

Three Dimensional Change

By Phil Ramsey

Imagine you are studying at university, and you're required to take a course on teamwork. While you enjoy working in teams, you dread having to do assignments where your grades depend on fellow students. What's the problem?

The fair option should be to divide the work up among those in the team and rely on people to do a good job of their assigned portion. But experience tells you at least one teammate is going to let everyone else down. You'll end up having to do more than your fair share if you want a reasonable grade. And the lack of fairness often results in arguments that leave everyone exhausted and bitter. Efforts to avoid conflict usually result in mediocre work. What a mess!

Perhaps you have had that experience while studying. While it might seem that it is a product of the somewhat artificial context of student life, it has a lot in common with the realities of leadership and change. Change facilitator Adam Kahane explains in his book *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems* (see the Book Review in this newsletter) that radical change requires work in three dimensions - the same dimensions that cause aggravation to students.



Taking a Systems View

Like your school or centre, your community or city, the team the students are working in can be viewed as a social *system*. A "system" is a collection of parts that interact with one another to function. Most social systems are messy: it feels like they should work better. But they are complex, so often when you are part of a social system it feels like there isn't much you can do to improve it.

According to Kahane, while systems might look impregnable, they all have cracks; areas where the problems are painful and call out for change. Cracks create the opportunity for "radical" change. Kahane explains that the term *radical* is from the Latin *radix*, meaning 'root'. So radical change is that which gets to the root causes of problems. And making radical change involves looking at the system from three different perspectives: the system as a whole; the health of the separate parts; and the relationships between parts.

It is hard to argue with people who get on a soapbox to advocate for any one of these dimensions. They may be concerned that the system (the school, centre, or team) isn't getting the results that are needed and that things have to change. Meanwhile, others are saying that the more attention needs to go on the wellbeing of individuals within the system (those making up the parts of the system): after all, if the individuals are burning out, how will the system remain healthy? Still others may focus on relationships within the system: how can we all get along?

None of these perspectives is wrong. It's just that on their own, none of them are complete. And if all the attention is going on one dimension, it means that two others are being suppressed.

Someone concerned only with the system's performance may try to produce results through bullying, creating a climate that destroys relationships and wrecks the wellbeing of the individuals who work within it. Likely you can recall situations where one of the other dimensions was given all the attention to the detriment of the other two. Like the students facing a team assignment, misery could appear in a variety of forms.

Working in 3D

While a Meatloaf song reassured us that "two out of three ain't bad", suppressing even one dimension will eventually create problems in a system. As an educational leader, aim to stretch yourself to work in all three directions. And keep in mind that, because systems are complex, it is OK to start anywhere. Look for a crack in the system created by a dimension that has been ignored or suppressed in the past.

Here are some ideas you could try. Start by being clear about the boundaries of the system you are working on. Is it the whole school or centre? Is it a larger group of schools, or perhaps a smaller unit within a school or centre?

Consider the 'system as a whole' dimension. Why does the system exist; what is its purpose? What does it contribute to the world outside its boundary? Who uses what it contributes, and what would they like to see change? To what extent do those within the system agree on its purpose and understand the role they play in order for the system to make its contribution?

Think about the individual players within the system. How are they doing? Are they personally benefiting from being part of the system, or does it wear them down? What changes would make their lives better? How could those changes be made without undermining the contribution of the system as a whole? Do they feel they are being treated with dignity?

What is the quality of the relationships within the system? How do people treat one another? What are conversations like? What is your vision for how people within the system could be interacting with one another, and how close is reality to this vision? What could you do to make interactions between people more nourishing?

Working in three dimensions may sound complex. Making change on one dimension may seem hard enough. Keep in mind that often the reason one dimensional change is difficult is that other 'suppressed' dimensions are causing frustration. Most people - including leaders in education and students at university - can stretch their thinking to consider three things at once. You can make this stretch by learning to see what dimensions that have previously been ignored while you make radical change to the systems you care about.

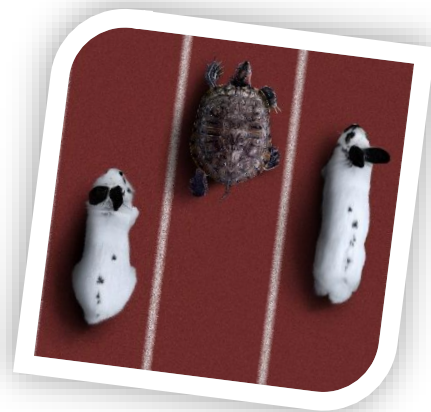
Take your Time

By Phil Ramsey

Recently I worked with an educational leader who had just taken on the principal's role in a school. He is an experienced principal, and just about everything in the school needed attention. A couple of terms into the new position and he was feeling exhausted. He was working long hours and he knew he was not paying enough attention to things like diet and exercise.

Perhaps you have been in situations like this, where you decide you need to push through to make the changes you can see the system desperately needs. From a three-dimensional standpoint, you may have been routinely sacrificing your wellbeing for the good of the system as a whole. Likely, as you became more and more tired the quality of your relationships with others in the system will also have suffered.

One of the habits discussed by Adam Kahane in *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems* involves a lesson learned by many experienced leaders, and one that we often have to re-learn. Taking the long view of radical change requires that you persevere. Important change takes time. Progress may involve small steps forward, along with occasional setbacks. Acting courageously takes effort, as does providing support for those who are struggling. For these reasons, it is important to make time to balance perseverance and rest.



Look for opportunities to share the load with others. Learn to delegate, investing time to train others to help with the work that is needed. Identify what management expert Peter Drucker called “posteriorities”. Most people have priorities: the items at the top of their *to do* list. Posteriorities are those items that are at the bottom of the list. They may be things that if you don't get around to them, little harm will be done. You might even create a *not-to-do* list of less important things that get in the way of rest and refreshment.

No doubt you realize that you will work at your best when you feel good, are getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising regularly, and when your workplace is calm and free from anxiety. These are the conditions in which we operate at our best. Be deliberate about creating a work life that is sustainable and enables you to persevere with your work as a leader. This is a habit that is necessary for radical change.

BOOK REVIEW: Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems

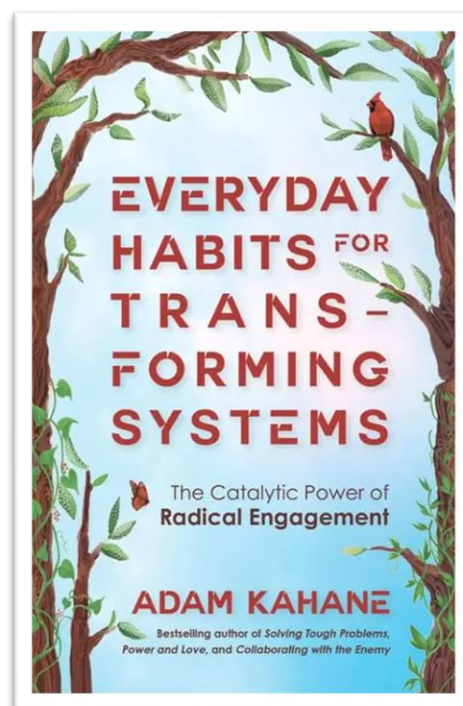
By Phil Ramsey

It's always exciting to find that Adam Kahane has written a new book. For over 30 years he has been helping people to transform systems through powerful conversations, and every few years he brings out a new book that keeps us up to date with what he has learned. We have reviewed several of his books in this newsletter over the years.

Prior to this, Kahane released *Facilitating Breakthrough*, in which he described his approach to facilitating tough conversations with people who do not necessarily get along, but who need to collaborate to make change. What he has learned since is fascinating for leaders who want to transform systems. In conversations he had with some of the leaders he has worked with, Kahane realised that his previous insights had been based on what things looked like from his point of view as a *facilitator* of conversations. Things look very different when you are a leader, actively involved in trying to make change to an established system, and when you are in it for the long haul.

Everyday Habits grew out of the realisation that system transformations aren't necessarily about big, visible breakthroughs. While a particular conversation or intervention may have a lasting impact, most leaders face an ongoing challenge to influence people who are part of an established system. And there are habits that leaders can employ over the long term as they work on changing core of what might initially seem impregnable systems. In *Everyday Habits*, Kahane outlines seven of these habits. Often, they reinforce concepts described in earlier books, yet they approach them from a more sustainable, leadership practice point of view.

As is always the case with Kahane's writing, he draws on experiences he has had in some dramatic contexts. Not all involve breakthroughs. *Everyday Habits* realistically discussed the leadership challenge of working to exploit cracks in unhealthy systems where change may not become apparent for years. While Kahane is drawn to work focused on large scale change, the habits he outlines seem important to those of us interested in working on a smaller scale as well. Whether you have read any of Kahane's earlier books or not, I'm confident you'll be able to find valuable lessons you can apply to radical change you'd like to see in systems you work within.



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