Leadership as a learning activity

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Acknowledgements

Contents

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Leading educational thinking and practice

Introduction

This paper is written for leaders and practitioners who are facing the challenges of leading organisational change in these volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA)[1] times. My proposition is that to lead this change, leaders need to put learning at the centre of their practice and make it part of their core role. To paraphrase Kurt Lewin, there is nothing as practical as a good theory. We stand on the shoulders of giants who have developed the theory and practice for developing organisations that help humans and communities flourish.

The purpose of this paper is to leverage great theories to support leaders to create an environment in their organisations that will enable people to do their best work and truly thrive. The frameworks I put forward are some of the best current thinking on how to help people, organisations and communities reach their full potential. While it is a paper focused on practice more than theory, I have cited my sources with the hope that readers will be inspired to go deeper into theory as part of developing their own practice.

Leadership as a learning activity

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing themselves.

Leo Tolstoy[2]

There is a quip in management consulting circles that 'change is the new constant'. While change has always been part of the human experience, the speed and volume of change required of us to continue to adapt and thrive feels new, given the current state of the world: we need to change how we socialise due to COVID-19; we need to change the way we live if we are to avoid the catastrophes of climate change; and we need to change the way we educate our children to meet the needs of the 'societal, economic and work contexts in which schools operate' (Masters, 2022). We need to change the way we work to better adapt to the rapidly changing technology landscape.

However, we know change is hard. It is often cited (be it somewhat contested) that 70 per cent of change programs in organisations fail to deliver on expectations (McKinsey).[3] Kegan and Lahey (2009) tell the story of the difficulty of change as follows.

> *Not long ago a medical study showed that if heart doctors tell their seriously at-risk heart patients they will literally die if they do not make changes to their personal lives – diet, exercise, smoking – still only one in seven is actually able to make the changes.*

One of the reasons that we find change hard as adults is that it requires us to learn. Change requires us to learn new ideas, perspectives, skills, competencies and ways of relating. To change the world we live in, we need to change ourselves at the same time. Argyris defines learning as 'the identification and correction of errors' (Argyris, 2002). When I have used this definition in my leadership development practice with clients, they generally wince in discomfort. As Argyris says, identifying your errors can be 'potentially embarrassing, or threatening'. So, as leaders of organisations we know that we need to learn our way forward (Hannon and Peterson, 2021) if we are to thrive in the 21st century – and yet we know learning is hard. This leads me to a concerning observation that the learning we need to adapt effectively in these changing times is conspicuous by its absence in organisations today.

Learning is conspicuous by its absence

Organisations spend billions of dollars annually on learning and development. The majority of education departments in Australia have teaching and leadership institutes dedicated to delivering professional learning. This level of investment in time and money in learning is necessary but not sufficient if organisations are going to adapt to the changing context we live in. The sort of learning we need happens every day on the job and in service of improving organisation performance. Adults learn best when they are working on real work, solving problems they care about, with peers they can effectively collaborate with, and receive timely effective feedback on their impact (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004); Boyatzis, 2006). This is not a new idea by any means. Peter Senge wrote *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* in 1990.

He posited the idea of developing the learning organisation as a response to the increasing complexity that people in organisations were facing.

This sort of learning is conspicuous by its absence in many if not most organisations today. To see if this is true for you, ask yourself the following questions.

1. How often do you and others ask open-ended questions in meetings?
2. How safe is it to experiment and fail in your organisation?
3. How is learning designed in, incentivised and rewarded in your organisation?

If your answers to these questions are in the negative, it is likely that your leaders and the organisation are not set up for learning that is required to effectively navigate these changing times. Let's look at each question in more depth.

How often do you ask open-ended questions?

To test this for yourself, you can do a very simple experiment. In your next meeting where you are working with a team to plan actions going forward or solve a problem, do a count: how many of the contributions can be categorised as statements (what people think or know); closed-ended questions (often beginning with the stem 'have you…'), which have a yes/no answer; and open-ended questions. A colleague did this experiment in a large group meeting of interdepartmental functional experts. In one hour, he counted 80 statements, eight closed-ended questions and four open-ended questions. After the meeting, he made the comment that it was a waste of time with very little learning happening.

> leaders are going to make mistakes if they are to learn their way forward. Organisations that see learning as a key part of adapting and delivering outcomes, see experiments and failure as part of the process.

How safe is it in your organisation to experiment? How are mistakes or failure treated?

Leading change in complex systems is best achieved by probing the system to see what works (Snowdon and Boone, 2007). This means leaders are going to make mistakes if they are to learn their way forward. Organisations that see learning as a key part of adapting and delivering outcomes, see experiments and failure as part of the process. A positive example of what this can look like in practice was an exemplar school in professional learning. In a group meeting, a young teacher was relating how she saw mistakes as an opportunity for learning. When asked to give an example she said: 'We work in teaching teams working on specific areas of improvement our students need to work on. I am the least experienced teacher on the team, but it is cool to say what my weaknesses are and give new things a go to learn. I learn best through trial and error'.

How is learning designed in, incentivised and rewarded in your organisation?

Organisation design is the art of coming up with the least worst structure! Whether you design your organisations along functional lines (productions, sales, marketing), customer segments (pre-school, K–12, vocational) or geography, you are arbitrarily creating boundaries which can become barriers to learning.

As for incentives, we manage what we measure, and we measure what we can count (hence the word accountability). Reward systems today are focused on incentivising outputs, which is logical in terms of the overall purpose of the organisation. In education we measure the learning of our students but we don't apply the same level of energy in measuring the learning of the adults accountable for creating the context where the learning happens.

So, if you conclude that you find learning in your organisation is conspicuous by its absence, then the next question is: 'Why is this the case and what can I do about it?'. Actually, that is two questions so let's look at them one at a time.

What explains this absence of learning?

Kurt Lewin, described in Wikipedia[4] as 'one of the modern pioneers of social, organizational and applied psychology', published a paper in 1936[5] that proposed the equation $B=f(P,E)$ to help explain the complex phenomenon of human behaviour. This equation describes human behaviour (B) as being a function (f) of something to do with the person (P) in interaction with their environment (E) (Lewin, 1935). This elegant equation provides us with a frame to consider why learning is often absent in organisations today.

On the 'person' (P) side of the equation, we humans are neurologically wired for safety. Our amygdala, the brain's emotional memory bank, uses stored memories in its role as a sentinel constantly scanning the environment to answer a question crucial for survival: 'Am I its prey, or is it mine?' (Goleman, 1998). Uncertainty and ambiguity trigger the amygdala and raise anxiety, which leads to discomfort and even a more extreme 'amygdala attack', where we act before we think. To avoid the discomfort of not knowing, our intuitive 'system 1' fast thinking (Kahneman, 2011) uses heuristics (rules of thumb) to quickly and efficiently make sense of the world. This leads us to jump to conclusions on scant information. One of the reasons I have spent time over my career reading books on leadership and organisation effectiveness is to avoid the professional embarrassment of 'not knowing'. This eventually became a trap for me, when I was participating in a professional development program

> If I can't embrace my learning edge and step into the space of not knowing, I can't learn anything new.

in which I was struggling to make sense of the experience. I sought the counsel of one of my mentors who was facilitating the program and, with tears of frustration in my eyes, I asked what I should do. She looked at me with compassion and courage and said, 'You are trapped by your own knowing'. If I can't embrace my learning edge and step into the space of not knowing, I can't learn anything new. This is what Pfeffer referred to[6] as the 'knowing doing gap'. You have to overcome your innate fear of the unknown to create space for learning.

On the environment side of the equation, we can look at how we have designed organisations and the organisation culture that prevails. Bob Kegan observes that 'organisations today are designed for delivery, not development' (1994). His point is well made when you look at how we design our organisations to deliver outcomes for our customers/constituents/ key stakeholders. When we think about the key aspects of organisation design – strategy, people, structure, rewards and processes (Galbraith, 2002) – we don't find learning explicitly called out. Indeed, in the structuring of organisations, we find silos of work, along expertise or functional lines, that can create barriers to learning.

The introduction of the matrix organisation structure in the latter part of the last century was an attempt to break down these silos and create a level of interdependency and cross fertilisation of ideas and learning. The matrix structure is challenging to work in because most middle managers end up with two bosses and if there is any misalignment it can create a lot of noise and confusion amongst frontline staff. You see this in large education bureaucracies where the central agency breaks the work down into different aspects of the learning process (curriculum, assessment, pedagogy etc) and the schools are left to make sense of the competing demands in the

classroom. Collaboration is espoused as a way of addressing these barriers to learning but in practice suffers from the same barriers that frustrate learning in the work.

The other challenge is that reward systems focus on outputs, not inputs. Learning by its nature is an input to problem solving and improving performance. If learning does show up on the management dashboards it will be represented by an objective measure such as dollars spent on training and development, or the number of participants in development programs.

Organisation culture is also part of the environment that does not support learning on the job. Our aversion to 'not knowing' leads to a culture in organisations today where everyone has two jobs.

> *In ordinary organizations, most people are doing a second job no one is paying them for. In businesses large and small; in government agencies, schools and hospitals; in for-profits and non-profits, and in any country in the world, most people are spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other people's impressions of them, showing themselves to their best advantage, playing politics, hiding their inadequacies, hiding their uncertainties, hiding their limitations.*

> (Kegan and Lahey, 2016)

Bushe calls this dynamic 'competence compulsion'.

> *Learning and performing are inversely related, the compulsion to see themselves, be seen by others, as competent, can make people reactive to information they need for learning.*

> (Bushe, 2010)

So, learning is conspicuous by its absence in organisations today, in part because of the way our brains are wired for safety and in part the way we design our organisations and the prevailing cultures this gives rise to.

How to bring learning to the centre of your leadership work

As leaders in organisations today, it is not our fault that learning is conspicuous by its absence, but it is our responsibility to do something about it. Leadership is a learning activity. Learning is core to our role of leading our organisations through these VUCA times. Fortunately, we have well-founded theories and practices that can act as navigational tools to help lead and learn in the face of the ambiguity and complexity of the task. The complexity of the role of leaders in organisations today may explain the prevalence of the 'imposter syndrome' among leaders. The challenges of leading change can feel somewhat overwhelming. Indeed, any leader who is not humbled by the complexity of their role in leading change has not fully grasped the requirements of their role.

As a leader, it is your job to develop strategies for yourself and your teams that will enable learning to happen at all levels, on the job, alongside the delivery of outcomes. In the education sector, this need for leaders to bring learning to the core of their work was highlighted by the Gonski Review (Gonski et al, 2018), which set out the need for education systems in Australia to adapt to a changing context.

> *To support excellence in education, school systems and schools need to adapt to changing contexts and needs. There must be continuous improvement across each part of the education system, from curriculum, reporting and assessment models to workforce development and community and parent and carer engagement.*

We know that change is hard, and bringing learning into your daily work is no different. Your environment has as much to say about your behaviour as you do. We can use this to our advantage in how we frame our role of leadership.

Frameworks and practice

There are four frameworks and one practice that can help us design learning into our daily work. These frameworks are underpinned by rigorous research and practice over decades. They have learning at the centre of the work and can be used as stand-alone interventions or in concert with one another.

The frameworks are presented in a logical sequence, working from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal to the systemic, but you can start anywhere. Leadership is learnt in the doing, so hopefully you will feel inspired to try out a couple of things in your work. Wherever you begin, set yourself a goal that is stretching but achievable. Give yourself a break and recognise that learning requires you to risk failing. Be compassionate towards yourself and maybe seek help from trusted colleagues to support you in your endeavours.

The presentation here will be as follows.

Intrapersonal – developing self
1. Immunity to change

Interpersonal – developing generative relationships
2. Clear Leadership framework
3. The power of the open-ended question

Systemic – designing learning into the work
4. The six conditions for high-performing teams
5. Adaptive leadership

The authors cited here have spent decades researching their frameworks and putting them into practice, so the short descriptions here are by their nature inadequate to reflect the richness and elegance of the ideas. Ideally you will dig deeper into one or more of the frames and begin to build them into your daily practice of leadership as a learning activity.

Intrapersonal – developing self

1. Immunity to change

The 'Immunity to change' framework may be most helpful if you recognise that there are aspects of your own leadership that you want to improve but are struggling to make the change stick.

Up until the 1980s the common view among the medical fraternity was that the adult brain finished evolving around early adulthood (approximately 25 years of age). Bob Kegan and his colleagues were seeing something different in their longitudinal research into the on-going development of mental complexity in adults. In his book *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan showed how the conflicting demands of modern life have outstripped our mental complexity, leaving many of us feeling frustrated, defeated and literally 'in over our heads'. His research team was finding there was a smaller part of the adult population that had developed a different level of mental complexity, which enabled them to better negotiate the complexity of the modern world – and, in particular, the complex task of leading large organisations. He proposed that the adult brain was able to adapt and develop well beyond early adulthood. He suggests

that the medical fraternity has now caught up, as follows.

Today they talk about neural plasticity and the phenomenal capacities of the brain to keep adapting throughout life.

(Kegan and Lahey, 2009)

Developing our mental complexity takes more than learning new content, loading more information into the current operating system. Developing our mental complexity requires us to adapt our way of seeing the world, to literally transform our sensemaking to deal with the increasing level of complexity of the leadership task. This requires us to address not only our thoughts, but also our feelings, our beliefs, assumptions and ways of seeing the world. What Kegan and Lahey found in their research and practice was that change was not hard because of the cognitive load required to learn something new. The challenge lies in the fact that changing our beliefs and assumptions about the world is an adaptive challenge not a technical one. The authors reference their colleague, Ron Heifetz who makes an important distinction between technical and adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al, 2009). Technical challenges, while not necessarily simple, are clear in terms of the problem to be solved and the solution to be applied. Adaptive challenges on the other hand are ambiguous in terms of what

the problem is and the solution requires us to learn something new. This ambiguity has an emotional salience that can raise anxiety and create an unconscious barrier to change.

'Immunity to change' describes a dynamic where our underlying beliefs, assumptions or fears can work against our stated improvement goal and literally hold us in place. This dynamic is made visible through the simple, elegant process of developing an 'immunity to change map' that shows us how our hidden commitments (beliefs, assumptions, fears) make sense of the things we are doing or not doing that frustrate our good intentions to change our behaviour (see Kegan and Lahey, 2009). The process of developing your immunity to change map (see Figure 1, for an example) allows you to 'creep up on your amygdala' and to become aware of your 'big assumptions' that are working against your improvement goal. This innovation of making your 'immune system' visible allows you to clearly articulate the adaptive problem you are facing in changing your behaviour.

The last part of the process is to develop a set of experiments that enable you to test these assumptions. Kegan and Lahey encourage the reader to take on an experimenter's mindset, to not try and change anything, but to gather the data and see how this affects your 'big assumption'.

Figure 1. Immunity to change map

IMPROVEMENT GOAL	DOING/NOT DOING	HIDDEN COMMITMENT	BIG ASSUMPTION
I want to get better at creating space for others to add their ideas to improve our collaboration	Talk too much Cut people off Stop listening when I get distracted by the idea in my head Get too excited by my own idea and lose people in my enthusiasm	**WORRY BOX** I will be uninteresting I will be ignored I will be irrelevant I will be ridiculed I am committed to not be ignored I am committed to not looking stupid	If I don't say what I know people will think I am stupid and ignore me

This approach is compassionate towards oneself. Your immune system has looked after you for a long time and kept you safe. The problem with all adaptive problems is that 'what got you **here**, won't get you **there**'. This process recognises the emotional/social challenges with changing your beliefs and assumptions and provides a technique that enables you to achieve real change in your sense-making, enabling you to deal with the complexities of your role as a change leader.

Kegan and Lahey's book (2009) provides a step-by-step process for developing your own map and designing your experiment for testing your big assumption. It is a powerful process for an individual leader but even better when done with colleagues. Leaders learn best in a social setting, so doing this with a group of like-minded individuals can be a great way of building a learning culture in your organisation. It can also be used to support the development of high-performing teams, as we will see later in this paper.

> The problem with all adaptive problems is that 'what got you **here**, won't get you **there**'.

When I did my first immunity map, the improvement goal I set for myself was to get better at creating space for colleagues to contribute their ideas in our collaborative problem solving. I found myself too often jumping into the quiet in the conversation and putting forward my ideas and thinking. This shut down the quieter voices in the group. The big assumption that was getting in the way of me changing my behaviour was that 'If I don't know an answer people will think I am stupid'. This assumption was holding me back from admitting I often do not know what the solution is. I did a couple of experiments with trusted colleagues where I admitted 'I am not sure what to do!'. I could feel my amygdala kicking in alerting me to the 'danger' of the situation. I later checked in with the colleagues as to their experience of my declaring that I did not know what to do.

One colleague responded that he was excited by the challenge of solving the problem. The other colleague appreciated the opportunity to work with me to solve the problem together. This data has helped me to change my underlying assumption about the impact of my admitting I do not know what to do when solving adaptive problems.

Interpersonal – developing generative relationships

2. Clear Leadership framework

The Clear Leadership framework may be most relevant if you are working with groups who are struggling to partner effectively across organisation boundaries (ie, assessment and curriculum) or to collaborate on solving complex issues in your organisation or broader system.

Clear Leadership, developed by Professor Gervase Bushe, provides a framing and skill-based approach that brings learning into the core of leadership work.

> *Clear leadership assumes that teams and organizations need to perform and learn simultaneously, rather than being about how to lead performing (only), clear leadership is about how to lead learning (at the same time).*
>
> (Bushe, 2010)

For people to learn together, on the job, they need to be working in partnership to deliver outcomes. These partnerships are critical if leaders are to collaborate effectively to solve the intractable problems that arise in leading change in these VUCA times.

One of the biggest barriers to learning in organisations today is what Bushe calls 'interpersonal mush'. Interpersonal mush arises because of the following two aspects of the human condition.

1. We each have a unique experience of the world. Our experience of the world is created, in the moment, through our own unique history, personality and genes in interaction with things going on in our environment.

2. We make sense of our world through narrative and metaphor. We have mental models for how we predict the world to be and when we find gaps in our understanding of others' experience, we make up stories to complete the picture.

The interpersonal mush arises when we do not check out these stories we have made up about others, and act upon them as though they are real. This is not some aberrant behaviour. This is normal everyday behaviour in polite society. Interpersonal mush is present when you are working with a colleague who does something odd and you jump to conclusions as to why, and don't check out your sense-making. It shows up when colleagues prefer to have the conversation outside the room rather than tackle the challenges in the room. It is why groups will agree to one thing in the room and then do something else after the meeting. Left unaddressed, interpersonal mush creates a drag on performance and disengagement, and becomes toxic when extreme. The antidote to interpersonal mush is interpersonal clarity.

To be able to create interpersonal clarity and lead learning at work, there are four different sets of competencies. There is the aware self, a set of skills for knowing what your moment-to-moment experience is. This is a lifelong quest of gaining ever deeper awareness of what you are observing, thinking, feeling and wanting. The descriptive self combines skills for making your experience understandable to others in a way that builds strong relationships.

The curious self helps others deepen their awareness of their experience and makes it safe for them to tell you. This includes the ability to take control of your reactivity and be open to hear your partners' experience. You ask open-ended questions to clarify gaps in your understanding. Finally, there is the appreciative self that looks for and amplifies the best in one's partner, seeing the positive intentions in them and focusing on what you want more of, to bring out the behaviours you want from the others.

A simple innovation that enables us to practise clear leadership in our work in teams is what Bushe (2010) has called the 'Experience Cube' (see illustration in Figure 2).[7]

This is a simple model and can be used to figuratively (and literally if you have the space) walk the cube as a way of getting

Figure 2. The experience cube

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clear on the experience you are having in the 'here and now' and being able to describe that to your partners. Being able to describe your 'here and now' experience is harder than it sounds and is a very powerful way to create alignment and buy-in with teams. The 'here and now' is the only place that change can occur and yet we spend most of our time in teams talking about 'there and then', things that have happened in the past or may happen in the future, involving people who are just as likely not in the room. Bringing the dialogue to the 'here and now' allows learning to occur. It allows us to check out the stories we are making up about others' experience and to ensure that we create a shared understanding of the problems and opportunities we are facing.

While many of the skills of Clear Leadership are easy to describe and demonstrate, they are often hard to practise because of the ways in which we normally manage anxiety. Bushe describes the many ways in which managers destroy the conditions for partnership by trying to 'help' others have the 'right' experience. Often, the manager is unconsciously trying to manage their anxiety that arises from someone saying or doing something, by telling them how they should think or feel, or what they should want. Bushe emphasises that no one can make another person experience anything, they can only shut down expression of it, which leads to mush. What is required, instead, is for the manager to not take responsibility for the experience of others, because everyone creates their own experience. Organisational learning takes place when the variety of experiences is seen and understood, with the expectation that everyone will be having different observations, thoughts, feelings and wants. To create climates of clarity, leaders must learn to be 'self-differentiated', that is be able to be separate enough from others that they will not be emotionally hi-jacked, but connected enough to others that they want to understand the other's experience.

In order *'to change the way we educate our children to meet the needs of the 'societal, economic and work contexts in which schools operate'* (Masters, 2022) education system leaders need to devolve decision making to school leaders who know their context best and to the moderating layer of managers in the bureaucracies who support teaching and learning at a network and system level. The challenge is that the current operating models in most education systems are designed on a principle of strong centralised control. The socio-technical school of thinking *'recommends the participation of lower level groups in decision-making, yet the reality of power structures is that innovation is often halted when it is successful enough to threaten existing authority structures'* (Mumford, 2006). This dynamic is present in most education bureaucracies that attempt to become more learner centric and devolve decision making into the middle of the organisation only to find the pull of external accountability and scrutiny in their authorising environment pulling them back to centralised control. The Experience Cube and clear language can help education leaders that are trying to collaborate across boundaries (ie, Pedagogy, curriculum and assessment) to overcome their competence compulsion and passion for their cause and really partner with their colleagues in order to deliver on their goal of improving education outcomes for all children.

Interpersonal – developing generative relationships

3. The power of the open-ended question

This is more a practice than a framework and is based on my experience working with leaders over the past 25 years. The open-ended question may be most relevant if you are looking for a simple and quick way to bring learning into your day-to-day work in a variety of settings.

Leaders learn best when they are working in learning groups with like-minded peers, working on real work that they care about (Boyatzis, 2006). Lewin's research into experiential learning showed that 'people will believe more in knowledge they have discovered themselves more than knowledge presented by others' (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). When using action learning (Revans, 1998) as a framework to help participants put good theory into practice, the one skill that leaders consistently struggle with is the art of asking the open-ended question. This is not surprising, given the culture in organisations today that leads us to all have a second job (Kegan and Lahey, 2016) and the impact of 'competence compulsion' (Bushe, 2010). At the beginning of the work with groups we spend a lot of time helping them step into the role of inquirer, helping them to park their tendency to provide advice and try and solve the problem for their colleagues.

One reason leaders struggle to ask open-ended questions is that they find it uncomfortable to watch a colleague struggle. To avoid this discomfort, we try to change our colleagues' experience by helping them resolve the problem (Bushe, 2010). This dynamic is often seen in our intimate relationships. When my wife is describing her problem to me, I can hear all the suggestions for resolving that problem rattling through my thinking. When I respond rather than react, I will stay in listening mode, helping her to open up the problem and being supportive. If I am more reactive (maybe I am tired, lazy or distracted) I will jump to conclusion and offer my advice. You know the outcome of the second scenario.

The other problem with providing advice is that in action learning, we ask participants to bring their most intractable, complex problems to the group. These problems by their definition are adaptive. The solution or advice colleagues have to offer are technical in nature, as they are known answers to a problem.

The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.
(Heifetz et al, 2009)

This dynamic plays out in meetings and work interactions on a regular basis. Members of a leadership team were trying to resolve a complex risk issue in their organisation. After working on the problem for an hour, the consultant intervened and asked them to reflect on how effectively they were working as a team. After a couple of safe contributions about 'doing OK', one brave executive offered that 'I find that for most of the conversation, I am lining up to say what I think, and I don't ask questions of anyone who had made contributions before me'.

Asking open-ended questions while collaborating with colleagues takes courage, shows generosity, and requires compassion. It takes courage to overcome the competence compulsion and ask a question to which you do not know the answer. It also takes courage to ask a question of a colleague to which they do not know the answer, as this may hook their competence compulsion and make them angry. It is an act of generosity, because it is risky (for the aforementioned reasons) and it takes time. It slows down the conversation and shows that you care about what the other has offered and validates their struggle because you admit that you also do not have the answer. Finally, it requires compassion: compassion for yourself, as you sit with the discomfort of watching your colleague struggle; and compassion for your colleague, who is brave enough to bring their most challenging problems to the group and seek help. Margaret Heffernan, in her wonderful Ted talk on Super Chickens, highlights that outstanding leaders share the ability of knowing when to seek help from others in solving complex problems.[8]

If you are going to do the short experiment described earlier in this paper, the following provides more detail on how I define the three different types of interventions.

Statements of what people know or think

These statements are often preceded by the words 'building on what so-and-so has just said …', but I find generally what comes next has little to do with the preceding contribution and is more often the idea that sprang from the person's associative memory system, related to something that happened three ideas ago. Our 'system 1' fast thinking cannot help but have us jump to a conclusion and offer a solution to whatever problem is being solved (Kahneman, 2011). We then sit poised, waiting to say our piece, rather than staying connected and listening to the group work as it unfolds.

Closed-ended questions

These are questions that have a yes/no answer and are statements or advice pretending to be a question. When leaders are challenged to reframe the question from closed-ended to an open-ended, their response is to push back, saying 'I don't want to embarrass my colleague by asking a tough question!'. Here you will notice the impact of 'potentially embarrassing or threatening' questions that may help the other identify errors in their own observations, thoughts, feelings and/or wants (Bushe, 2010).

Open-ended questions

These are questions to which the questioner does not know the answer. I do my best work asking open-ended questions when I frame the conversation around learning. I give myself permission 'to remain ignorant and let the knowing bubble to the surface', to paraphrase Freud. When I give my full attention to the other and forget about myself, I can fully engage in their story and help them gain new perspectives and insights to learn something new.
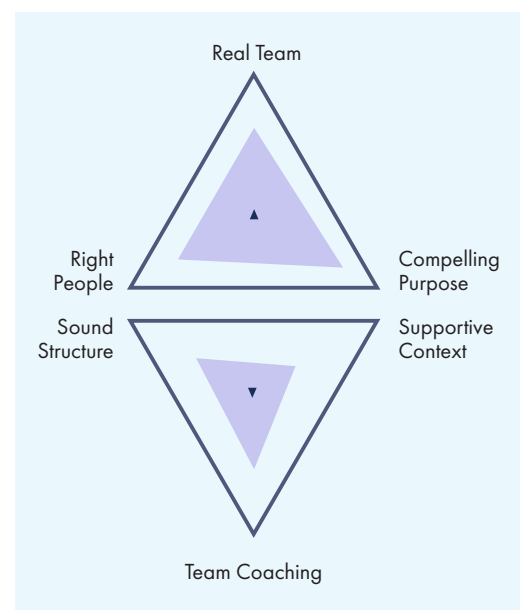
Systemic – designing learning into the work

4. The Six Team Conditions

The Six Team Conditions framework (see Figure 3) may be most relevant if you are leading leadership teams and feel that they are not quite aligned, and execution is not meeting the expectations of your stakeholders.

The focus of leadership development, in the main, has been on improving the leader. We have fallen into the trap of thinking that if we just had better leaders a lot of our problems would be solved, but what if the environment that the leaders work in is part of the problem, as expressed in Kurt Lewin's equation, $B=f(P,E)$ – cited earlier in this paper. We have focused too much on the P part of the equation, because individual characteristics are what draw our attention. Social psychologists Ned Jones and Dick Nisbett showed many decades ago that we prefer to make dispositional attributions about others' behaviour, and we overlook the causes in the situation (Jones and Nisbett, 1972).

Figure 3. The Six Team Conditions

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Moreover, the environment is a much more complex phenomenon and harder to influence. To ignore the environment, however, is akin to what Kegan referred to in his 'goldfish' metaphor about how we typically try to develop leaders. We take them out of their environment (their fishbowl), clean them up and then put them back in the same dirty water in the fishbowl, and wonder why their leadership does not improve.[9]

What if, instead of asking 'How can I make my leaders more strategic people?' or 'more collaborative people' or 'better decision makers', we asked: 'how do we affect the environment for leadership such that it creates a context where strategic, aligned, collaborative decision making can happen?'.

One key aspect of the environment for any person in an organisation is the team of which they are a member. Dr Ruth Wageman says that in teams 'Structure drives behaviour'. A key move every leader can make to improve the environment for their leaders, and therefore to shape more effective behaviour, is to consciously design their teams and ensure that the six conditions for high performance are in place. High-performing teams are ones that meet and exceed the expectations of their stakeholders. High-performing teams demonstrate superb collaboration and the capacity to learn their way forward.

Leading change in our schools, organisations and communities clearly is a collective task and needs high-performing leadership teams to guide us through these challenging times. So, what does it mean to 'consciously design' a team to ensure the six conditions for high performance are in place? The research led by Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman from Harvard University showed that a number of conditions (environmental factors) account for 80 per cent of the variance in team performance (Wageman et al, 2008).

These six conditions were further broken down into those conditions that are essential to team performance and those conditions that are seen to be enablers.

In the research, the following three criteria have been found to underpin high performance.

1. The team meets and/or exceeds the expectations of its stakeholders.
2. The team learns to become more effective over time.
3. The team is a place that promotes learning (especially about leadership and shared leadership) of its individual members.

The framework helps leaders create the environment that enables, supports and reinforces the learning of the leaders.

The first question you need to ask as a leader is 'Do I need a team to deliver on the expectations of our stakeholders?' What is the compelling reason that you need to work together rather than working separately or in parallel? If you conclude that you need a real team to deliver on the stakeholder expectations, then the following six conditions provide a frame for diagnosing the design of your team and what you can do to improve alignment and performance.

1. A real team – Is my team bounded (people know who is on the team) and stable (it has been together long enough to build relationships) and does it have an interdependent task?

2. A compelling purpose – The interdependent task is compelling (people buy into it), consequential (it really matters) and clear (people can see what it looks like). The ten-year research project that underpins the framework showed that of the more than one hundred teams in the research, most felt their team purpose was compelling and consequential, but they were not quite clear what it was.

3. Right people – Do you have the diversity of skill and perspective required to deliver on the interdependent task? Do team members demonstrate the right behaviours required for success?

4. Sound structure – Is the team the right size in terms of numbers (the sweet spot being between six to eight people) and do you have norms of behaviour relative to the compelling purpose?

5. Supportive context – Does the team have the right information and materials required to do the job. Are the rewards and incentives aligned to the purpose of the team?

6. Team coaching – Does the team attend to process and develop individual and team capability building.

As you think about the change you are leading in your work, have you intentionally put in place a design that creates an environment that enables the team to flourish? It may feel counter-intuitive for leaders to stop and reflect on the design of their teams when there is so much pressure in the school/organisation and community to deal with the urgent. However, by attending to the environment you create for your leaders, you can 'liberate the greatest amount of energy in his/her community/ organisation' (Parker Follet, 1920).

Systemic – designing learning into the work

5. Adaptive Leadership

The Adaptive Leadership framework may be most relevant if you are leading change, be it small change within your team or more complex change, trying to transform the way the work is done, and how value is delivered (which is the case for most leaders in large education systems across the globe).

> *We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.*
>
> (Attributed to Albert Einstein)

When we consider the challenges of transforming education systems to meet the needs of learners today, we need to learn new beliefs, assumptions and habits that enable us to change our complexity of mind to fully understand and make sense of the complex system we are trying to change. The Adaptive Leadership framework, developed by Ron Heifetz at Harvard University over the past 30 years (see Heifetz et al, 2009), provides a way of navigating the complexities of leading the transformational change as we think about and plan for an education system design that prepares young people for the world we cannot yet see. The framework has the following two key ideas relevant to our discussion.

1. When looking to lead change and transform the broader system, we need to start from a position of 'not knowing'. An adaptive challenge is one where the problem is unclear and the solution requires us to develop new knowledge.

2. To lead transformational change, we need to see ourselves as part of the system and recognise that for the system to change, we need to understand and shift how we are in it. Joan Lurie (2020) makes the point that the key to success for leaders is to recognise that 'it is not the system out there that they need to change. It is the system they construct in their minds, the mental maps and frames they hold that need to change. These maps define 'the system' as much as it defines them.' They are not separate from it, but co-create it.

In their practice guide, Heifetz and his colleagues (2009) set out a framework for engaging in adaptive leadership that supports '(changing yourself), your organisation and the world'.

Diagnose the system

Adaptive leadership takes a systems view of the problem – complex, adaptive and emergent. It requires us to spend more time making sense of 'what's really going on here' and not just jump to conclusions.

Our intuitions are biased by their nature and can lead to poor decision making in the face of the complexity of the challenge. At this point, the first solutions that come to mind are, by definition, a technical solution (a known answer) to a problem that is yet well understood. Hence the work of 'getting on the balcony' to better see the patterns that emerge and to gain deeper insight to causes in the system, not just symptoms. This process of 'getting on the balcony' takes time and Heifetz suggests that addressing adaptive challenges requires more thorough up-front analysis, looking at the pressure points, context and histories.

> It is ... critical to recognise that while many things must change, much must remain the same, and supporting people through the change is not only honouring loss but paying attention to what remains consistent.

Clay Christensen suggests that you cannot innovate from the centre (Christensen et al, 2008). Yet we have many large education systems that are looking to change the current delivery model to become more learner-centric and meet the needs of the 21st century. This is an adaptive challenge, which requires leaders in these systems to reflect deeply on the generators of the current system and how to lead change.

Mobilise the system

Leading change has a political element, in that you are asking people to change their beliefs, attitudes and habits, and that means they have to lose something before they gain something else. Kahneman (2011) shows that we are not risk-averse but in fact we are loss-averse. When leading adaptive change, you need to moderate the rate of disappointment to a level that your stakeholders can tolerate. Leaders need to 'give back the work' to those whose job it is that needs to change. It is also critical to recognise that while many things must change, much must remain the same, and supporting people through the change is not only honouring loss but paying attention to what remains consistent. Also, change takes time, so leaders need to

'hold steady' and give the system time to adjust and adapt to the moves being made. As Senge (1990) showed in the Beer Game,[10] feedback loops in systems vary the speed at which information flows and there can be significant lags between action and reaction.

See yourself as a system

> *Exercising adaptive leadership is about you (an individual system) making interventions in a social system you are a part of.*
>
> (Heifetz et al, 2009)

This puts the leader right in the middle of the change process and calls you to think about changing yourself in service of helping the organisation/system to change. Too often, leaders look to others to do the changing, when in fact the first change needs to happen much closer to home. Heifetz uses the metaphor of 'Know your tuning' which is very aligned to Goleman's (1998) focus on self-awareness as the foundation of strong emotional intelligence. If you are the instrument through which you will make sense of what is going on, then understanding yourself is critical to accurately interpreting what you are experiencing at a system level.

Deploy yourself

The practice guide finishes in more familiar leadership territory, focusing on the individual leader. As leaders of change in complex settings, we need to be clear about our own purpose and use this as a navigational tool when dealing with the challenge of maintaining people in their productive zone of distress. This is the zone where we step into the void of 'not knowing' and ask people to get outside their comfort zone to learn something new. Being clear on our own purpose enables us to do this work ethically and with integrity. Heifetz encourages us to 'name our piece of the mess' and own up to our own incompetence as a way of authentically leading the learning and change (Heifetz et al, 2009).

In conclusion

Leading change in these complex times requires us to learn our way forward. We need to bring learning into the core of our leadership role and find ways to create an environment in our teams and organisations where learning and delivery are seen as two parts of an essential whole. These frameworks work well on their own but can also be used together in different ways. You can use 'Immunity to change' with leadership teams while you are helping them design their team using the six conditions. Clear language supports the development of a compelling team purpose. The six conditions support teams doing adaptive leadership work. Open-ended questions work well as a process of inquiry with all four frameworks. Wherever you start, find ways to bring learning into your day job. Rediscover the love of learning we all had as children and use it in service of something bigger than ourselves.

Endnotes

1. VUCA as an acronym was first used in 1987, drawing on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, to describe or to reflect on the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity

2. A quote traced from Tolstoy's 'Three Methods of Reform', in *Pamphlets*, translated from the Russian (1900).

3. mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/Transformation/Our%20Insights/Why%20do%20most%20transformations%20fail%20A%20conversation%20with%20Harry%20Robinson/Why-do-most-transformations-fail-a-conversation-with-Harry-Robinson.pdf (and also see) mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/changing-change-management

4. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Lewin

5. *Principles of Topological Psychology* (1936).

6. See, for example, youtube.com/watch?v=f1iQYmjT798 Also see the book Jeffrey Pfeffer co-wrote with Robert I Sutton (1999) *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*, Harvard Business School Press, Brighton, MA.

7. Also, for a practical explanation, see coachingleaders.co.uk/the-experience-cube-explained-in-a-page/

8. youtube.com/watch?v=udiTaS2wTAM

9. Quote from *Immunity to Change* workshop by Robert Kegan in Melbourne 2019.

10. For an explanation see, for example, readinggraphics.com/understanding-systems-thinking-the-beer-game/

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About the author

Nicholas Conigrave is passionate about working with leaders, individually and collectively, to help build their capability to create organisation environments where people can flourish and do their best work. Over the past 25 years, he has worked with leaders across a range of sectors (education, energy, consumer, banking and public), both locally and globally, to lead organisation transformation to adapt to a rapidly changing context. His passion for working in education began when he co-led the 'Leading Australian Schools' program, a collaboration between Hay Group and University of Melbourne sponsored by the Commonwealth Government between 2006 and 2011. He was a founding member of the Global Education Leaders' Program and continues to work with education system leaders in various settings to put in place the conditions that enable high-quality teaching and learning. He integrates theory and practice to help leaders learn how to lead on the job.

His recent consulting work in education includes: working with the NSW Department of Education to design and implement a high-impact professional learning policy and framework for all school-based staff; supporting the board of the Washington-based National Center on Education and the Economy to recruit and bring on-board the new CEO; and leading the Executive Class Principal Adaptive Leadership program for the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership.

About the paper

The author frames this paper for leaders and practitioners who are facing the challenges of leading organisational change in these changing times. He argues that to lead this change, leaders need to put learning at the centre of their practice and make it part of their core role. He draws on the best of current theories and thinking to support leaders in their change management, and believes the frameworks he puts forward will help them, their organisations and communities reach their full potential. He hopes readers will also be inspired to go deeper into theory as part of developing their own practice.