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Leading the system towards transformative learning for all

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Foreword

This paper is written for educators and their allies who believe there is a better way to develop an education system that promotes excellence and equity, **and** which supports all our young people to become

*... confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.*¹

... in an increasingly uncertain and frankly dangerous time in the history of the human race.

A great education for all is the basis of a civil society and there has never been a more important time to strengthen those civic structures that protect and promote the civil society we all want to live in.

The frameworks and ideas put forward in this paper can help system-level education leaders who are leading transformational change to navigate these challenging ‘waters’ effectively. You may be a teacher who wants to work more collaboratively with your colleagues.

You might be a school principal leading school improvement inside and beyond your school gate. You might be a mid-level bureaucrat who is striving to shift from an adult-centric to a student-centric approach in your work with peers. You may be the leader of a whole system, with an ambition to move the operating model from a top-down ‘command and control’ hierarchy to a collaborative networked eco-system approach to education. You may be an ally who is working with education leaders trying to coalesce these changes in the education system.

Our ambition is to present robust theories and practices that provide leaders with the navigational tools required to individually and collectively challenge the current status quo in education today. In doing so, our hope is that this work assists education leaders to connect across networks more effectively to collaboratively lead systemwide change that creates the conditions that enable transformative learning for all.

Introduction



The operating model of education today was designed during the 19th century to meet the needs of the burgeoning global economy as the world went through the transformative first industrial revolution. In this operating model, students are batch-processed through the system, by age, with an ‘overcrowding’ of some curricula with factual and procedural content (Masters, 2022) and assessed in terms of quality against a standard measure. Their

daily routine is timetabled (in say 50-minute blocks) and governed by a bell – a system first developed for the factories of the north of England. This operating model underpins many education systems today (as distinct from the increasing number of innovative learning

environments), but is no longer fit for purpose if we are to prepare children to thrive in the context of the fourth industrial revolution.² The late Richard

Elmore, primarily associated with the Harvard University School of Education, described the current situation as follows.

Education alone has remained more or less in its original institutional structure, dominated by traditional policy and governance structures, composed of highly interest-based constituencies and massively complex pluralist political alliances, heavy monopolistic control through finance and accountability structures, human resource models relying on old-form industrial organisation and labour relations practices, and a ground-level delivery structure composed of atomised, self-contained physical structures – designed as much for custody and control of the youth population as for the cultivation of learning.

(Elmore, 2016)

The data from NAPLAN and PISA show that the current model of schooling does not serve all children well

In Australia, the data show that children from lower socio-economic communities start schooling with one or more deficits in early development domains. This gap in educational attainment and progress, between the least advantaged and most advantaged cohorts, worsens through their schooling progress. The data from NAPLAN and PISA show that the current model of schooling does not serve all children well, to the point where the less advantaged cohorts

... are locked into trajectories of 'underperformance' that often lead to disengagement, poor attendance, and early exit from school.

(Masters, 2015)

To create education systems that enable transformative learning for all, teachers, staff ... principals and system leaders need to become learners who can support the change in how the system works.

The status quo is hard to change, but is becoming untenable, if we truly believe that demography should not be destiny. The good news is that 'the future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'.³ There are wonderful examples of schools and systems reconceptualising what education means today and how the education system can be redefined to deliver on the

education transformation ambition. The following are a few places where leaders can find inspiration.

1. Valerie Hannon's Australian Learning Lecture and subsequent book, *Seeing is Believing: The Future School is Here*,⁴ is based on a global scan of schools that are designed to meet the needs of students and our world. It revealed that radically transformed schools are already here – all around the world.
2. The OECD *Future of Education and Skills. Education 2030* (OECD, 2018)⁵ provides a rich resource of research,

tools and frameworks for education systems to determine the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that students need to thrive in and shape their future.

3. Education Reimagined⁶ (which incorporates the Big Picture schools) is a community of education leaders who have developed resources and practices that help educators 'put learners at the centre' in a real and practical way.
4. The Association of Independent Schools, South Australia, has run a research program across 10 schools (expanded to 15 in 2023) over the past four years, using the work of Charlie Leadbeater, Michael Bunce and colleagues to design education that goes beyond disciplines and privileges students' agency to chart their own education journey.⁷

To create education systems that enable transformative learning for all, teachers, staff (schools and central office), principals and system leaders need to become learners who can support the change in how the system works.

This paper is structured in three sections, as follows.

SECTION ONE: INSIDE OUT – Preparing yourself for the journey

Great leaders make others feel stronger and more capable in the service of working on something bigger than themselves, which is reflected in a clearly articulated purpose (McClelland, 1970). To effectively lead the adaptive challenge of delivering transformative learning for all, leaders need to prepare to step into the place of not knowing (Conigrave, 2022), letting go of the ego (Scharmer, 2016) to engage in the learning required to 'work out what's really going on' (Heifetz et al, 2009).



SECTION TWO: OUTSIDE IN – Making sense of your environment

Leading this transformation will require leaders to take a system perspective of their adaptive challenge. The paper offers three key frameworks that can help leaders navigate the complexity of the journey. The Strategic Triangle (Moore, 1995), Transforming Education Systems: Why, What and How (Sengeh and Winthrop, 2022) and System Innovation on Purpose (Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021) provide different lenses for making sense of the complexity of the authorising environment into which leaders and followers will need to intervene in order to manifest the transformation at the system level.



SECTION THREE: DOWN TO BUSINESS – Putting good theory into practice

A number of theories and practices can be sequenced to provide a robust navigational tool to guide the leader, their teams and key stakeholders through the journey. These theories and practices all have learning at their heart. Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz et al, 2009) provides guidance on how to take a systemic approach to the transformation. The Six Team Conditions (Wageman et al, 2008) provide guidance on setting up teams, and teams of teams, required to leverage the tacit collective collaborative capacity in the system. Clear Leadership (Bushe, 2010) provides guidance on how to make the learning real on the job, in a way that supports people to collaborate in delivering the transformational change.

All models are wrong but some are useful!⁸

This aphorism reminds us that all the frameworks proposed here are, by their nature, an abstraction from the complex ground of organisation and community life, and can only ever provide guidance, not an answer. Leadership can be seen as making choices in the face of overwhelming complexity, which raises anxiety and can inhibit one's capacity to 'learn our way forward' (Hannon and Peterson, 2021). The frameworks offered provide anchor points in the journey. We have cited a range of different authors who have spent decades researching their frameworks and putting them into practice. 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 practice, as you take on the task of leading transformation in your education system.

Defining terms

Throughout the paper key terms are used, which have multiple interpretations. We do not propose the following as **the** definition, but rather **a** definition that will support the reader making sense of our intent.

Leadership

If you plug the word 'leadership' into Google Scholar, you will get more than five million hits to sift through.⁹ Leadership can be seen as a role (formal and informal); a position; an activity; an attribute; as well as a phenomenon. In this paper we have taken the perspective of leadership as an

activity with a desired impact. Mary Parker Follet said it best in 1920, stating that

The skillful leader then does not rely on personal force; (she) controls the group not by dominating but expressing it. (She) stimulates what is best in us; (she) unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but never gets away from the current of which we and (she) are both an integral part. The person who influences me most is not she who does great deeds but who makes me feel I can do great deeds.

Collaboration

Collaboration is seen as an inherently positive behaviour in teams. It is essential for high-performing teams who are addressing the complex challenges that they face in these volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) times. Often, the meaning of the word collaboration is assumed in the literature (Conigrave, 2004). For the purposes of this paper we define collaboration as follows.

Where people work in an open and honest relationship, sharing knowledge, ideas and resources, while recognising their interdependence with all the benefits and problems interdependence gives rise to.

Complex adaptive systems

Education systems are complex adaptive systems by their nature. They are a social construction that lives within the minds and hearts of all the key stakeholders. Due to the dynamic nature of the system, they are not knowable in the same way that we can measure things in the physical world. The following three key concepts from complexity theory help to explain these phenomena (Ng, 2015).

1. **Emergence** speaks to the interrelated nature of parts of the system, at different levels, which are dynamically linked, where patterns can emerge that are hard to predict.
2. **Non-linearity** refers to the exponential nature of the impact of changes in the system that can lead to synergistic benefits and failures.
3. **'Self-organisation** happens naturally as a result of non-linear interaction among members of an organisation'. This is relevant for leaders to recognise that they can give up their fantasy of control when leading adaptive change.

Learning ecosystems

Learning ecosystems 'are entities already in existence providing directly to learners. They comprise open and evolving communities of diverse providers that cater to the variety of learners' needs in a given context or arena. They are usually supported by an innovative credentialling system of technology that replaces or augments the traditional linear system of examinations and graduation'.¹⁰



SECTION ONE: INSIDE OUT – Preparing yourself for the journey

It's all about you

Leading transformation is a complex task, and you need good navigational instruments to guide you on the journey. The most important instrument you have as a leader is yourself. It is through your experience of the world, observations, thoughts, feelings and wants (Bushe, 2010) that you make sense. This sense making is informed by a series of lens or filters such as your social setting, history and your genes. The more you know about yourself, your motives, values, enduring traits and self-image, the more opportunity you have to understand your sense making and what it might tell you in any given context.

One approach to improving self-awareness is to surface beliefs, assumptions or fears that get in the way of growth and development.

There are many ways to build one's self-awareness. Reflective practices, such as journalling, meditating on unspoken wants and needs, and various psychometric tools (that can measure motive, values, personality etc), can help us know ourselves at a deeper level. A developmental technique often used with executives is to ask, 'when you hear yourself say what you are thinking, feeling and wanting, what comes up for you?' (Bushe, 2010).

That shift to seeing yourself in the third person, figuratively to stand outside yourself, can be a powerful way to build self-awareness and be clear about how you are showing up in your role of leader.

One approach to improving self-awareness is to surface beliefs, assumptions or fears that get in the way of growth and development. The process called 'Immunity to change' was developed by Professors Kegan and Lahey at Harvard's School of Education. They designed an elegant process that asks four key questions to help make visible the hidden commitments (beliefs, assumptions, fears) that make sense of the things we are doing, or not doing, which can frustrate our good intentions when trying to change our behaviour. This process can be done individually or in groups and is clearly set out in their 2009 text, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation*. The process of experimentation that they propose to help test the 'big assumption' and learn something new, helps improve your meaning-making system (mental complexity), which is required for working on the complex adaptive challenge of transforming the education system.



Understanding your own ‘Why’, popularised by Simon Sinek in 2009, is an age-old practice of building self-awareness and better understanding our sense-making apparatus. A variety of different approaches can be found in books, on the internet and offered by consultants to help individuals, teams, and whole organisations to ‘find their own why’. When done well, the exercise helps us to tap into our intrinsic motivation, which provides us with energy for the journey but is often tacit and sitting dormant in our unconscious. Purpose can provide a guiding light in the moments of darkness and uncertainty that inevitably arise during the transformation process. To step into the space of not knowing, it can be comforting to have an anchor point of something you are confident about. Purpose shows up in a number of places in this paper: as a core part of the strategic triangle as it is expressed in the public value proposition (Moore, 1995); the starting point for transformation (Sengeh and Winthrop, 2022) as a key condition for designing high-performing collaborative teams (Wageman et al, 2008) and organisation design (Ansar, 2019).

Otto Scharmer (2016) suggests that there are two Selves: first the Self made up of experience, the journey we have taken thus far; second the Self that we are becoming, as we journey into the future. The place of learning is the everyday moment, the here-and-now where the past Self and future Self meet. It is at this point where transformation literally happens all the time but, due to our busy distracted minds, we fail to pay attention to it. Meditation practice shows that we are constantly thinking about what happened in the past as a representation, or fantasising about what may happen in the future. When we can quiet the mind and tap into our ‘here and now’ experience, we can learn something new.

It’s not all about you!

Kurt Lewin, ‘one of the modern pioneers of social, organizational, and applied psychology’¹¹ 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). So, while leaders need to see themselves as instruments to understand their context, the context of the environment is not inert. The environment that we experience is dynamic and constantly unfolding and emerging, which in turn informs our experience and impacts our behaviour. In one sense our environment has as much to say about our behaviour as we do.

This gets even more complex when we look at the challenge through the lens of social identity theory (Haslam et al, 2011), which posits that we come to know ourselves through the groups we identify as ‘us’, in contrast to those groups that we identify as ‘them’. This dynamic is clearly visible in day-to-day life – think football team allegiances and political parties for two instances. If leaders are to consider themselves and their experience as key navigational tools for the transformation journey, they need to deeply understand how the environment is impacting them and how they are impacting the environment. 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.

We are not separate from the environment but co-create it. So, in the face of overwhelming complexity, it can help to give up the fantasy of control and admit that you do not know what is going on.



Giving yourself permission to not know

The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems.

(Heifetz et al, 2009)

For many leaders, this move of stepping into not knowing is uncomfortable and can elicit the defensive routine of denying the complexity in the first place.

To lead a system toward transformative learning for all is an adaptive challenge. The problem is unclear and so is the solution. It often requires those within the system to give up closely held beliefs, assumptions and habits that hold the current system in place, to enable something new to develop. As a leader beginning this journey, you

need to give up the fantasy of control and accept that you don't know how to do this work, or what the solution may be.

For many leaders, this move of stepping into not knowing is uncomfortable and can elicit the defensive routine of denying the complexity in the first place. This reaction is not surprising given that our current education system rewards being right on standardised tests and our organisations are designed for delivery not learning (Conigrave, 2022). Leaders often feel the overwhelming sense of accountability that emanates from their authorising environment. For system leaders this feels like the glare of their key stakeholders to meet or exceed expectations. For mid-level bureaucrats this may feel like their boss's expectations to deliver on overly prescribed ends with uncertain/under resourced means.

When leaders recognise that they cannot know the answer to an adaptive challenge, they feel a sense of relief. They give themselves permission to not know. To paraphrase Freud, they 'luxuriate in their ignorance and let the knowing burble to the surface'. This becomes liberating and enables them to engage with their peers and teams more effectively in the excitement and wonder that is the world of learning. To quote Alan Watts,

*What (the leader) does not know seems to increase in geometric progression to what he knows. Steadily he approaches the point that what is unknown is not a mere blank space in a web of words but a window in the mind. A window whose name is not ignorance but wonder. The timid mind shuts this window with a bang, and is silent and thoughtless about what it does not know, in order to chatter about what it thinks it does know. It fills up the uncharted spaces with mere repetition of what has already been explored. But the open mind knows that the most minutely explored territories have not really been known at all but only marked and measured a thousand times over. And the fascinating mystery of what it is that we mark and measure must in the end tease us out of thought until the mind forgets to circle and to pursue its own processes and **becomes aware that to be at this moment is pure miracle.***

(Watts, 2011)



It's a collective endeavour

As the African proverb says, 'if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together'. Leading transformation is an adaptive challenge where the problem is not clear, nor is the solution. Adaptive challenges require leaders and followers to learn new ways of being (beliefs and assumptions) and relating (habits) if they are to make the changes in the system they aspire to. Learning in this sense requires us to collaborate with others, to be open and honest in our work together, sharing knowledge ideas and resources. It requires us to recognise our interdependence, with all the benefits and problems that this gives rise to (Conigrave, 2004).

Margaret Heffernan, in her wonderful TED talk entitled *Super Chickens*, highlights that outstanding leaders share the ability of knowing when to seek help from others in solving complex problems.¹² Working

with peers on solving complex problems was the genesis of Action Learning, developed by Reg Revans, when he was working as a physicist at the Cavendish Laboratories, Cambridge University in the 1930s. This is a recognition that the creative potential of groups to solve adaptive challenges lives in the relationships of the group's members as they work in the group.

Adaptive challenges require leaders and followers to learn new ways of being (beliefs and assumptions) and relating (habits) if they are to make the changes in the system they aspire to.

Starting with hope

To overcome the anxiety that a VUCA environment can engender, leaders need to create a positive emotional tone for the work (Boyatzis, 2006). When leading change, it is best to engage the passions and capture the dreams of the group to give hope for a better future. Martin Luther King spoke to this in his compelling speech in 1963, when he said, *'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in*

a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character'. That powerful vision of hope stills moves the spirit of justice nearly 60 years later.

We need a new narrative for education – one which gives us hope that binds us as a community to act collectively. The Environmental movement shows us that stories of gloom and catastrophe are not enough to galvanise us. We need a compelling positive narrative that can act as a generative image that pulls us toward a better future. We literally need to 'Sell the Sizzle'.¹³ The narrative needs to connect to everyday life, using language that binds us as a community and reminds us of what we can achieve when we work together (Stears, 2021). Crafting an everyday narrative that captures the full complexity of what we hope for in the education of our children in ordinary language is a complex task. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, 'I didn't have time to write you a short letter so I wrote you a long one'. Crafting a new compelling narrative for education will take time.

Hannon and Peterson devote much of their text, *Thrive: The Purpose of Schools in a Changing World*, to make the case for a new narrative that moves from the economic model of education to one where we can thrive at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal and global level (Hannon and Peterson, 2021). To do this effectively, leaders need to engage widely with their authorising environment and become astute at co-designing and communicating a compelling narrative that binds 'us' in contrast to 'them' (Haslam et al, 2011). The 'them' in this case is not an out-group so much as a different time in the community's life, where we used to identify with the old narrative for education that is reflected in the current industrial age education operating model.



SECTION 2: OUTSIDE IN – Making sense of your environment

As you venture out into the complex ecosystem that is education, context is everything. Finding the right navigational tools is essential to help you make sense of the complexity and make decisions about who to engage and how to intervene effectively, to achieve your transformational agenda. The following frameworks provide guidance for working out where you are, what resources you have available to you and what resources you will need to source if you are to be successful.

The first framework we consider is the work of Professor Mark Moore from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, in his seminal 1995 text, *Creating Public Value*. In the text he proposed the ‘strategic triangle’ which has become a foundation framework for public servants who are thinking deeply about how they fulfil their role in service of the public good.

The second framework to consider was developed by the Brookings Institution’s Center for Universal Education (CUS), presented in the paper by Sengeh and Winthrop, *Transforming Education Systems: Why, What and How*. While Moore’s work speaks to all public servants, the CUS framework is designed specifically for leaders of education systems and brings in the central role of the pedagogical core.

The third framework is more specific again and looks at the role of Purpose when leading system transformation. In their 2021 paper, *System Innovation on Purpose*, Leadbeater and Winhall propose a framework for leaders to consider the key moves they need to make in developing a new purpose to guide their system transformation. They draw widely from different disciplines and present a number of different texts and fields of study to enable leaders to deepen their understanding of theory that they can put into practice.

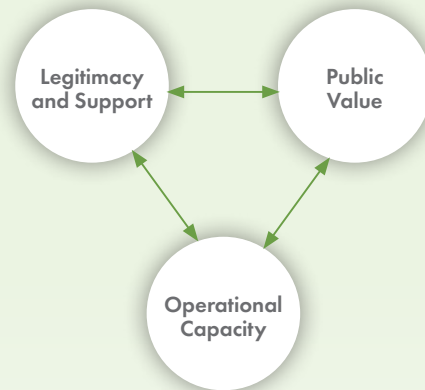
FRAMEWORK ONE – The Strategic Triangle

Since writing *Creating Public Value* in 1995, Professor Mark Moore has worked globally to help public servants consider how they can deliver value on behalf of the community they serve. He suggests the following three questions that public sector managers need to attend to if they are to create public value.

1. What is the important ‘public value’ the organisation is seeking to produce?
2. What sources of legitimacy and support will be relied upon to authorise the organisation to take action and provide resources necessary to sustain effort to create that value?



Figure 1. The Strategic Triangle



3. What operational capabilities (new investments and innovations) will the organisation rely upon (or have to develop) to deliver the desired results?

Given the degree to which many public servants are familiar with Professor Moore's Strategic Triangle (Moore, 2006 and see Figure 1), we have focused more on how these ideas can be put into practice.

The power of purpose

The public value of education is articulated in the purpose statements of the school, department, state or nation (ie, the Alice Springs Declaration). Organisation and personal purpose statements were popularised by Simon Sinek in his 2009 TED Talk. Litwin and Stringer (1968) showed the power of connecting organisation purpose (mission and direction) to the individual's intrinsic motivation (organisation expectation) in their research project that developed the four-circle model of organisation performance. The research done in 1965 showed the impact of organisation climate on employee motivation and overall performance. David McClelland was head of the Psychology department at Harvard and contributed to the research by assessing the intrinsic motivation of the leaders in the research simulation. They showed that intrinsic motivation of the leaders influenced their leadership styles, which heavily influenced the organisation climate (how it feels to work here) of the

employees – which accounted for up to 30 per cent of the variance in organisation performance. The four-circle model is a systemic representation of Lewin's proposition of behaviour being a function of the person in interaction with their environment. The research established the powerful link between purpose, intrinsic motivation and organisation performance.

As leaders embark on the transformation journey, it is critical to reflect personally on their own purpose and being able to articulate this to others (White et al, 2022). However, it is not enough for a leader to find their own purpose, their sense of passion for the cause. They need to help others find their purpose and create a common purpose that galvanises the group to engage in the adaptive work of transformation.

Purpose combines identity with intent. What and who you care about is a matter of identity: it's fundamental to who you are. Yet purpose also expresses what we want to achieve and who we are becoming. That intent needs to be made real by being acted upon; our purpose should propel us forward into the world.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021)

Social identity theory shows us that the power of the leader comes from the group, and leaders are authorised by the group to lead when they have a prototypical reflection of the group's wants, needs and desires (Haslam et al, 2011). To change the operating model of education requires leaders to step into the territory of not knowing, creating space for a new narrative to arise, which aligns to the higher aspirations of the community (Hannon and Mackay, 2023).

Engaging your authorising environment

No matter where you are leading from – the Secretary of an education department; a mid-level bureaucrat; a school principal or a teacher leading a teaching team – you



will need to engage with your authorising environment in leading transformational change. The authorising environment comprises key stakeholders in the broader system who can support your agenda or block the change. They may have direct authority over your work (ie, your boss' boss or the Minister of Education) or be a key influencer in your broader eco-system (a minister's chief of staff, the unions, or the parent body).

Being able to connect with our key stakeholders with everyday language takes skill and requires us to listen to their unspoken thoughts and feelings.

Understanding your key stakeholders, their hopes, dreams and concerns, is critical if you are to engage them in your transformative agenda. Being able to connect with our key stakeholders with everyday language takes skill and requires us to listen to their unspoken thoughts and feelings. As Ostaseski observed in 2017, *listening is the shortest*

distance between two people, but it takes discipline to overcome our own beliefs and assumptions, and listen with an open mind to what the key stakeholder is saying.

The art of influence is to

unify and concentrate what (they) feel only gropingly and scatteringly

(Parker Follet, 1920)

... and to articulate how their agenda and your education transformation agenda are two parts of the same narrative.

Leveraging your organisation capability

In any endeavour, intention is not enough; you must have the capability to deliver the desired outcomes. Poor leaders often make the excuse that 'my team is just not ready/good enough/up for the job'. The reality is that a leader can never truly understand the capability of their team if they have not created an environment where their people can do their best work. The organisation climate, 'how it feels to work here' accounts for 30 per cent of the variance in organisation performance. 70 per cent of the organisation environment is down to how the leader

leads, the style of leadership they employ relative to the context of the adaptive challenge (Litwin and Stringer, 1968). Hence as you begin your transformation work, and address the adaptive challenge, you need to look at your own leadership practice and ensure that it is fit for the task. For a more recent review of the impact of leadership styles on organisation performance, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee extend the work of Litwin, Stringer and McClelland in their paper *Primal Leadership*.¹⁴

Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.

W Edwards Deming¹⁵

The Operating Model and subsequent organisation design are key elements of the organisation environment that leaders have differing degrees of direct influence over. There are five key aspects of organisation design: strategy, people, structure, rewards and processes (Galbraith, 2002). Dr Atif Ansar of Oxford Saïd Business School frames this as attending to the 'poetry and the plumbing' of strategic organisation design.¹⁶ The poetry is expressed in how the strategy encapsulates the organisation purpose and reflects not just outputs (tangible results such as goods and services) but also the outcomes (eg, human connection, communities flourishing). In recrafting the narrative for education, leaders have a chance to focus on aspirational outcomes for the education of our children that captures the dreams and engages the passion. Culture is an outcome of the poetry of the design – for better or for worse.

The plumbing of the organisation reflects the more tangible aspects of structure, rewards and processes. In education, organisation structure is reflected in the sticks and boxes of organograms (organisation charts) and position descriptions of the school, division and department that is authorised to run the education system. The new narrative for education, reflected in the poetry of



the purpose, needs to be reflected and designed into the structures and jobs within the system. This is not a technical task. Organisation design is the art of coming up with the least worst structure. Defining boundaries creates clarity and ambiguity simultaneously. As Voltaire said, ‘common sense is not so common’. Creating a common understanding of who does what work, and how it is integrated to deliver on the organisation purpose, is complex, dynamic, context-specific and each person will have a unique experience (Bushe, 2010) of the intent and enactment of the organisation design.

Delivering on a new purpose for education that is fit for purpose for these VUCA times will require a move from a hierarchy-based to a network-based operating model. This will require leaders to build a learning ecosystem, where new players are considered as service providers, partners and enablers. What is inside and outside the ‘organisation’ will become less defined and the use of formal authority will become less effective. Leaders will need to find the required capabilities in different and unusual places. The Granny Cloud, founded by Sugata Mitra in 2009, was set up to

... have folks who were native English speakers Skype in with children in these remote (Indian) and disadvantaged locations and enable them to pick up English in the way we typically pick up any language – through hearing it spoken around us and using it in conversation. In the very first days of The Granny Cloud, it became apparent that learning English would be only one of the many possibilities of these interactions.¹⁷

The Granny Cloud, (although currently on pause due to COVID and lack of access to technologies in the children’s home) shows what can be achieved for the least advantaged learners in our community, when we open our minds to different ways to use the resources already available in our environments.

FRAMEWORK TWO

– Transforming Education Systems: Why, What, and How

Education system transformation must entail a fresh review of the goals of your system – are they meeting the moment that we are in; are they tackling inequality and building resilience for a changing world; are they fully context-aware; are they owned broadly across society? – and then positioning all components of your education system to coherently contribute to this shared purpose.

(Sengeh and Winthrop, 2022, p 5)

Sengeh and Winthrop have drawn on research and practice from a wide range of sources in the education landscape to develop their framework for leading transformation of education systems. They propose the Three Ps of transformation, as follows, to guide the reader.

1. **Purpose of Education** – Develop a shared vision of the purpose of education.
2. **Pedagogy** – (Re)design systems, starting with the pedagogical core.
3. **Position** – Position and align system components to support the pedagogical core.

First P: The Purpose of Education

The key question to ask is ‘transformation for what?’ This will vary in every system but there are two essential criteria that a purpose should cover.

1. It should be broadly shared in and outside the education system.
2. It should meet the moment we are in globally.

Drawing on the system transformation theory of Donella Meadows,¹⁸ Purpose is seen as a high leverage point for change in the system, but is harder to implement.



To craft a new Purpose for the system means shifting goals, beliefs and values that hold the current system in place. Heifetz et al (2009) frame this as the adaptive challenge when mobilising the system, and argue that shifting tightly held goals, beliefs and values is experienced as a loss. A challenge for any leader of complex change is to first understand the different perspectives of various stakeholder groups in their authorising environment. Alignment is reached when people use different words to say the same thing. The reality is more often that we use the same words and mean different things.

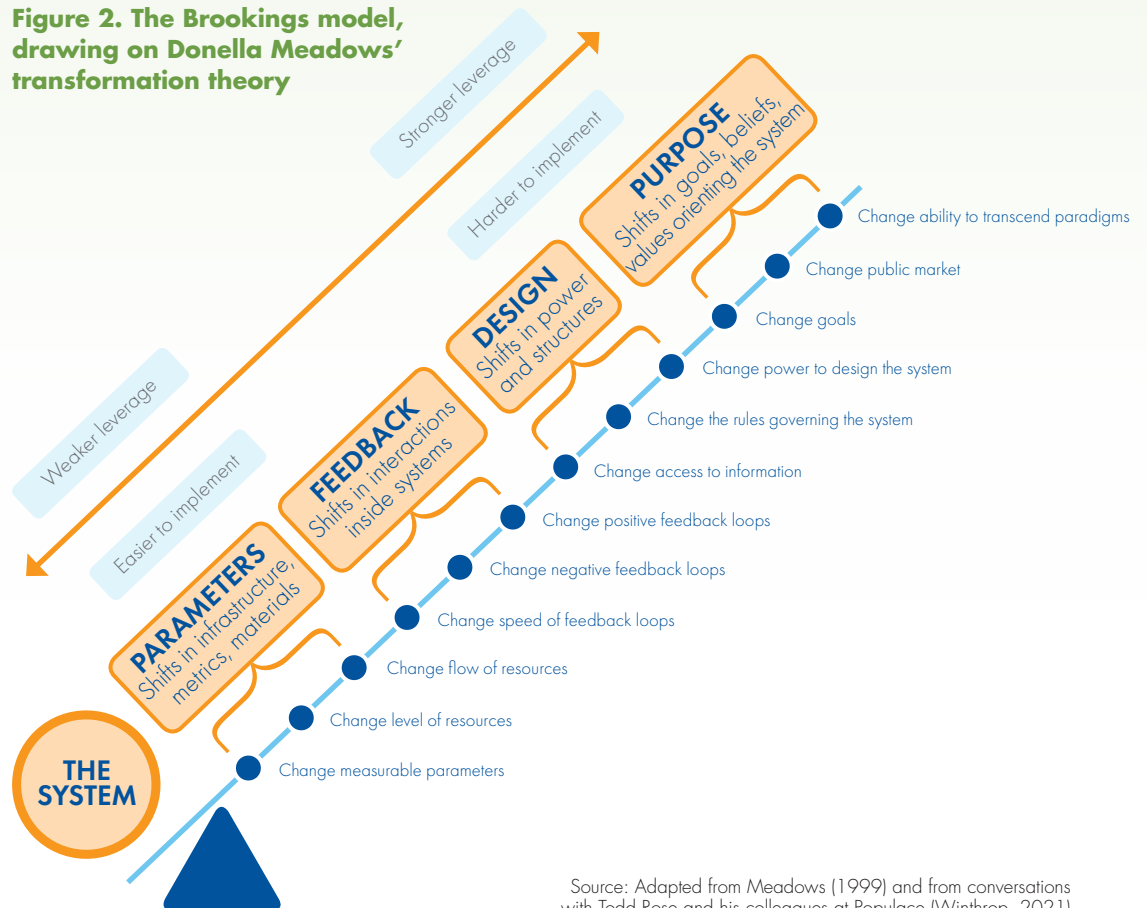
A study done mapping beliefs on what is the most important purpose of education in different jurisdictions showed a stark contrast between teachers' and parents' perception of each other's beliefs.

Parents' and teachers' perspectives on the most important purpose of school – and importantly their perceptions of each other's beliefs – often revealed a misalignment or lack of shared values.

(Winthrop et al, 2021)

This reinforces the complex nature of the task of transforming the system (see Figure 2). The Brookings Institution has a series of tools that can help leaders facilitate a dialogue in their community, to help pave the way for a broadly shared vision for education.¹⁹ In these dialogues it is critical that young people have a voice in the crafting of an education purpose that meets their wants and needs, and that they feel they have agency in directing their own education journey.

Figure 2. The Brookings model, drawing on Donella Meadows' transformation theory



Source: Adapted from Meadows (1999) and from conversations with Todd Rose and his colleagues at Populace (Winthrop, 2021)



The best people to redesign the work are those accountable for the work

This participatory policy design process for developing a new purpose for education does not mean education leaders abdicate responsibility for the setting of the vision for the system. This can be framed as directed co-construction, where the leaders are accountable for leading the deep dialogue with various stakeholder groups and synthesising the dialogue into an outcome that different groups will recognise and that they feel represents their values and aspirations.

Second P: Pedagogy – (Re)design systems, starting with the pedagogical core

‘Redesigning education systems can, and often does, result in a lot of action with limited results for children’s learning and development’ (Sengeh and Winthrop, 2022). As one leading educator commented, most education transformation is like a stormy ocean: lots of turbulence and chaos on the surface, with waves sinking boats and crashing against land (analogous to the department and the broader authorising system) while the fish at the bottom of the ocean (the teachers and children in their classroom) experience very little change at all. The best people to redesign the work are those accountable for the work. Teachers do the teaching and students do the learning and are, together, best placed to redesign the way teaching and learning should happen in the classroom.

Hence, we argue that starting with the changes that are needed in the ‘pedagogical core’ and mapping backwards out and up into the broader systemic reforms is the more fruitful approach to system (re)design.

(Elmore, 1979)

The first step in this process is to diagnose who the system is currently leaving behind – which children are not thriving and achieving in the current design. This will be a complex set of variables ‘but

often includes children from low-income families, rural areas, refugees or ethnic minorities who do not speak the language of instruction, (gender in some cultures) and children with learning differences’ (Elmore, 1979, p 18). Azlina Kamal, UNICEF Education Specialist and Lead in Malaysia, argues that ‘A developmental model should be used when approaching transformation so that innovations are designed with the needs of the most marginalised in mind at the outset rather than trying to fit them into the mainstream approach later on down the line’.²⁰

As we come through the COVID pandemic, attention is clearly focused on wellbeing as a critical input and outcome of an education system that enables transformative learning for all. This was recognised in Singapore, in response to stress and anxiety of students in a high-performing system, when the move was made to ‘shift societal focus on academic performance toward a holistic education that equips students with knowledge, skills, values and competencies that Singapore needs among its citizens in a rapidly changing world’. Wellbeing is not only an issue for students. Studies in Australia highlight the impact of workplace stress on school principals and teachers, leading to educators leaving the profession and systems struggling to staff schools.

Third P: Position – Position and align components to support the pedagogical core

To ensure that the overall system is aligned to supporting the work of the pedagogical core is very challenging, considering the complexity and dynamics of any education system. This is highlighted when considering the various tensions that need to be held together and be resolved. These polarities require system leaders to ‘grapple with tensions regarding what should be centralized or decentralized and the balance between prescription and local adaptation, among other concerns’ (Sengeh and Winthrop, p 24).



Sengeh and Winthrop cite various studies and resources that help frame the problem and give leaders a place to begin their sense making. They include the following.

1. The Global Partnership for Education, the global fund supporting education in low-income countries, has a new (2025) strategic plan focusing on transforming education systems (most recently updated at globalpartnership.org/content/gpe-2025-strategic-plan).
2. The CUE (Center for Universal Learning) Millions Learning initiative, on scaling and sustaining education change inside systems, highlights multiple system components that need to work together, including governance, human resources, curriculum and materials, information and data, finance, and stakeholder engagement (Perlman Robinson et al, 2021).
3. *Building a World Class Learning System*, by Geoff Masters, is derived from studying high-performing education systems in high-income countries. The publication highlights six major components of effective learning systems that must work together: a quality curriculum, informative assessment processes; highly effective teaching; comprehensive student support; strong leadership of learning; and a supportive learning ecosystem (Masters, 2022).
4. Lant Pritchett and his RISE (Research on Improving Systems of Education) team take another approach altogether in their work to harness systems thinking to improve foundational learning in low-income and middle-income countries (Spivak, 2021).

The paper sets out the six key components that CUE considers essential if a system is to align its design to support and enable the pedagogical core to deliver on the Education Purpose. The six are as follows.

- **Curriculum** – Are curricula focused on the competencies and skills required, as envisioned in the purpose?
- **Human resources** – Do you have the right people with the right skills and dispositions to deliver the purpose (in classrooms, schools and the broader system)?
- **Data and assessment** – Do assessments align to the purpose, and do you have data systems in place to track progress and achievement, of individuals and cohorts, that inform decision making with transparency and fidelity?
- **Governance** – Are senior leaders in the system supportive of the redesign and can they actively lead the implementation with fidelity?
- **Finance** – Are there sufficient, sustainable funds to implement the redesign? Do key stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, politicians) have a voice in how funds are used?
- **Engagement** – Is there a plan for on-going engagement in the learning ecosystem, to support implementation and adjustments to the plan as required?

FRAMEWORK THREE

– System Innovation on Purpose

Leadbeater and Winhall co-lead the System Innovation Initiative at the Rockwool Foundation's Intervention Unit in Denmark.

The initiative works with system innovation experts and practitioners internationally and in Denmark to turn systems theory into system change in action.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021)

In their paper, *System Innovation on Purpose* they reinforce the power of purpose to shift a system and propose the 'intentional emergent model' for helping system leaders find the purpose that will help shift their system.



Is the system ready to shift?

The first question they look at is determining when a system is ready to shift.

Systems become open to fundamental change when two conditions come together: society faces a systemic challenge which requires a systemic response and a systemic opportunity emerges to create a new kind of system.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021)

A systemic challenge is deep rooted by its nature and continues to produce ‘persistent patterns of failure’, and is not the failure of any one part of the system but arises from the interconnections between different systems. The persistent pattern of failure in education today is the fact that it does not meet the needs of too many students, with the least advantaged students starting their school life behind their more advantaged peers in terms of developmental domains, and the gap tends to widen through their schooling years. Michael Fullan captures the problem as follows.

The first mystery of system change in education is why has the 200-year-old current system in Western societies not transformed when the majority of people have known for at least 50 years that it does not work?

(Fullan, 2023)

This is the systemic challenge that is truly stuck.

The systemic opportunity presents a new way to organise the system founded on a new sense of purpose.

Often the first sign that a new system purpose is feasible is the appearance of ‘hybrids’ which combine elements of the old and the new.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021)

COVID has shown us that schools are a fundamental part of the community, but how we use schools, how they are organised within the school gate and

as learning and wellbeing networks, is beginning to shift. This suggests that the time is right for systems to search for a new sense of purpose for education, which is focused on transformative learning for all (students, educators, public servants, parents and politicians).

Finding a new purpose

Leadbeater and Winhall set out two different approaches to finding a new purpose, each approach being suited to different contexts. The Directive approach, which is characterised by top-down direction setting, is better suited to more technical challenges – where the what and why are clear but the how requires innovation. The example they use in the paper is the Apollo Moonshot mission, first proposed by President Kennedy in 1963 as a way of projecting US technological power in the context of the Cold War with the USSR.

The directive model is the right approach when the challenge is well-defined, the authority to set the purpose is clearly established and the potential solutions fairly knowable.

The emergent model will be more appropriate when there are many different possible solutions and purpose will only come into focus through discovery and experimentation, from within society rather than set by those in authority.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021, p 15)

They use the Dutch example of developing a piped water system to deliver clean water to the community, as an emergent process of a system finding a purpose. The process began in the Dutch Golden Age in the 1600s with the commercial need to deliver clean water to ships for their long voyages. In the early part of the 1900s, health was considered a private affair and it was believed that a body covered in grime provided protection against disease.



This shifted in the last three decades of the century with a social need, when the middle class set themselves apart by being clean and washing with soap. It was not until the mid 20th century that it became a public health need and 80 per cent of the population were living with a piped water system. This was a system in search of a purpose.

The challenge for leading transformation in education is that we need the speed of the directive approach while managing to integrate the competing claims of different purposes from different parts of the community.

Systems are organised around their purposes. But new purposes are rarely rationally chosen nor decided by figures of authority. More often they are found, discovered, uncovered and generated. Our model of intentional emergence shows how that process can be accelerated, synchronised and steered by all those involved.

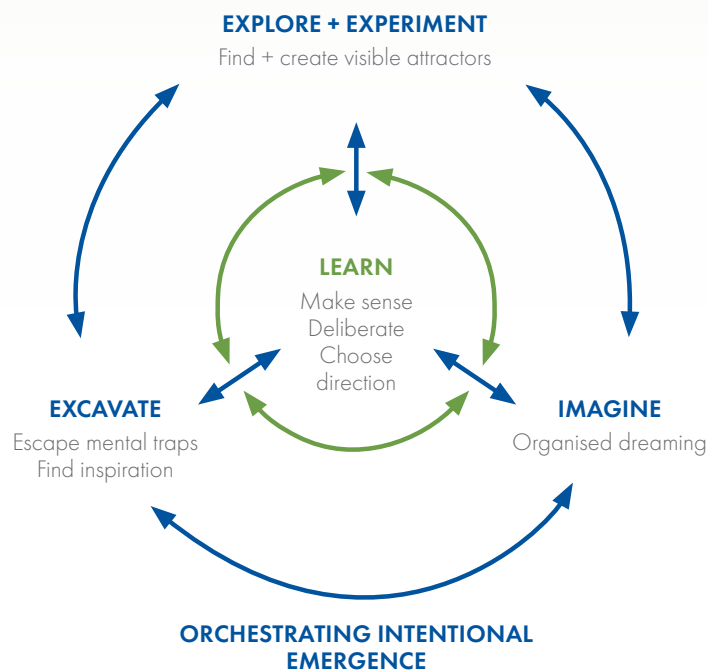
(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021, p 29)

The model for intentional emergence has four elements that leaders can consider when they are engaging their community in the development of a new purpose for education (see Figure 3).

Element 1: Learn (make sense, deliberate, choose direction)

Developing a purpose that can hold all the different perspectives of an education system, and integrate the different interests, requires leaders to create deliberative spaces for dialogue. These deliberative spaces provide a forum where different players can debate the change they are looking for in their context, aligned to their wants and needs. Reframing a purpose needs to involve those voices of the most marginalised as well other those with a vested interest (teachers, students, parents, education leaders). Leadbeater and Winhall cite a few different approaches to framing the problem for leaders looking for ideas in leading this learning approach: Reos Partners' 'convening for radical

Figure 3. Leadbeater and Winhall model for intentional emergence



To understand why the system is like it is we need to look at how we got here, what assumptions and metaphors hold the current system in place and therefore what needs to change. We need to honour history but not be hostage to it.

diversity’;²¹ Kees Dorst in his 2015 book *Frame Innovation*, on engaging the inner core and the outliers; Terry Irwin, Professor of Transition Design, who highlights the power of conversation (2015). Creative deliberation and learning to decide the shared purpose for system change can be enhanced and enacted by attending to three other sources: imagination, exploration and excavation.

Element 2: Imagine (organised dreaming)

Designing social policy without an imaginative sense of your destination means your best efforts will land you toward the front of the status quo, but not ahead of it. Imagination helps you transcend the limits of what seems naturally possible and morally acceptable.

(Etmanski, 2020)

Leadbeater and Winhall cite many different examples of practices that can be used with groups to facilitate organised dreaming. Great teachers help students to ‘capture the dream, engage the passion’ (Boyatzis, 2006) as a way of engaging their intrinsic motivation. The techniques cited in the paper bring the same energy to large groups and community work to help shift people’s minds and imagine what is possible.

Element 3: Explore + Experiment (find + create visible attractors)

To create a shift in a system, it helps to create what the economic historian, Carlota Perez calls a ‘visible attractor’, which needs to appear, ‘*symbolising the whole*

new potential and capable of sparking the ... imagination of a cluster of pioneers’ (Perez, 2002). In education we are blessed with many different ‘visible attractors’ that demonstrate the sort of education we want for our children, as referenced earlier on in the introduction to this paper. The task for leaders, in crafting a compelling purpose for their system, is to tap into these examples (often referred to in derogatory tones as ‘a thousand flowers blooming’) and see them as resources for helping their community see what is possible (Perez, 2002). New possibilities for us to aspire to.

Element 4: Excavate (escape mental traps, find inspiration)

System innovators need to dig deep to uncover the underlying beliefs and assumptions that will continue to shape the evolution of the system unless challenged.

(Leadbeater and Winhall, 2021)

This connects back to the earlier quote, by Deming, that every system is perfectly designed to deliver the outcomes it is delivering. To understand why the system is like it is, we need to look at how we got here, what assumptions and metaphors hold the current system in place and therefore what needs to change. We need to honour history but not be hostage to it. In education there are so many assumptions and beliefs that we have been trying to shift; ‘from sage on a stage to guide on the side’ or ‘professional ≠ autonomy’. As we try to recraft the narrative of the purpose of education, we need to be clear on the beliefs and metaphors that got us here in the first place.



SECTION THREE: DOWN TO BUSINESS – Putting good theory into practice

To create education systems that enable transformative learning for all, teachers, staff (schools and central office), principals, system leaders and their allies need to become learners who can support the change in how the system works. However, taking on the role of leading system change can feel overwhelming, particularly if you do not believe you have agency in your working environment. Complexity theory reminds us that small changes can have oversized effect in the broader system. Buckminster Fuller is referenced for his use of the trim tab on ship rudders, as a metaphor for how one individual's actions can create a small perturbation in the system, which pulls the whole ship around.²²

To step into the role of system change agent, leaders and followers need to develop their meaning-making system (their mental complexity) moving beyond what Kegan called the Socialised Mind (where we are 'subject' to our social culture and setting) to the Self-Authoring mind (where we are no longer just subject to our social setting but feel a sense of agency, self-trust and the capacity to exercise initiative) to the Self-Transforming Mind (where we can step outside our own ideology and framework, observe their limitations and develop a more comprehensive view of the broader system) (Kegan and Lahey, 2009).

To make these subject/object moves requires us to decentre (Piaget) and gain an ever-broadening perspective.

In his paper, *Leadership as a learning activity* (2022) Conigrave proposed four frameworks and one practice that help leaders broaden their perspective and increase their mental complexity by bringing learning into the core of their role. These were presented with the following logic.

Intrapersonal – Developing self

1. Immunity to change

Interpersonal – Developing generative relationships

2. Clear Leadership
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

In this section we will look at how these frameworks and practice can be used in an integrated way to support leaders who are trying to lead transformation in their system. We propose that changing the operating model in your part of the education system provides a start point, considering how you can put theory into practice to deliver more confidently on your newly crafted purpose for education.



Translating aspiration into action

To bring the new purpose for education to life and have a positive impact on teaching and learning in the classroom, leaders need to translate the aspiration articulated by the new purpose into the day-to-day practices of their part of the system (ie, teaching teams; whole school; a division within a department; a whole department). This translation can, in part, be achieved through redesigning the operating model that underpins the work.

An operating model is an abstract concept that attempts to break down the complexity of the education system into its component parts. The operating model articulates how the system currently works (the 'As Is' model), and indicates where you want to shift the model to (the 'To Be' model) in order to improve system performance. An operating model, in a technical sense, shows how people, processes and technology integrate to deliver value for the stakeholders. This is expressed in the formal organisation design represented by organograms, role descriptions, delegations of authority, policies, procedures, etc. This technical work often gets the bulk of attention in operating model change because these elements are easily made visible and we know how to do the work.

The adaptive leadership work of changing the operating model involves working on the informal design of the organisation. This work may include discussing the undiscussables, such as how power is used and shared; how leaders and followers collude to keep the current dysfunction in place; uncovering the assumptions, beliefs and habits that no longer align to the new purpose; who wins, who loses and how? This is the work that often gets ignored or denied in organisation change processes. See Box 1 overpage for a sample case study.

Translating the new purpose into your operating model will look different depending on which part of the system you are working on/in.



As a teacher you may be wanting to move to a more collaborative team-teaching approach, moving from 'my students' to 'our students' and leveraging the broader learning eco-system to deliver a more student-centric learning experience.



As a school principal, you may be in the process of implementing a newly crafted whole-school purpose that reshapes the sort of education your community wants for your children. You will be looking at the complexities of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, workforce design, timetabling, school governance and engaging your authorising environment.



As a mid-level bureaucrat (often called the moderating layer in the organisation) you may be looking at how your division can work more collaboratively with other divisions, to better integrate the overall work so it is easier for teachers and students to implement with fidelity in the classroom.



As the leader of a whole department, you may be looking at how to move from an 'As Is' operating model, which is designed as a traditional hierarchy (top-down, centrally prescribed, command-and-control), to a 'To Be' operating model, which is an adaptive network – where the power is distributed, the culture is truly student-centred at all layers of the organisation, and teachers and students have agency in how teaching and learning is done.

The following proposed work sequence for changing an operating model begins with a focus on Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Model as the meta frame, using the six Team Conditions, Clear Leadership and the power of open questions as specific interventions within the broader change program.



Box 1. Sample case study

A large government authority was 18 months into the redesign and implementation of the organisation operating model. The ambition was to break down traditional functional silos and move to a matrix model that aligned more to the needs of their key 'customers'. Large amounts of time and money were spent with consultants (internal and external) running a highly consultative co-design process, to ensure that the To Be operating model was sensitive to the context, culture and newly crafted purpose of the organisation. As the program moved to implementation, issues arose that threatened to derail 18 months of work. At an Executive Meeting where the real issues surfaced, a key executive had an outburst of emotion, admitting that he was not prepared to dismantle his part of the organisation that he and his team had spent the last five years building into a high-performance operation. Leaders ignore the adaptive challenges at their peril.

Adaptive Leadership

In their *Practice Guide* (2009), Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky set out a framework for engaging in adaptive leadership which supports '[changing yourself], your organisation and the world' (Conigrave, 2022). They present an iterative process in four parts, which are a mixture of diagnosis and action (including interpretation) focused on self and system. While it is presented in a linear fashion, it is seen as an iterative process that enfolds and unfolds like a good dance, as you move between diagnosis and actions, shifting focus from self to system and back again. The four phases are as illustrated in Figure 4.



1. Diagnose the system

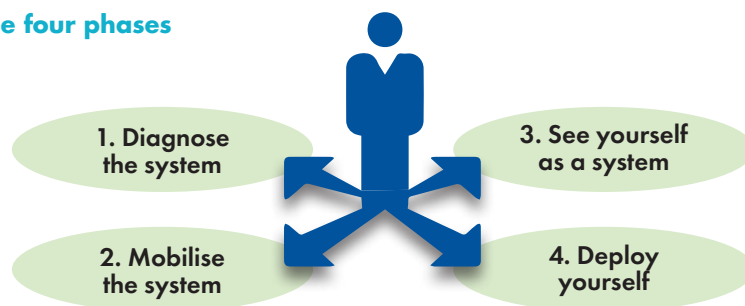
Effectively engaging with your authorising environment and working collaboratively with your community to craft a new, compelling narrative for education takes time and patience. By this stage it may feel that you have done little more than listen,

engage, reflect and co-construct the new narrative. The good news is that while nothing much seems to have changed, your interventions have begun the process of shifting the system and creating a common narrative that will sustain you and your community through the adaptive challenge.

Heifetz and his colleagues (2009) suggest that one of the big mistakes leaders make in addressing adaptive challenges is to not take enough time in the diagnosis phase. The pressure to drive for outcomes leads us to jump to conclusions and act on the first solution that presents itself. There is little reward in organisations today to wallow in not knowing and considering different interpretations for an event. Heifetz encourages leaders to develop a holding environment, where there is time to consider multiple interpretations of 'what is really going on', to get a better understanding of the system and the dynamics driving the current outcomes.

A critical move in the diagnosis is differentiating technical from adaptive

Figure 4. The four phases





challenges. ‘The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems’ (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 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. Adaptive challenges are more complex, because they require individuals and groups to change beliefs, assumptions and habits that have served them well in the past. Changing a timetable in a school has both technical and adaptive challenges. Both types of challenges are important in the change process and need to be attended to in a coherent way.

Getting on the balcony

During the diagnosis phase it is critical that you move beyond responding to the symptoms and look to solve for the deeper causes of the dynamic within the system. Heifetz uses the metaphor of ‘getting on the balcony’ to gain a distanced perspective of the underlying patterns that help you gain a deeper understanding of the system. When you are in the thrust and parry of your workday, you can only see those that you are working directly with and may miss problems and opportunities apparent from a broader perspective.

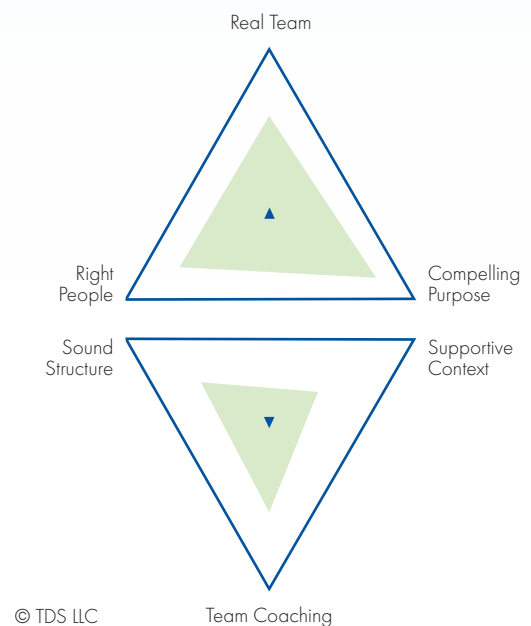
To do ‘balcony work’, leaders need to get comfortable with not knowing, avoiding the temptation of jumping to conclusions. One key place to practise this work is in your direct leadership team. As stated previously, complex adaptive problems are best solved through teams that can collaborate effectively in developing potential solutions. The team also provides a place for leaders to observe the system in action, as the team is a microcosm of the broader organisation. What happens in the team gives a window to what is likely happening in other parts of the organisation.

Designing the team for superb collaboration

One key issue in organisations today is that teams are often a team in name only. Just calling a ‘group’ a ‘team’ does not ensure that the environment in the team will be conducive to the collaboration required to tackle the adaptive challenge of designing and implementing a new operating model. Research led by Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman from Harvard University in the 1990s showed that there are six conditions (environmental factors) that 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 which are essential to team performance and those conditions are seen to be enablers (see Figure 5).

Having a well-designed team is essential to effectively lead the design and implementation of the new operating model. The first condition to attend to is ensuring that you have a real team that is bounded (people know who is on the team) and stable (the team has sufficient time working together), and the interdependent task of the team is clear.

Figure 5. The six team conditions





The interdependent task is related to the unique value-add of the team, what the team can only do together that cannot be done by any other individual or group. The interdependent task is articulated in the compelling purpose of the team, which sets out what it delivers, how it delivers it and why it matters.

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

A well-designed team also supports the diagnostic process in the transformation, as it represents a microcosm of the broader organisation, a mini representation of the whole system in the here and now. A well-designed team that is set up for collaboration can use its own experience of working together in the here and now, as point of diagnosis, and of developing hypotheses of 'what is really going on' in the

broader system. This can lead a team to develop possible solutions to the adaptive challenges arising in the development of the new operating model, and to construct experiments and choose micro sites for iterating new ideas, to see how they play out in the real world.

The second condition required for superb collaboration is a compelling team purpose. This is not the same as delivering the overall purpose of the organisation or system, but the unique value-add of this team in service of delivering on that broader purpose. Developing (discovering, finding) a compelling purpose for your team is harder than it looks. It needs to be consequential, in that it makes a difference; challenging so there is stretch in the task, while being achievable; and most importantly it needs to be clear. One practice that teams can employ to improve the speed and efficacy of developing a compelling purpose is using Clear Leadership principles, developed by Professor Gervase Bushe.

Developing interpersonal clarity

Co-designing a compelling purpose for a team is a learning activity, but learning together in teams, in the open, can be tough. 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 other's experience, we make up stories to complete the picture.

The interpersonal mush arises when we do not check out these stories that we have made up about others and act upon them as though they are real. This happens in teams all the time, because of the dynamic pace of the work and the complexity of social interaction. Consider the vignette in Box 2.

This sort of dynamic is happening all the time in teams – hence the high prevalence of interpersonal mush getting in the way of learning on the job. The antidote to interpersonal mush is interpersonal clarity.

A simple (not simplistic) innovation that enables us to develop interpersonal clarity in our work in teams is what Bushe has called the 'Experience Cube' (Bushe, 2010). This model can be used figuratively (and literally if you have the space) to walk the cube as a way of getting clear on the experience you are having in the 'here and now' and being able to describe that to your partner. Being able to describe your 'here and now' experience is harder than



Box 2. Vignette

A consultant is working with a team running an activity to develop a compelling purpose. A colleague is presenting the work of their small group to the whole team when the consultant notices that one of his colleagues is grabbing the hands of those standing on both sides, making what the consultant interpreted as a joking gesture of 'kumbaya'. The consultant intervened and asked the executive what he was doing, aware that he felt himself getting angry and defensive on behalf of the other executive presenting back the work. The consultant asked the executive what he was intending by grabbing the hands of his colleagues in this way. The executive was somewhat startled, looking like a child in a classroom who has been caught by the teacher doing something naughty. The executive spoke of the positive feelings the presentation was generating and wanted to express this. The consultant and the team used this as a learning opportunity and the work continued.

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.



2. 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 shows that we are not **risk** averse but that in fact we are **loss** averse. Changing an operating model in a system is intensely political, because it changes the way in which the work is done, how power is shared/distributed and whose agenda is privileged. Your work in managing your authorising environment will give you good intel in to how the different parts of the learning eco-system will respond to change, who will win and who will see themselves as losing.

Heifetz suggests that leaders need to be able to moderate the rate of disappointment to a level that their stakeholders can tolerate. Clear Leadership and the Experience Cube (see Figure 6) can support leaders in ensuring that they understand their own and others' experience of the change. Throughout the change process, conflict will naturally arise and people will try to make sense of the new way of working and their role. This conflict can fester and become dysfunctional if not attended to in a timely and effective manner. The Experience Cube can be used in what Bushe calls a 'Pinch Conversation', which is a simple process of ensuring that you are clear with yourself, and the other, about the experience you are having, and

Figure 6. Clear Leadership - Experience Cube



© Gervase Bushe 2022



open to and clear on the experience of the other. This approach de-escalates conflict and makes conflict useful as a tool for making the system visible.

Understanding the politics in the system will be assisted by effectively 'excavating the past', as Leadbeater and Winhall suggest, to better understand longstanding alliances and how power came to be shared as it is. The metaphors that hold the

working in a high-performing team is not like a warm bath. It requires leaders who can turn up the heat and create a container for constructive conflict required to hold the different polarities of competing agendas inherent in any system.

current system in place provide a window to the culture of the system and can indicate where narratives need to be recrafted. With the current challenges arising from the technological changes in ChatGPT, one response in some systems has been to ban it from use in the classroom. Others are advocating for a new narrative, encouraging leaders to not change the assessment but rather to change the nature of the original task.

A key idea in mobilising the system is to 'hand back the work' to those who are best placed to do the work. As stated previously, teachers and students are best placed to redesign teaching and learning in their classroom. The new operating model needs to redefine the work of the broader system, moving away from prescribing the answer to one that frames the questions and provides resources for local implementation of broad principles.

The third team condition

The third condition of a well-designed team is to ensure that you have the right people on the team. What constitutes 'the right people' is a function of the compelling purpose of the team, ensuring you have the right diversity of skills, dispositions, and perspectives to deliver on the interdependent task. The Hackman/Wageman research found that one of the key behaviours required in high-

performing teams is what they called 'integrity'. In this model, integrity shows up as team members being able to hotly debate challenging topics in the room and, once a decision is made, the team members speak with one voice outside the room. This 'cabinet solidarity' supports congruent messaging of complex choices required in leading the transformation work. It also highlights that working in a high-performing team is not like a warm bath. It requires leaders who can turn up the heat and create a container for constructive conflict required to hold the different polarities of competing agendas inherent in any system.



3. See yourself as a system

Earlier in this paper we covered the importance of self-awareness as critical if you are to use your own experience as a key navigational tool in leading adaptive change. Kegan makes the point that

... to look deeply into the complexity of the system, you need to look deeply into yourself – The further reaches of adult development.

(Robert Kegan, RSA Presentation)

Adaptive leadership requires you to see yourself as a system; to recognise your internal world as a reflection and embodiment of the external environment. Bushe (2010) makes the point that experience is not something that happens to us. Rather it is something we create through the sense we make of the external stimulus filtered through our internal lens.

Playing multiple roles

One powerful lens that influences our behaviour is the different roles or identities we have in different contexts. When you wake up in the morning, you may play the role of spouse trying not to wake your partner. Stepping out into the hallway



you may step into the role of parent and remember that you need to wake your child so they can get to university on time. As you step out your front door you assume the role of community member maybe chatting to your barista at your local coffee shop. At work you take on your role in the work as 'agreed' with your organisation which evolves and changes depending on who you are working in relationship with. During your day, you move seamlessly from one role to the next, using different mental models to guide your decision making, different beliefs and assumptions helping you to navigate these different contexts effectively. In leading the change in an operating model, leaders need to be clear what role you are taking up or should take up to be effective.

Naming our loyalties

As discussed earlier, changing an operating model is political, in the sense that power shifts – some win and some may feel a sense of loss. Heifetz and colleagues (2009) suggest that we look through the lens of our loyalties (colleagues, community, ancestors) to better understand some of the conscious and unconscious drivers of our decision making. One way they suggest unearthing loyalties and making them visible is to use an adapted 'Immunity to Change' map (developed by their Harvard University colleagues Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, 2009) to get to the hidden commitments and loyalties driving some of your behaviour.

Designing the team to ensure you have the right people in place (the third condition) ensures that you have the diversity of perspectives and loyalties required to achieve the compelling team purpose. We are all biased by our nature (Kahneman, 2011) and the best way to debias our decision-making process is through the collaborative decision making that can occur when the team is well designed, launched and learning together.



4. Deploy yourself

The Practice Guide finishes where we began this paper; with a focus on purpose and the emotional journey that is leading adaptive change.

The ethics of purpose

One of the challenges that Heifetz and his colleagues raise is the ethical implications of your purpose. Adaptive change always involves loss and as a leader you need to be able to moderate the degree of disappointment that your stakeholders can tolerate. Loss brings the risk of causing harm. The question to ask is 'what will you not do on behalf of what you believe most deeply?'. For instance, changing the operating model in your organisation may lead to jobs being made redundant. How would you work with those who might be impacted by these changes and still stay true to your own ethics. These are not simple questions and require leaders to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, as well as the impact their choices are having in the system.

Engage courageously

Stepping into the space of not knowing takes courage and requires us to work against our own neurophysiology, which wires us for safety and avoidance of loss (Conigrave, 2022). We have to deal with our own competence compulsion (Bushe, 2010), giving ourselves permission to not know the answer. We can do this by working in our teams, framing the adaptive problem we are trying to solve and then collaborating with our colleagues to learn something new. Leading change in complex adaptive systems requires us to make decisions and then to 'hold steady' while the unseen cause/effect loops embed the change and nothing much seems to happen initially. To quote Francisco Varela ... *Because the whole point is that after suspension you have to tolerate that nothing is happening. Suspension is a very funny procedure. Staying with that is the key.* (Charmer, 2016, p 35)



Inspire people

The root of the word inspire means to take a breath in, to fill with spirit.

(Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009)

Connecting with your team and your community throughout the change process is essential for your wellbeing, the wellbeing of others and the success of the transformation. As you 'hand back the work' of implementing the new operating model, listen to the feedback with curiosity and compassion: curiosity about how your intention for the new operating model is manifesting in the day-to-day work of your teams; compassion for the struggle that is inherent in moving from conscious incompetence to conscious competence as the teams learn new ways of working.

Run experiments

Framing the work of implementing a new operating model as a series of small, connected, congruent experiments, maintains the learning orientations and reduces the risk when things do not work. As Heifetz and colleagues say

Leadership is an improvisational art. There is no recipe.

(2009)

Test the boundaries of your authority and challenge yourself to take risks and see how the system responds. By probing the system (Snowden and Boone, 2007), you gather data about how it is going to respond and this allows you to learn your way forward implementing the new operating model. Sometimes you will need to 'turn up the heat' and focus people's attention on beliefs or assumptions that they find troubling and will try and deny/ignore.

Conclusion

We end where we began. Our ambition was to present robust theories and practices that provide leaders with the navigational tools required, individually and collectively, to challenge the current status quo in education today. In doing so the hope is that this work assists education leaders to connect across networks more effectively – collaboratively to lead systemwide change that creates the conditions which will enable leadership of the system toward transformative learning for all.

As a leader of transformation you will require energy for the journey and you need to ensure that you look after yourself. When the masks drop from the aircraft ceiling in an emergency, you are instructed to put yours on first. While leading the change of operating model may not feel like an emergency, it is what can be

referred to as a chronic crisis – it can take a long time, with a constant threat of failure always looming. You need to find confidants who can be your companions on the journey and to whom you can turn when you come upon the inevitable ‘dark night of the soul’.²³ To effectively be the instrument of navigation, you need to have the bandwidth and capacity to see further and farther. This is best achieved when you can effectively engage the parasympathetic nervous system, and connect effectively with others in a way that

... unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but never gets away from the current of which we and (she) are both an integral part.

(Parker Follet, 1920)

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17. [thegrannycloud.org/background/](https://www.thegrannycloud.org/background/)
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19. For further information email: leapfrogging@brookings.edu
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Additional reading

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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-lead 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.

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About the paper

The authors believe a great education for all is the basis of a civil society and there has never been a more important time to strengthen those civic structures that protect and promote the civil society we all want to live in. The robust theories, frameworks and ideas they put forward in this paper are intended to help system-level and school-level education leaders who are leading transformational change to navigate these challenging 'waters' successfully. Their hope is that the paper assists education leaders to connect across networks more effectively – collaboratively to lead systemwide change that creates the conditions which will enable leadership of the system toward transformative learning for all.