

# 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 not 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.

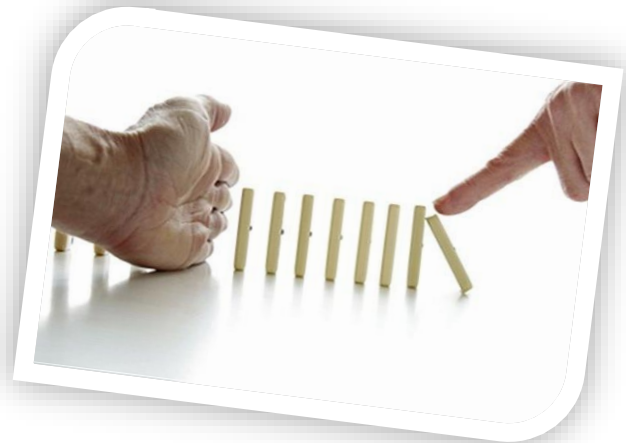
That's just one example of a design decision aimed at keeping things calm. Basecamp takes what others consider to be unusual approaches to meetings, goals, deadlines, and just about everything else that shapes how work gets done.

Remember, though, what 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 too 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: **It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work**

By Phil Ramsey

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

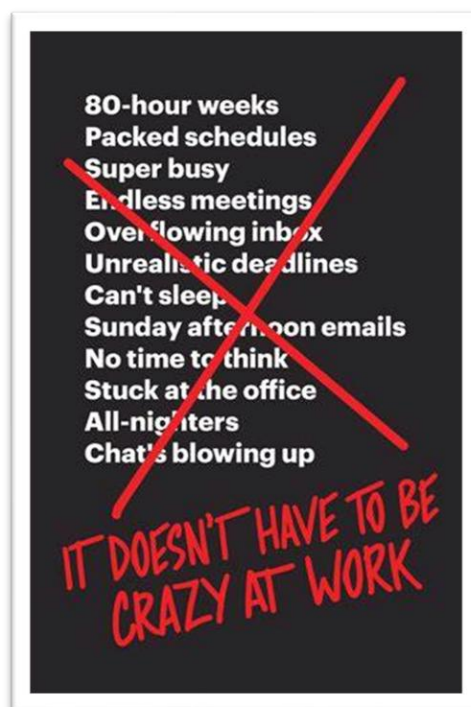
They have seen what 'crazy' organization does to people who have to suffer from stressful work schedules, endless meetings, and no time to think. In their book *It Doesn't Have to be Crazy at Work* they outline the approach they take to creating an organisation where people can be calm and clear-headed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



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