. The work you will have done provides you with a TPOV that informs your decisions, enabling you to get clarity when working out what to prioritise. And it gives you a head start when communicating change to others. Your TPOV becomes a familiar frame that helps others understand decisions.

Refining Your TPOV

By Phil Ramsey

An essential feature of a **Teachable Point of View** is that it really is teachable. You have to be able to use it in a variety of ways with different stakeholders. The good news is that you have plenty of experience with teaching and making complex ideas teachable. What are some principles you can keep in mind?

Firstly, understand that your early attempts will need to be refined. It is always the case that you will be able to learn from and improve on what you do and say at the start. You may find that the way you describe your localised curriculum is too complex for some stakeholders and too simple for others. More likely, you'll find it is too complex for everyone, and you need to simplify and clarify what you say for people to understand.

How teachable something is also depends on the context in which you are teaching. You may have an hour to go into detail with a group of fascinated colleagues. What is more common will be situations where you need to describe the key elements in a few minutes, prior to a meeting with stakeholders more interested in the decision you have made than the way that you made it.

Because people learn in different ways, having a variety of ways to explain your localised curriculum will be important. A graphic representation can make it memorable. Telling stories that illustrate how it has been used to address some of the challenges the school faces is a way to bring it to life. And it is important to not be the only voice that is expressing this TPOV; find ways to get others involved in sharing it.

Finally, repetition is valuable in learning. If a localised curriculum gets developed and then shelved, rather than acting as a way to cut through confusion and bring coherence to change efforts, it becomes just another burdensome demand that has come and gone, with no great impact on people. So, having made the effort to develop a localised curriculum, put it to use while using your professional skills to make it teachable.



BOOK REVIEW By Phil Ramsey

Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls

By Noel Tichy & Warren Bennis

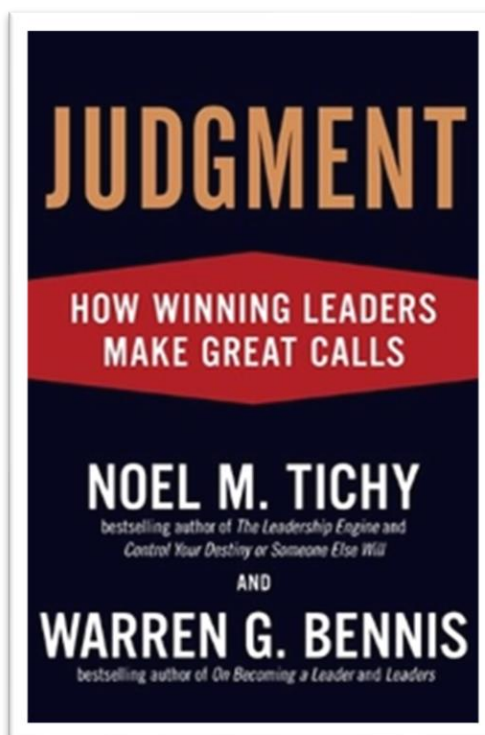
Authors Noel Tichy and Warren Bennis have both had distinguished careers as professors of business, and as consultants with major US organizations. Both have also been prolific writers on leadership and organizational change.

With this background they have each had front row seats from which to observe both leaders making judgment calls in high-stakes situations. They can provide fascinating accounts of decisions that affected the future of major corporations, including General Electric, Hewlett-Packard and Boeing.

In their book *Judgment*, they tackle the challenge of making “good judgment” teachable. Sometimes even the exemplary leaders, renowned for their good decisions, struggle to explain how they exercise judgment. Sometimes research in this field stays focused on how decision making goes wrong and writers limit themselves to describing the traps to be avoided. Here, Tichy and Bennis present a model that describes what it takes to get decisions right.

The approach they take involves a detailed look at the process used by leaders: how they prepare for a decision; how they make the “judgment call”; and how they follow through. They focus attention on the character of leaders who have made the process work, considering the mix of humility and courage that is required. And they look at judgment calls in three areas where the stakes are particularly high for large organizations: succession planning (making judgments about people); strategy (setting organizational direction); and crisis management. Incorporated into the book is a ‘Handbook for Leadership Judgment’ that includes exercises to help you develop your decision-making ability.

I found it fascinating how leadership development featured in the book. In their experience, the most crucial decisions leaders make have to do with identifying and preparing the next generation of leaders with good judgment. There is plenty to learn from massive corporations like General Electric, where leadership development has been part of their core theory of success for decades. While the context of education is very different, *Judgment* by Tichy and Bennis can give you a framework for building capability for yourself and for your team.



'In the Moment' Newsletter – May 2023

Skillful with Questions

By Phil Ramsey

Take a moment to picture 17th Century scientist Isaac Newton walking through his garden and seeing an apple fall from a tree. Newton wasn't the first person to see something fall to earth. Plenty of people would have seen apples fall and thought nothing of it. What made Newton different to everyone else, though, was that he asked some important questions about what he had just seen. Why did the apple fall to earth? Why did it go straight down, not sideways? Why didn't it go up?



Answering questions like these led to defining the laws of gravitation, which took Newton over two decades, and represents a monumental leap in scientific progress. Often, though, when we think about progress and achievements, we focus our attention on the brilliance of answers rather than the questions that led to the breakthrough.

Like anything, we can become skilled, or even masterful at something if we give it sufficient attention. Sometimes we don't give attention to things we do all the time. We might think that breathing is just a natural part of life; something everyone does which doesn't require skill. Yet musicians will treat breathing as a skill because it makes such a difference to the quality of their performances. In the same way, while we all ask questions, effective leadership depends on asking questions skillfully.

How can you improve the quality of your questions?

Finding the Right Tone

What is the emotional impact of the questions you ask? What affect do your questions have on how others feel? How do they affect how you feel?

After studying the relationship between questions and emotions, author and leadership expert Marilee Adams drew a profound distinction between 'learner' questions and 'judger' questions. A judger question involves an attack, either on ourselves or on someone else. Imagine talking to colleagues and wondering "What is wrong with you people?" You may not ask the question aloud; even so it is going to shape how you feel about them. And while you may feel that you have a great poker face, chances are your feelings will leak into the conversation in some way. Similarly, questions you ask yourself - like, "Why am I so stupid?" - can make a big difference to your mood, your motivation, and your resilience.

If we don't give attention to the tone of our questions, what will be the result? We can find ourselves in a vicious spiral of judgement. What is the way out of this spiral? According to Adams, awareness is the basis for change. When we start attending to tone, we can practice asking 'learner' questions. We can develop the habit of asking questions that prompt us to be curious, reasonable and compassionate. The difference between learner and judger questions is so significant, Adams has concluded that if we change our questions, we can change our lives.

Questions for Clarity

Being skillful with questions involves more than how you ask them. Knowing what questions to ask is also critical. Sir John Whitmore, expert on coaching and training, proposed the GROW formula as a guide to questions that can help people work out what they can do to solve their own problems. This formula is “tried and true”, having now been used by leaders and teachers over decades. The acronym GROW stands for Goal, Reality, Options, What next?

You will have experienced what it is like to be confused about what you should do in a complicated situation. It may feel like your head is spinning. Having someone offer more advice just adds to your confusion. The GROW formula helps people sort through the turbulence. The first step is to ask about goals, with questions like, ‘What do you want to achieve?’ or ‘What would success look like?’

The second step gets people to think about their current reality: where are they now in relation to the goals they have just described. Asking about goals and reality in this order helps people clarify the gap they are trying to close. It allows them to see the direction they want to go. The third area for questions comes naturally: asking, ‘What are your options?’ or ‘How could you get from where you are to where you want to be?’

To complete the coaching process, ask ‘What will you do next?’ As well as knowing the direction to go in, people need to think about how they will get started. What will be their first step on what might be a long journey? By following this GROW formula, you can help people go from confusion to clarity about the next action they need to take.

Questions for Breakthrough

Author Warren Berger (*see the Book Review in this newsletter*) has outlined a formula for questions that can lead people to breakthrough ideas. The “breakthrough” process is very different to GROW formula, in that the questions might be spread over a long period of time, like the decades it took Newton to understand gravity. While breakthroughs that you seek might not be on the same scale, what are the questions you can use?

The first step is a ‘Why?’ question. Interestingly, we often start with a question that is directed at other people: like ‘Why doesn’t someone do something about...?’ A crucial change is when you make the question personal, transforming it to ‘Why don’t I do something about...?’ No doubt you know many people who don’t make that change and are left complaining about a situation they assume they can do nothing about.

As the ‘Why?’ questions percolate in our minds, we go through life noticing interesting things that all relate to breakthroughs we would like to see. The next step is when we see a possibility. It involves asking the question, ‘What if...?’ In Newton’s case, he went from asking ‘Why did the apple fall directly to earth?’ to ‘What if the earth is drawing the apple toward it?’ As a leader, your ‘What if...?’ might involve a change: ‘What if, instead of doing what we’ve always done (which isn’t really working), we tried...?’

Some of the answers to your ‘What if...?’ question might lead nowhere. When you strike upon an answer that holds real promise, the final step is to move to questions of ‘How?’ How will you go about making it work? The bigger the breakthrough you hope to make, the more likely it is that initial efforts will fail. You will need to keep asking ‘How?’, to provoke more experimentation and learning.

Questions have power. You can become more skillful in how you use them. By learning to ask effective questions with the right tone, you can harness that power to accelerate the progress of your school or centre.

Advanced Questioning

By Phil Ramsey

As outlined earlier in the newsletter, we can become more skillful in our use of questions. Keep in mind, though, that questions are used in conversation. Your wonderfully skillful questions might be met with resistance or confusion by someone else. If that person has been on the receiving end of mainly 'judger' questions, they may have learned to be on the defensive when a question comes their way. What can you do to help?

One thing you can do is notice how people respond. Once you start paying attention you might be quicker to recognize when someone tries to avoid answering - or answers a different question to the one you asked. Of course, it could be that you have asked your question with a tone that signals judgement. Noticing the reaction gives you the chance to reflect on how you asked and adjust your tone.

On the other hand, there may have been nothing inappropriate about the tone. It may be that you are talking with someone who feels threatened by questions of any sort. What can you do to help?

If you notice a defensive reaction, try reassuring the person. Shift the conversation away from anything personal and on to the task that you are working on together. You could say something like, 'I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound as if I'm blaming you. What I'm really interested in is...'

It can help both you and others to transform your questions. The way you formulate a question when you ask it for the first time might not help you get a complete answer. Try putting the question another way. Here are a couple of transformations you could try.

A well-known distinction is between 'open' and 'closed' questions. Closed questions can be answered with a word: usually 'yes' or 'no'. Open questions require longer answers. If your initial question was open, try transforming it to one that is closed. If it was closed, transform it to one that is open. Recently, a student asked me 'Is this course going to be useful?' That was a closed question that felt like it placed the responsibility for relevance all on my shoulders as the teacher. When we transformed it into 'How can we make sure the course is useful?', it led to a rich discussion based on a sense of shared purpose and responsibility.

Thinking expert Edward de Bono suggested an alternative distinction. Using questions can be compared to hunting: you are in pursuit of information. Some questions are 'shooting' questions: you are targeting a specific piece of information and you either get it or you miss. Others are 'fishing' questions: you have thrown out a line and you are not sure what you will pull up. Whichever you try first, see what happens when you transform your question to the other form.

All of us have some level of skill when it comes to questions. If you want to unleash the power of questions, keep asking yourself, 'How can I advance? How can I take my questions to another level?'



BOOK REVIEW: A More Beautiful Question

By Phil Ramsey

Warren Berger is a journalist who has developed a fascination for questions and their power to drive innovation.

He is not alone: in his book *A More Beautiful Question* Berger draws on work of educators like Deborah Meier and organizations like the Right Question Institute. Further, he gives fascinating examples of the way questions have led to breakthroughs that we may take for granted today.

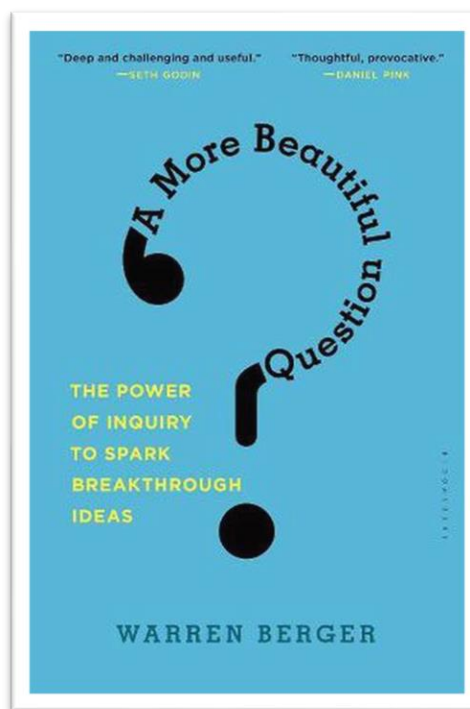
A great story from the books, that highlights the “Why, What if, How” formula described in our earlier article is that of Van Phillips, an engineer who lost a leg in an accident at age 21.

Starting with the question “If we can send people to the moon, why can’t people develop a better prosthetic leg?” Eventually, this question led to the development of the “Cheetah” running blades now used by most Paralympics runners.

Berger makes good use of questions to give the books structure and direction, and to address issues that will be of deep concern to leaders in education. For example, why is it that 3 year-olds are full of questions - to the annoyance of their parents - yet for most children questioning seems to stop when they start school? Is there a link between the fall-off of questioning in school and lack of student engagement? How do we design school and organization cultures to promote questioning?

There was a time when having answers was a great indicator of intelligence. Today, of course, it takes no time to find answers of the internet. Of greater value is the ability to ask questions that others are not asking, provoking new inquiries and breakthroughs. The good news is that asking questions is a skill most of us had when we were 3 years old, and it is one we can rediscover with some effort.

I thoroughly enjoyed *A More Beautiful Question*, and it left me determined to be more deliberate in my use of questions. This is an excellent book for people in all fields, and particularly for those involved in education and leadership.



'In the Moment' Newsletter – August 2023

Leadership & Swiss Cheese

By Phil Ramsey

It can be frustrating when things you thought you knew turn out to be wrong. Or when what you believed were 'tried and true' approaches seem to make things worse. Lately, leadership has been a frustrating topic for many people who thought they were experts. Some of the wisdom gleaned from experience, research, and theory may not seem to help with today's problems.

If you have experienced this kind of frustration, it isn't necessarily the case that yesterday's answers were wrong. They worked at the time. Leaders tried them and found they helped. But if the world is asking new questions, you can't rely on the old answers. Few would argue with the idea that life has become more complex and chaotic. New challenges require innovative solutions. Leadership researcher Linda Hill, along with her colleagues from academia and business, have been exploring what successful leadership looks like when organizations are striving to be innovative (*see the Book Review in this newsletter*).



Leading for innovation, it turns out, is a lot like Swiss cheese which is famously full of holes. Picture a wedge of cheese. How might this be like a leader in a school or centre? Well, because it is cut into a wedge there is a point to the cheese. Likewise, leaders need to make sure that people have some clarity about the direction they are all moving in. But why might there be holes in the leadership? Leaders don't have all the answers. There is space for others to contribute.

The Size of Holes

Scientific progress in the 20th century was not kind to Swiss cheese. As processes became cleaner, the holes in the cheese got smaller and sometimes disappeared. Recent research has suggested that holes were caused by microscopic hay particles in milk buckets used for traditional cheese making. An effort is underway to get more holes back into the cheese, so the Swiss can recapture their cheesy tradition.

Leadership seems to have followed an oddly similar process, one that you might have experienced personally. Can you recall your first experience of being in a leadership role? You would have been very aware of gaps in your knowledge. You might have relied on others for answers. As you gained experience and expertise, a couple of things may have happened. Other people recognized that if they had problems or questions, you were the best person to ask and, as the leader, you had a responsibility to provide answers. Along with that, you were learning, so you had better and better answers to give. The holes in your leadership cheese may have been getting smaller and smaller.

A lot of leadership theory has, perhaps unwittingly, encouraged leaders to be experts who have all the answers. Influential concepts like Transformational Leadership emphasize the leader's role in charismatically motivating individuals to perform at their best. From this perspective the leader is a heroic individual who helps other individuals become heroic too.

But what if the success of your school or centre depends on collective rather than individual performance? That is the case when the name of the game is innovation. Bringing something new into existence invariably requires a team rather than an individual creative genius. A rich mixture of skills and knowledge are needed. Further, when people talk about creativity they might use the phrase, “thinking outside the box”, to encourage unconstrained ideas. Innovation, on the other hand, happens inside the box: there are important constraints or parameters that people need to work within. As a leader you might welcome new ideas and breakthrough thinking, as long as the ideas help to deliver the curriculum, fit with the values of the school or centre, are within budget, and so on.

Like Swiss cheese, leadership needs a combination of structure and holes. Leadership that produces innovation needs to both unleash the creativity of people while harnessing that energy, so it can be directed effectively. Leaders need to find balance - the right amount of holes - by working out what needs to be controlled and where things can be allowed to be more chaotic.

Leader as a Social Architect

Encouraging innovative solutions requires that leaders give attention to the “social architecture” of their schools and centres. A “charismatic expert” leader may unintentionally give the impression that the cheese is already complete with no holes yet to fill. A “social architect” creates conditions for people to appreciate there are plenty of holes where they can contribute solutions.

To do this, leaders need to ask themselves, “What shapes the way that people around here work together?” Creating conditions that encourage innovation involves a balancing act. Encouraging individual contribution needs to be balanced with collective action. Challenging people cannot be at the expense of providing support (and vice versa). Wisdom is needed to decide when to rely on known solutions and when it is the right time to improvise. And personally, leaders need to work out how to both listen with empathy and tell people with authority.

Typically, educational leaders get into leadership roles because of their expertise and experience. That means leaders need to be both confident in their own capability, and humbly aware that there is still plenty they don’t know. Leadership capability, in other words, is also like Swiss cheese. It is good to realistically acknowledge that there will always be gaps in what you can do. The gaps - or holes - can prompt you to recognize the contribution others can make and encourage you to get busy as a social architect.

Creative Abrasion

By Phil Ramsey

Diversity has long been viewed as an important ingredient necessary for innovation. New ideas will often appear at an intersection of two different ways of thinking. People who have specialized knowledge of a subject often need an outsider to provoke a different way of thinking. Just having a variety of people available, however, isn't enough. Some social architecture is needed to get what Linda Hill calls creative abrasion, where ideas rub together to create enough sparks to generate innovative approaches to old problems.



Why do leaders need to design for creative abrasion?

Primarily because most people don't like conflict. When you are interacting with people, you'll find yourself naturally drawn to those who agree with you. Those who are abrasive are not so attractive; you might tolerate them for a time, but it feels like hard work. So, creative abrasion is important for innovation, but most groups of people and most leaders will naturally prefer keeping interactions smooth.

What can leaders do to create conditions where creative abrasion is valued?

Because the desire for smooth, conflict-free interactions is so strong, there need to be repeated messages that emphasize the importance of diversity. This is best done by a leader, and preferably by other opinion leaders as well. Those who are new to the organization need to be encouraged to express alternatives, and everyone needs to know that diverse points of view are expected.

Left to chance, teams will develop norms that mean differences are quickly resolved and efforts made to smooth over differences. For creative abrasion to spark innovation, a new set of norms must be established. A team may think that the need for diversity can be met by brainstorming a few alternatives and then quickly settling on the one they like best. Different viewpoints need 'airtime' for people to really listen and consider their implications and importance. As a leader you might try establishing "rules of engagement" that govern how team processes are played out. Usually these will involve making sure that conflict needs to focus on ideas and tasks, not on the people and personalities.

Why not take some time at your next staff meeting to do a diversity audit? That is not simply a matter of noting who is present. Check for the diversity of ideas, the variety of opinions, and the degree of creative abrasion. Consider whether your meetings are currently designed to deliver the innovation that is needed. And if something needs to change, think about how you might change the social architecture that shapes how people behave.

BOOK REVIEW: **Collective Genius**

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Linda Hill is a Professor of Business at Harvard Business School, whose research is focused on making the most of diversity for innovation.

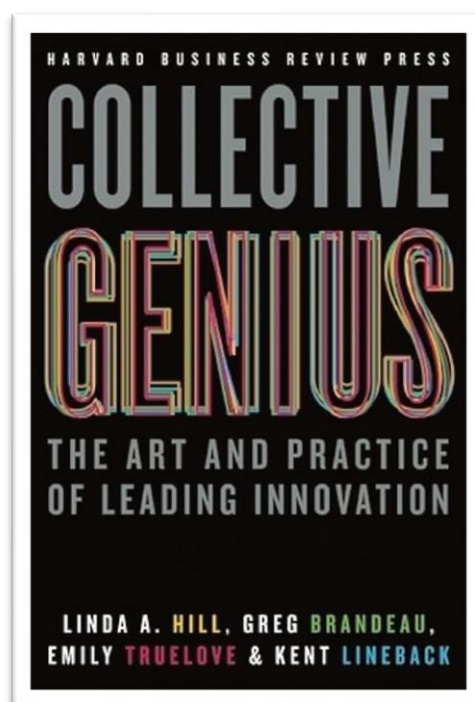
Appropriately, her book *Collective Genius* is written with a group of authors, to bring together perspectives of researchers, leadership practitioners, and consultants. Together they outline a very useful model that can guide leaders interested in innovation and the social architecture needed to support it.

Their model is based around the well-established management formula, that for people to performance at anything they require a combination of motivation and ability. In this case, Hill and her co-authors explore what it takes to (1) create a community in which people are motivated to innovate, and (2) develop critical skills people need to be able to innovate.

While models are a useful way of explaining complex ideas, they are not particularly interesting to read about. Those interested just in the 'Collective Genius' model can probably learn plenty about it by reading one of the shorter articles Hill has published in business journals. Happily, the book is fresh and insightful because it is based around descriptions of some fascinating businesses that have made innovation a way of life. These include Pixar Animation Studios, eBay, and Google.

Most readers will be familiar with some of the movies created by Pixar. These combine very different forms of creativity. Some very creative people work together to develop the stories and the original songs. And Pixar keeps finding breakthrough animation technology to add a WOW factor. Then there is the creativity needed by a range of people in management, who must make sure that films are released on schedule and within budget. I thoroughly enjoyed the behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to organize people to deliver this level of innovation with one movie after another over the last 30 years.

Collective Genius wraps up with a look to the future. To sustain innovation, leaders need to grow more leadership capability. Again, doing this well involves going beyond a one-off effort. Hill discusses the social architecture some leaders have designed into the organizations to continually nurture leadership talent. *Collective Genius* is an excellent book for anyone interested in leadership and innovation.



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