in the moment

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2025

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Leadership Goal: Better Listening

By Phil Ramsey

With the start of a new year, many educational leaders will be thinking about how they can improve their leadership practice. Perhaps that's true of you. Learning and development isn't just for the inexperienced. All of us need to keep moving forward and building our capability. Let's take a moment to look at why, in his book *Humble Inquiry* (see the Book Review in this issue) leadership expert Ed Schein says that special attention needs to be given to listening as a core leadership skill.

To start to understand why listening is so important it is good to think about what we mean by 'leadership'. Canadian leadership and organisational philosopher Elliot Jaques emphasised that we shouldn't think of leadership as a role. Instead, leadership is something you do while you are carrying out a role. For instance, you might have the role of teacher or principal or administrator. Think of leadership as a process you can use to make sure you carry out that role well.

What does it mean to 'do' leadership? According to Jaques it is the process of building relationships that enable you to work effectively with others. Whether you think of yourself as a leader or not, if you build collaborative relationships as you do your work, you are doing leadership.

Of course, it is also true that some people think of themselves as leaders while they are wrecking relationships that could help them in the future. They think they are doing leadership when they *tell* others what to do, even though healthy relationships are more often based on listening rather than telling.

Culture and Listening

Ed Schein spent decades exploring the interplay of leadership and culture. In *Humble Inquiry* Schein explains how cultural forces often mean that as we gain experience our ability to listen deteriorates. We find it easy to listen to people who we respect; they naturally hold our attention, and we are curious about what they are going to say. And who we respect is shaped by our culture.

When you grow up in a community, you learn through observation how you are meant to behave. That includes learning who the people with high status are; the ones you are *required* to respect. Anthropologists use this as a fundamental way of classifying cultures. Some cultures value *ascribed status*, where people are given respect based on who they are (the family they come from, the position they hold in the community, etc.). Other cultures value *achieved status*, where people are given respect based on what they have achieved in areas the community thinks are important.

And here's the problem when it comes to listening: in organisations, as you gain experience it's likely that you both achieve more and are put in positions of high status. So, as you progress, the culture you are in makes it more common for others to respect you, and to listen to what you have to say. That in turn means it takes more of an effort for you to listen to others around you, who perhaps

haven't achieved as much or are in positions viewed as being of lower status.
It doesn't help your listening when others expect you to take a 'leadership by telling' approach and when, because of your experience, you have plenty of things to say.

Humble Inquiry

Based on years of work with outstanding leaders and organisations, Schein provides a way to unlock this cultural challenge. Cultural values may shape when you decide *in advance* that you will treat someone with respect, or when you will show humility by asking questions rather than asserting your own opinions. Because of the way cultures work, this decision becomes automatic: you decide without really thinking about it. The alternative is to make a deliberate and conscious decision *in the moment* to be humble.

Humility means to take up the mindset that the person you are talking to is superior to you; that you are talking with someone with knowledge or insight that you can learn from. An attitude of humility is possible for anyone who realizes that the world is full of things they don't know. And this is a great attitude to have when you collaborate with others.

As we've discussed regularly in this newsletter, the complexity of work means that collaboration is now essential for just about everyone. You can't get things done independently. Making changes and getting results involves working with others and being dependent on them for the help they can provide. You might think of this as interdependence, because they also depend on you. But if you are consciously and deliberately aware of your dependence on them, you'll be more authentic in how you seek their views and value their perspective. Humility generates a mindset that will naturally make your questions more respectful, no matter who you are talking to. And this in turn will strengthen your relationships. You'll be truly doing leadership.

Don't Hold Back

Being a leader implies taking the initiative. When we think about collaboration and interdependence, we might be inclined to wait for someone else to take the first step. Why treat someone else as superior, if the result is them using your vulnerability, making you feel inferior?

In complex situations, though, the reality is that you *are* dependent on others. What will help you embrace this reality? Realise that being humble in the moment doesn't detract from your worth. You have dignity and value. You have added to this with what you have achieved and the positions of responsibility you have attained. Reflecting on your experience and achievements can help you build the confidence to take a position of humility in the moment, as required.

Pay Attention to Your Questions

By Phil Ramsey

The term 'Humble Inquiry' combines two elements: a mindset and an action. Ed Schein emphasises that it is primarily an attitude, where humility is chosen as the basis for building respectful relationships. Notice, though, that the attitude gets expressed through the practice of *inquiry*. In other words, humility moves us to ask questions.

We are surrounded by questions and may not give much thought to what the ones we ask sound like to other people. Some questions are really statements of opinion in disguise, like "Isn't this terrible?" Many leave little doubt as to what we prefer. Others are designed to lead the listener to a conclusion, or to help us diagnose the other person's problem.

In each case we are not positioning ourselves humbly. We are thinking of ourselves as the person in the superior position. Even when our motives are good - we really want to help - these are not the kind of questions that make a fundamental difference to relationships. And sometimes our questions are toxic, when we use them to tell someone off. "Why on earth did you do that?" is punishment poorly disguised as interest in what someone has to say.

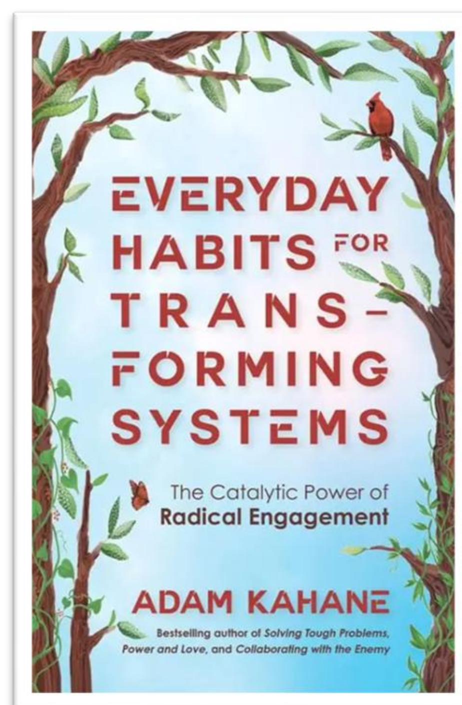
As Schein describes most of us find it easy to *(1)* withdraw from conversations, *(2)* tell rather than ask, or *(3)* ask questions that make it look like we think we are superior to others, even if that isn't how we feel. Humble inquiry is all about our ignorance; situations where we are curious and ask questions because we realize how much we don't know. As Schein says, it takes discipline and practice to be comfortable with ignorance so we can stay focused on the other person.

It is tempting to provide a list of acceptable humble questions, but a list won't convey the attitude with which they are asked. A list won't convey the tone of voice needed to show real curiosity. And that makes a big difference. People can usually tell when our questions aren't sincere. Or they decide that we are not interested when our follow-up questions show we weren't really listening to their answers. It is best to find ways to open up conversation - ways that feel right to you - and then practice showing sincere interest. Notice how people respond. And become aware of any tendency you may have to lose interest or slip into telling mode.

A good rule of thumb for any kind of development is that "awareness is curative". The more we notice what we do and the impact it has, the more readily we adjust our practice. Challenge yourself to grow your ability to sustain a humble position in conversation.

BOOK REVIEW:
Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – August 2025

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.

Design for Calm

By Phil Ramsey

How long since you have had a routine week at your school or centre? Maybe it has been quite some time. Life is complex for leaders in all fields. Unexpected challenges keep popping up. And it is hard to know what is just around the corner. We may realise that it is important to stay clear-headed when making important decisions. And we certainly appreciate working with calm people. When the pace and complexity of change seems too much, you may start to wonder whether clear-headedness is possible.

Staying calm is something business leaders Jason Fried and David Hansson have strived for in their software business, Basecamp. They work in an industry most people would associate with disruption rather than tranquillity. Long, stressful hours are treated as normal. Yet Fried and Hansson have chosen to run their company differently. They outline their thinking in the book *It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work* (see the book review in this newsletter).

While a lot of *what* they do may be more applicable to business and the IT industry, educational leaders can learn from *why* and *how* they go about their leadership work. Let's take a closer look.

The 'Why' and 'How' of Calm

It doesn't take much effort to realise that there is real value in being calm. Imagine if everyone in your school or centre went about their work without getting frantic or acting crazy. What if people stayed calm throughout the day? What difference would it make?

Perhaps you've experienced the downside of 'crazy' yourself. Likely you know that it leads to burnout, poor health, and damaged relationships. Maybe you have seen how people leave, rather than stick around a stressful work environment.

The first step to building a calm organisation is realising that it doesn't have to be this way. When we live in a system, it is easy to think that 'this is just the way it is.' What we are used to seems to be normal and unavoidable, as if it has been decreed that this is the way organisations must function. In reality, organisational systems have been designed by someone. Perhaps the design happened long ago and we can't remember a time when things were different. Whatever the case, the systems that shape 'crazy' behaviour are based on decisions. We can live with them. Or we can make new decisions, designing new and hopefully better ways of working.

This is the way the Basecamp team approached their work. They reasoned that organisations exist to make products: in their case, a software product. The product gets designed and made. As time goes along, problems with the product surface, customers demand new features, and so on, so the product gets redesigned and improved. The work of the organisation is to make the product.

What is the work of the leadership team? Executives need to treat the organisation itself as their product, giving thought to how it is designed, how that design shapes people's behaviour and the

work they do, and making improvements where they can. And because working calmly is so crucial in any organisation, leaders should be particularly interested in designing for calm.

Before starting Basecamp, Fried and Hansson had experienced plenty of turmoil at times when they had worked in and around other companies. So, they had seen for themselves that many common ways of thinking about work create stress and contribute to a toxic work environment. They were ready to experiment with radical approaches to work.

Rethinking the Culture

Designing a calm organisation involves innumerable decisions, small and large. Many of these decisions involve thinking about the kind of culture needed to stay tranquil. Fried and Hansson realised, for instance, that people work at their best when they don't get interrupted, and they are not rushing from one thing to the next. And some of the basic assumptions people make about communication are at the heart of interruptions.

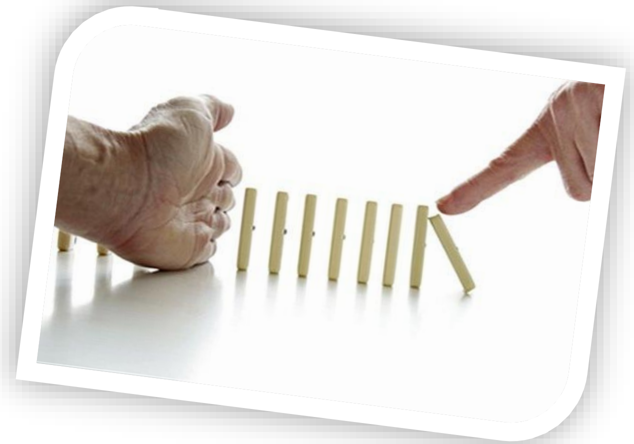
Not all requests for information are equal. Some things are important and urgent, requiring an immediate response. But a lot of communication is not so important and definitely not urgent. So, at Basecamp people are encouraged to <u>not</u> check their emails or instant messages for long periods of time. Others may be asking for information, but they probably don't need it right now. And they can wait for your response. No doubt there is other work they can get on with while they wait.

That's just one example of a design decision aimed at keeping things calm. Basecamp takes what others consider to be unusual approaches to meetings, goals, deadlines, and just about everything else that shapes how work gets done.

Remember, though, <u>what</u> they do is not so important. Some of what they do may work in your school or centre and could be easily imitated. What educational leaders are most likely to find valuable is the concept of designing for calm and the experimental approach that's needed to make it work. Why not take some time to assess the state of your school or centre. Is it calm or is it crazy? If you could do with more calm, don't just hope for it. Calm won't happen by accident. Give some thought to how your current culture and systems are shaping behaviour and talk with your leadership team about where you could experiment with a different approach.

Stay Calm by Saying ‘No’

By Phil Ramsey



Many of the educational leaders we work with find it hard to say ‘No’. They realize that working together effectively requires good relationships, and ‘No’ seems to put relationships at risk. Plus, there are often genuine needs or good reasons for others to ask permission or make proposals, and ‘No’ seems like a harsh response. Despite that, saying ‘No’ is an essential skill for leaders who want to build a calm organisation. What is the connection between ‘no’ and a calm workplace?

For work to be calm, people need to be clear-headed. And we are all limited by our cognitive capacity. There is just so much we can have going on in our heads. If we get in the habit of saying ‘yes’ we quickly become over-committed—trying to achieve to much all at once—or committed to things we realise we shouldn’t be doing at all. Even if we say ‘yes’ when we have no intention of doing what we’ve agreed to, we carry around anxiety that at some point we’ll get called to account.

Leaders at Basecamp are primed to make ‘no’ their default response. Obviously, there are plenty of things they eventually say ‘yes’ to, but they have realised the value of having people get used to hearing ‘no’ for an answer.

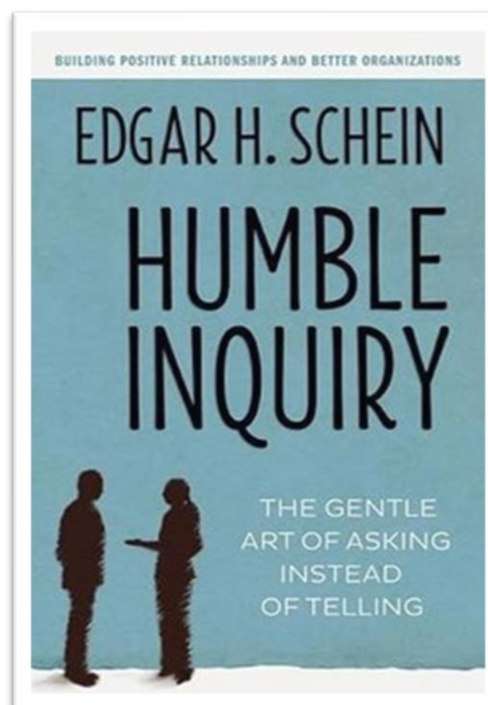
Saying ‘yes’ is easy at first, but hard to go back on. Saying ‘no’ may be hard at first, but it is easier for leaders to reconsider and switch to ‘yes’. And while saying ‘yes’ may seem affirming and positive, it comes with a cost. You can’t do everything, so saying ‘yes’ to one thing means you are saying ‘no’ to all the other possibilities that now can’t be done.

Here are a couple of things to consider. Firstly, how good are you at saying ‘no’ to yourself? Many of us tend toward perfectionism, where we can see that, with a little more work and effort, we can make improvements to whatever it is we are working on. We might find it hard to say, “No. It’s good enough as it is.” Robert Fritz, an expert on the creative process, says that the completion of a project calls for a declaration. He recommends saying aloud, “It is done!” By doing that you say ‘no’ to any further tweaking, and you can get on with the next piece of work.

Secondly, how skilled are you at saying ‘no’ to others? It requires some skilful balancing of the desire to stand firm for what you know is right and the desire to maintain a healthy relationship with whoever you are saying ‘no’ to. And it is a skill that can be learned. By practicing saying ‘no’ in a positive way—a way that reinforces what you value—you’ll find it easier to stay calm and clear-headed to the benefit of you and the people around you!

BOOK REVIEW:
Humble Inquiry

By Phil Ramsey



'In the Moment' Newsletter – February2025

Ed Schein has had a long and distinguished career as a teacher, writer and as a consultant to major organizations. His work includes the classic book *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* and he has been a leading thinker on subjects related to organisational learning. It feels like Schein has drawn on all his experience in *Humble Inquiry* as he tries to capture the attitude that makes a real difference when it comes to leadership.

People concerned with leadership and change have for years recognised that relationships are crucial to effective collaboration. There is so much to learn about how to have good conversations and avoid the traps that derail people who are trying to work together. A lot of the training we do and the techniques we use aim to disrupt unhealthy patterns of how we talk together. As I read *Humble Inquiry* it felt like Schein was explaining something truly fundamental: an attitude that is an essential ingredient to the kinds of conversation we have been trying to encourage.

Schein does a fantastic job of describing what he means by humble inquiry and why it is such a challenge to show real interest in other people. He draws on his deep understanding of culture to show why we so often choose telling rather than asking. And Schein has an intriguing chapter where he discusses why we find humility personally challenging. He uses a classic teaching tool, the Johari Window, to give fresh insight into the dynamics of how we interact with one another.

I wasn't expecting to enjoy *Humble Inquiry* as much as I did, perhaps because earlier works have been full of relatively heavy academic writing that felt like a chore to read. I found *Humble Inquiry* very accessible and engaging. It doesn't try to include too much. Instead, Schein commits to explaining each issue with one concept that he applies elegantly, and then illustrates with mini-cases drawn from his rich experience as a consultant. Now I'm keen to read his sequel to this, *Humble Leadership.* I'm hoping he will take a similar approach. If you are interested in how conversations build relationships I'm sure you'll enjoy *Humble Inquiry.*

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 perspective: 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:
It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work

By Phil Ramsey

'In the Moment' Newsletter – May 2025

Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson, the founders and executives running Basecamp, are realistic about what gets treated as normal in the IT industry.

They have seen what 'crazy' organization does to people who have to suffer from stressful work schedules, endless meetings, and no time to think. In their book *It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work* they outline the approach they take to creating an organisation where people can be calm and clear-headed while they work.

Personally, I like to read about organisational life—especially about places that do things differently—and I really enjoyed the book. Fried and Hansson take a fresh approach to work and have an engaging style when it comes to explaining how they approach leadership. Organisational Learning expert Peter Senge wrote an article two decades ago, explaining that the key role of leadership was the behind-the-scenes work of designing their organisations. Fried and Hansson give a vivid picture of what that involves.

The book starts with a quick explanation of the approach they take to rethinking how work gets done. The remaining 60 or so chapters are short, each with a clear example of work practices they have changed. Chapters are grouped into some of the themes that guide their decision making. With the overall vision of a building a calm place to work, Fried and Hansson have realised they need to curb their ambition, defend people's time, feed the culture they want, pay attention to taken-for-granted processes, and make business decisions that keep the company stable.

As you can probably tell from the title, they have made an effort to write with an informal and engaging style. Occasionally this involved using bad language that seemed gratuitous and too abrasive for my taste. Still, I'm happy to recommend the book as one that can provoke new ways to think about leadership in your school or centre.

Many of their ideas will not easily transfer to an educational context. What I found fascinating was the way of thinking they describe and the readiness to experiment with things we might take for granted. So don't expect to be able to imitate their practices. Instead, use their approach to reflect on how you can create the kind of organisation in which you and others really want to work.

Beating Murphy's Law

By Phil Ramsey

How many projects have you embarked on, only to find progress was interrupted by unforeseen events? Has that happened in your school or centre? If you've experienced this kind of frustration, you are not alone. Project management experts estimate that the majority of major projects run in organisations either go over time or over budget, or both. In their book *How Big Things Get Done* (see the Book Review in this newsletter), Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner present evidence that less than 10% of projects are completed on time and on budget, and of these many don't produce the benefits that were expected.

It seems that Murphy's Law holds true: that if something can go wrong it will. Unexpected events always seem to come along. But while events like the COVID pandemic may be unpredictable, Flyvbjerg says that what is predictable is that something is going to come along. And because of that there are things you can do - lessons you can learn from successful projects - that can help you beat Murphy's Law.

Before reading on, think about a project your school or centre is about to embark on. Perhaps you'll find some useful guidance that can help you avoid common traps.

When Do Bad Things Happen?

Successful project managers have learned that unexpected events that derail progress can happen at any time. Some are external events like COVID. Others are mistakes made by those involved in the work. Projects have a life cycle, and it turns out to be important when in the project life cycle the event happens.

If something unexpected happens while you are in the planning stage, making an adjustment, or even scrapping the project, will not be too costly. Once the project is underway there is much more to lose. Similarly, mistakes made during practice sessions aren't as big a problem as those made when performance really matters. So, the time when projects are being implemented, when the stakes are high, is like a window of time when you are most vulnerable to Murphy's Law.

What is the implication? You want the implementation window to be open for as short a period as possible. So, it makes sense to work slowly - thinking carefully about all possibilities - during the planning phase of change. Then act fast when it comes to implementation. Have people spend more time in practice, so that when things have to be done right there is less time needed for learning.

This may seem obvious but it is an approach that runs counter to some natural human tendencies. When we have something important to do, we can feel driven to get things started. We can quickly decide we've thought of everything when really we've only thought about the things that are obvious to us! Taking extra time for consultation, consideration of possible scenarios, and practice, may seem like an unnecessary expense, but it usually works out to be far less costly than abandoning a half-completed project.

Closing the Window

The best way to beat Murphy's Law, then, is to get the implementation window of projects closed as quickly as possible. Projects don't get derailed by unexpected events that happen once the project is completed. Flyvbjerg has important tips for getting the window closed.

Albert Einstein famously said that "perfection of means and confusion of ends seem to characterise our age". In other words, people often focus on what they do and how they do it, while not thinking clearly about why. A question we need to consider with any change is, 'What is this work going to accomplish, and why is this important?'

Knowing what we are aiming to achieve and why helps leaders to focus, rather than get sidetracked by unnecessary activity. It provides leaders with a basis for saying 'No', which turns out to be a critical skill needed by anyone who wants to get windows closed quickly.

Amazon have recognised the need to remove the 'confusion of ends' from their projects. Anyone in the company who is promoting a new project must present their proposal in the form of a future Press Release explaining to key stakeholders what was achieved and why this was important for the company. The Press Release format not only stirs the imagination; it creates a disciplined approach to planning, where people start by thinking about the end to be achieved, then work their way back to decide what steps needs to be taken first.

And a further tip from Flyvbjerg is to value learning and expertise. Projects that are completed on time and on budget are almost always organised by people who have done similar projects before. Enthusiasm is not an effective substitute for prior learning. One of the reasons why cities that host the Olympic Games always experience huge cost blow-outs and struggle to get venues ready on time is that the people managing the project only do it once. The Olympics then head to a new city where a new project team starts the learning process over again.

What are the lessons? Help your people build experience and use those with expertise to take the lead. If you are experienced, don't assume that others will have the same intuition about what works and what does not. And have people work on the same kinds of projects regularly: the more experience they get the more they will learn.

Murphy's Law can always cause frustration and wasted effort. Understanding the nature of projects, the need for clarity of purpose, and the value of learning can help you close the window in which Murphy might operate.

Building Projects with Lego

By Phil Ramsey

One of Flyvbjerg's project leadership heuristics is to 'build with Lego.' This is shorthand for a concept that is transforming projects in many fields: the modularity approach. What does modularity mean?

Imagine building a house where every component is different. You would need to be skilled with all sorts of tools. Extra time would be needed at every phase of the build, to think about how you'll need to adjust the way you work. And if any component fails or gets broken it will take some time to replace. Contrast that to building with Lego. Once you get used to how the pieces go together you are working with small things that are all the same. Even though they are small they can be combined to make things that are massive. Each Lego block is a 'module'. Put a bunch of small modules together and you are making progress on your project.

When you work using small modules you are continuously working with something you know. That means there is lots of opportunity to learn and transfer your learning to the next step of the project. A classic example of modularity is how cargo is loaded onto ships. Up until the 1950s loading a ship was one big project and every project was different. Stevedores had to work out the best way to do the work based on the design of the particular ship and the nature of the cargo. Loading ships was slow and dangerous. Then the container was invented. Each container was a module. Stevedores could quickly learn how to safely fill a container. From that point each container was easily handled, transported, loaded and unloaded. Modularising cargo transformed shipping and global trade.

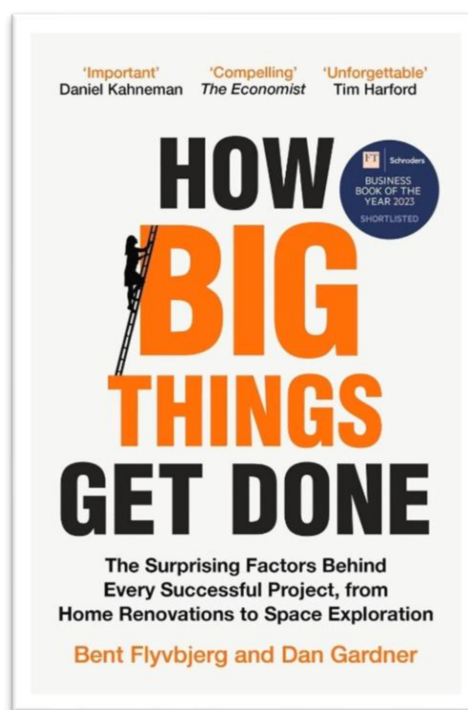
If you are involved in change within a school or centre, think how you might incorporate modularity. What would be your version of Lego? Perhaps it might be a new way to conduct a lesson, an approach that, once learned, can be used with a variety of subjects. Modularity allows new approaches to be rolled out lesson by lesson, then teacher by teacher, classroom by classroom.

Of course, the approach taken to modularity in building or shipping will be different to what works in education. Teachers need opportunity to be creative and authentic. Modularity may need to allow for personalisation. Still, learning is at the heart of the approach, so building with Lego can be creative and fun, contributing to the culture of your school or centre.

BOOK REVIEW:
How Big Things Get Done

By Phil Ramsey

This book summarises the lessons learned by Bent Flyvbjerg, the world's leading expert on "megaprojects" - projects costing over $1 billion. Flyvbjerg, a professor at Oxford and the University of Copenhagen, has teamed up with journalist and author Dan Gardner to create a book that is full of valuable concepts and is engaging to read.



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What makes the book fascinating is that it draws on examples of both success and failure, all of which are explained with clarity. Often the contrasts used are enlightening. For example, two of the great buildings of the world are the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Both are spectacular, but while the Guggenheim was completed on time and under budget, the Sydney Opera House was scheduled to be built in 5 years but took 14 and had one of the highest cost overruns in history. The story of what went wrong in Sydney and worked so well in Bilbao reinforces the important lessons of the book, particularly the value of planning and learning.

One of the fascinating parts of the book is the appendix where Flyvbjerg outlines eleven heuristics for project leadership. A heuristic is a 'rule of thumb' for simplifying complex decisions; one that captures knowledge an expert has built up over a lifetime of experience. The eleven heuristics reinforce key ideas contained in the body of the book in a way that sticks in the memory.

The articles in this newsletter have briefly explained some of the lessons from How Big Things Get Done. Read the book and you'll find there are more. While many of the projects described involve engineering - buildings, tunnels, power stations, etc - with some thought Flyvbjerg's heuristics can be applied to projects within your school or centre, possibly saving you time and waste, and reducing frustration. How Big Things Get Done is well worth reading!