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## *The Hidden Power of Alignment*

**A**s a school principal, continuously working with change, Bill knows that any time a group forms to do work together, they create a unique organism. Each person has travelled their own signature path to get to this school. How do you tap this unique collective resource to grow a school?

As a cognitive science researcher, John works to understand how people think and how to tap human potential. This brings him up against context. People do not live and learn in a vacuum. He is continuously exploring and testing learning processes internationally across organizations of all types.

How does the clinical clarity of well-tested research match with the complex messy reality of life in schools? Each of you will have faced this.

The researcher and the practitioner came together to work inside Bill's schools. We needed a process that was robust enough to provide a rock solid base for effective school change. To be of real value, any such process must be flexible enough to work across many school contexts and cultures. We have learned that the change process must encompass the beliefs and experience of all of the school community if it is to have any chance of lasting the distance.

Sometimes change works beautifully; sometimes it enthruses us all at the start and fades to leave us bereft; and sometimes it is slow to begin and develops real bite over time. Change in schools is always working inside a fluid medium. Principals come and go, staffs change, mandates come and go, as do theories and funding.

Despite all of our practical experience, reading, and research, and that of our many colleagues, we all continue to struggle with the complexities and frustrations of school growth. There is no one formula. Each particular school context demands unique insights. As one observes any school, characteristics jump out. We may see strong teamwork, weak literacy skills, a strong multicultural community, tired staff development activities. Most staff will openly share these and they can form a strong basis for analysis. The challenge is to match this sharp analytical focus with the equally important big picture synthetic view of why this school exists. It is a delicious productive tension that tests and enriches us all. This balance of analysis and synthesis you will find throughout this book.

The best change processes are simple, powerful, and elegant. This requires stripping away artifice, the distractions that can derail thinking.

- We are only interested in this book in processes that drive action.
- We are only interested in models that give people explanatory power to understand what is happening to them.

Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 132) put it beautifully:

If one fails to develop any sense of reflective intervention in the information one encounters, one operates continually from the outside in—information controls you.

If you develop a sense of self, premised on your ability to penetrate information for your own uses, and you share and negotiate the results, then you become a member of the culture-creating community.

From the base of our rich experience and that of the thousands of people we have worked with, what is the distilled essence? What are the lessons and the pathways that lead to the creation of a culture of delivery? This first chapter takes you on a change journey.

## **ALL OF US HAVE A STAKE IN THIS**

A new teacher enters her classroom. She holds a dream for the way she wants her class to soar; she holds a dream for the teaching life that lies ahead for her. Over time, this evolves; reality reshapes all of our dreams. We see teachers living the joy of a teaching career, being filled daily by the nobility of the life teaching can provide. We also meet teachers grieving for the loss of their dreams, the loss of the career they envisioned.

The new principal enters the school, filled with dreams for the school. We know principals flourishing in their leadership career and we know principals grieving for their loss.

Parents have dreams for that child they held in their arms. They want the best for their child and will do almost anything to help achieve that. We know parents filled with the joy of family and the richness this brings to their lives. We also know parents grieving for the child they feel has somehow missed out.

This bridge between dreaming and grieving is crossed regularly throughout life. What stance we take on this bridge impacts our life and our career.

Every child has their own unique personality. Our children have precious lives ahead of them. They hold dreams for their own lives. Richard Ryan and Jennifer La Guardia (cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71) report,

Much of what people do is not, strictly speaking, intrinsically motivated, especially after early childhood when the freedom to be intrinsically motivated is increasingly curtailed by social pressures to do activities that are not interesting and to assume a variety of new responsibilities.

What message does this hold for us in education? Take some time to reflect on this.

What have you dreamed?

What have you lost?

What do you hold dear and will never let go?

Ryan and Deci (2000) reviewed the research on self-determination and what facilitates intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. Personal responsibility and self-determination are at the core of who we are. If we are to have the courage to address what best promotes organizational and individual richness of life and learning, here is a space to invest energy.

How can we address this deeply felt need for self-determination, the basis for any effective change process in our lives? And how do we balance this with the needs of the group?

## THE CORE OF CHANGE

At the core of any effective change is what people's lives have already taught them. All of us act out of what we know, what our life has taught us. My experiences with change have been positive, so I look forward to it and embrace it. That is all very well for me, but if your life has taught you that change is unpleasant and hurts you, then that is the reality you work from.

## 4 Schools That Deliver

We all have “school of hard knocks” knowledge etched into us. Jim Butler (1994) calls this **Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK)**. **This is my knowledge from living my life**, practicing my craft. It is personal because it comes from my unique life; it is practical because I can drive my performance from it; and it is true actionable knowledge. We explore PPK in more detail in Chapter 4.

My PPK comes from my experiences and my reflections on those experiences. And that should not be easily disregarded.

Because my parents moved home many times during my school years I developed PPK about how to deal with bullies in schools. That PPK is still with me. We each have our own unique PPK. My wife, Sandra, has loads of PPK about art, movement, storytelling, and early language development, where I have close to none.

When we work from our PPK, we behave in ways that are aligned with what we believe. **The common term used for these beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie our behavior is *mental models*.**

Examples of mental models are

- Children socially construct their own knowledge
- Classroom management is a curriculum issue
- Students must learn to take personal responsibility for their own learning
- Teaching requires deep subject matter knowledge

No one will buy into change wholeheartedly if their ideas and life experiences (**PPK**) and their beliefs and values (**mental models**) have been ignored or undervalued. We have all seen people and their ideas dismissed openly, and we have also seen it done more subtly: “We have really listened to what you have said, but because of (waffle, waffle, waffle) we have decided to take another path.”

Real listening is easy to spot. Patronizing people is also easy to see and hear.

We have often been called in to play a mediation role between warring factions. We begin by getting each person to write down, and then share, their mental models about the issue. As we publicly collect these, invariably there is amazement about the degree of agreement across factions. There are differences, but they are often minor. By working together out of the agreed mental models, progress can be made, and sources of disagreement often slowly dissolve.

Our PPK and our mental models drive our actions. So, the starting point in school change must be to tap these core resources to create a Shared Vision. We have found that this often puts teachers back in touch with their sense of vocation:

I have so enjoyed these two days; it reminded me why I wanted to become a teacher and refreshed my vision of myself as a teacher.

It was wonderful to see our vision emerge.

I cannot wait to get started and build the school which we have envisioned!

—Secondary School Teacher, Auckland, New Zealand

The last two days reminded me why I chose the teaching profession. We share a common goal in being passionate about our chosen profession.

It's interesting how differently I started this morning with kindergarten. Even though exhausted from yesterday I felt the passion for the children that I did when I entered the profession three years ago.

—Kindergarten Teacher, Sydney, Australia

Throughout, we will use quotes shared with us by the thousands of teachers who have taken a Shared Vision journey to become a school that delivers. These come from six countries: the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Norway, and cover all levels of schooling.

**Not every teacher has a successful experience, nor does every school.** We are continually learning about how to improve the processes we use. **Our processes will not be best for every school community.** We are happy to stand alongside the many other successful processes for school growth and development that exist internationally. Some share similar mental models to our processes and some come from a completely different mental model base.

As we have explored the best ways to create a genuine Shared Vision, we always come up against power structures. These can be formal structures; they can also be informal structures. Anyone who has worked inside any organization, not just a school, will know these well.

Often, we talk about power through the people who use or misuse it, and their associated behaviors. In our meaner moments, we refer to control freaks, bullies, micromanagers, naysayers, conservatives, cynics, radicals. In truth, they are each acting and responding from what their lives have taught them. They are trying to hold true to the PPK and mental models that have got them this far.

We each know in our heart how the real power structures in our school work, no matter what anyone may say. And most of us have learned to adjust our behavior to fit in.

Brené Brown (2010) expresses this situation well:

Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are. (p. 25)

Laying bare dysfunctional power structures, and our collusion in them, is central to empowerment and self-determination. This does not come easily.

We began by asking people to use classic brainstorming to get out of their hearts and souls what they really wanted for their school. Immediately, we met a massive obstacle. In most schools, there are people who are used to speaking the loudest and the strongest. And they do so. In classic brainstorming we would hear:

"I think what she/he is *really* trying to say is . . ."

"Look, what do you really mean by that?"

"How can you be sure?"

"I think you are forgetting . . ."

You will recognize these voices.

How do you deal with this?

### **We chose to ban discussion.**

We would explain before people started brainstorming: "We know that there are some people here who are good at discussion. Well, today discussion is banned. Discussion comes from a Latin root, *discutere*, which means to smash to pieces. And today we want all ideas to be heard. So, for those of you who are good at discussion we want you to imagine, just for today, that there are people in this room who can express exactly what they think without the benefit of your towering intellect to tell them what they are really thinking."

Sometimes there is a long silence, sometimes there is laughter, and sometimes there is applause. Almost always there is a massive sigh of relief.

Wow! Can't believe what has been achieved in 2 days! As a facilitator I was anxious all weekend—but I have really enjoyed working through the process with a group—NO DISCUSSION! Love it!

Be clear, at the start of any effective change process there must be ground rules in place that allow voices to be heard. In this way, we can tap into the PPK and mental models of everyone involved. These are the bases for empowerment, respect, and genuine alignment.

## THAT MAY WORK FOR INDIVIDUALS, BUT HOW ABOUT TEAMS?

Empowering individuals is central. But how do you empower teams? How does one achieve consensus and alignment in a school community if each person is expressing his or her own views?

As a young boy, I loved to read cowboy comic books and watch cowboy movies. I became enamoured of the image of the sheriffs or marshals or any “good guys” fearlessly walking down the dusty street. Shoulder to shoulder, hands hovering over their holsters, staring down the outlaws or “bad guys.” That sight of committed people with good on their side facing you down, coming at you head-on, has stuck with me.

Everyone in a school can line up, shoulder to shoulder, and walk down that dusty street saying, “This is what we are about; this is what we will achieve together. Anyone who tries to get in our way will have to deal with all of us united together.”

That would be an unstoppable force.

For a school to deliver, there must be a clear picture of what we will deliver, when we will deliver it, and how we will deliver it. Most people also want to know why. Our experience matches that of Simon Sinek (2009), when he argues that we should start with the why in everything we do. Do you know your why? What is the purpose, cause, or belief that inspires you to do what you do? For Sinek, knowing the “why” creates the buy-in.

We have visited few schools, companies, and sporting teams with a clearly owned and lived Shared Vision. Some have a vision on their wall; few have it in their heart or soul. When we have asked people about their vision-on-a-wall, many report, “That is what we say we do” and that the reality is very different. Such visions-on-a-wall are grist to the mill of the cynics in the school. As schools live their daily lives, there is a vision being lived out. It is composed of the beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie every action, every decision, and every system that is in place. Seldom is this articulated at all or articulated clearly. But it is alive and well and the true driving force in the life of the school.

Turning our intentions into action and impact, often called “walking the talk,” is crucial. To do this, we first have to be clear about what is the collective intention of those who make up our school community. There is rich literature available on organizational change and its challenges. At the

top of this for us is the work of John Kotter from Harvard. We have great respect for Kotter's work and have learned much from it.

In his book *Leading Change* (1996), Kotter lists the eight common errors in organizational change efforts. The third of these relates to Underestimating the Power of Vision. His reporting on the aligning power of a Shared Vision matches our experience totally. He explains that without a vision to guide decision making, each and every choice employees face can dissolve into an interminable debate.

We can think of many staff meetings we have endured that resonate with this. How about you?

Our long experience has taught us that intrinsic motivation is where the real action lies. In Daniel Pink's book *Drive* (2009), he shares what he sees as the three elements of the new motivational operating system: Mastery, Autonomy, and Purpose.

This era doesn't call for better management. It calls for a renaissance of self-direction. (p. 90)

From our experience, the secret is to help people tap into what they really believe, what they really want, what they would "crawl over broken glass" to deliver. Inside this collective resource are found the collective purpose and the bedrock of shared mastery to drive action. This chapter addresses our approach to tapping the power of purpose. Mastery runs strongly through the work of two major influences on our thinking, Peter Senge (1990) and Jon Saphier (Saphier et al., 2008). Personal mastery is one of Senge's five disciplines at the core of any Learning Organization. Saphier's continuing work on research for better teaching calls for focus on the professional repertoire of teachers as fundamental to quality teaching and learning.

**The unique lived lives of those people who form a school community are the most powerful resource our children have.** When all of this Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK) is respected and integrated, this is a resource of massive power for teaching and learning. Yet this is often buried beneath layers of doing and saying what is expected, years of working within a system with set parameters.

Brené Brown (2010) found from her research that our unexpressed ideas, opinions, and contributions don't just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness.

Our experience in schools is that years of being overloaded, and having insufficient space to stay in touch with what matters most deeply to us, slowly eats away at autonomy.

Any school can deliver if only this internal PPK is respected and aligned. Most schools need the rest of the world to get out of their way and let them become the school deeply embedded in their hearts and souls. They will ask for help if they need it and they will know who to ask.



Developing autonomy, both individual and collective, brings the sense of agency that builds individual and collective momentum. Giving everyone voice in designing our Shared Vision is a core element of autonomy and of schools that deliver.

As one teacher wrote to us:

I had reached a stage of stalemate or dead-end with regards to my teaching. But I now see the light at the end of this tunnel, with renewed hope and sense of direction and balance to my life as a teacher. This new vision is most welcome and I am looking forward to it.

Many people ask us about the difference between a Mission Statement and a Shared Vision. For us, **a Mission Statement is a statement of overall purpose:** Why does this school exist? Often the Mission is set by the community, or the country, or the state, or the organization that founded the school. **The Shared Vision is a clear picture of how our school will deliver on that Mission.**

As Joel Barker (1990) puts it so succinctly,

Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action changes the world.

Vision is not limiting—it is full of air and light and life. It gives you an open world to travel into rather than closing you down from the beginning. This chapter provides a process that works for creating a Shared Vision together and turning this into action.

## ALIGNMENT IN SCHOOLS AND IN LIFE

I was head of the science department in a large high school in Australia. At our heads of department meetings, we would each talk about what we were doing in our departments. Each of us was hard working, dedicated, committed, as were most of our staff. We had our plans and we were tightly focused on what we wanted. At one meeting, we had a discussion about homework. I had raised this issue for two reasons. One was what I saw as the unreasonable load on our students. The other was the unreasonable marking load on our staff. I did not mention the load on families. The head of languages said that his students had to compete in public examinations with students who had these languages as their

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first language. So his students needed to do a lot of homework. When I questioned him about what would happen if we all set that amount of homework, he replied that he had to look after his responsibilities, and that I should look after mine. It occurred to me that we were like a bunch of skyrockets sitting in a bucket, all with enormous potential energy. But, when we were lit we each flew off at full speed in our own direction, all pulling in different directions. And the school as a whole went nowhere! Why do we not strap all of the individual and teaching team rockets together with duct tape? When they are lit, they would move off together with an enormous whoosh—all heading in the same direction, with all of the power heading the same way.

How does this experience relate with yours? Many organizations are constantly dealing with silos. The key is to know where the whole school is heading and how we can contribute together to the best outcome. What structures currently exist in your school to promote and ensure alignment?

An old crab catcher described a similar phenomenon to me. When he caught his crabs, he would tie them together with a piece of string. He would leave them on the beach while he searched for more. When he returned the crabs would still be there. They had each been trying to scuttle off in a different direction and together they had gone nowhere. If only those crabs had agreed on one direction in which to scuttle together, they would have been gone. Have a think about the crabs in your school and in which directions they scuttle at present.

## EXPLANATORY POWER: TWO MODELS

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, having models that give explanatory power to what is happening is an essential element. What follows are two models, from the many we have tried and tested, that have proved invaluable for schools we have worked with.

The first of these models helped us see the importance of keeping a focus on the future and not bogging down in current reality and getting caught in the restrictions we can all see around us.

Mandates can be seen as restrictions. We learn about restrictions from the moment we are born. Babies spend nine months floating in a very safe, fluid environment. They emerge into a new reality. Let's face it, gravity is very restrictive! Babies do not lie around grumbling about this. They have an inner drive to learn their way forward, and they crawl, they walk, and

then they run. This is the approach we see in schools that deliver—they focus on action, not grumbling. They take restrictions in their stride.

The best expression of this comes in **Robert Fritz’s Model of Structural Tension (1987)**.

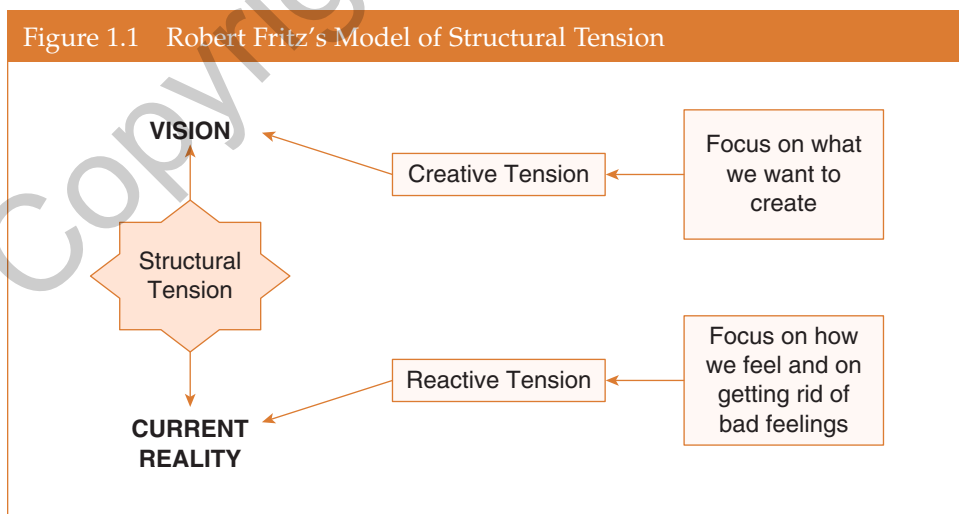
### Robert Fritz’s Model of Structural Tension

Nick Zeniuk, through his work with Fred Simon (personal communication, 2015), introduced us to this powerful visual representation of Fritz’s work (see Figure 1.1).

What Fritz has taught us is that between any vision we create and the current reality in which we live, there is always structural tension. This is normal, natural, healthy. So, when any new mandate arrives, welcome this new picture of the future. Then look at it from your context, your collective perspective, your current reality. Take your time.

You then have two choices in how to deal with this structural tension.

The first choice is to focus on the current reality. Poor us, they have dumped another mandate on us; we are still living through the troubles from the last mandate. Whining, moaning, groaning, wallowing. We have entered many schools who share with us this terrible state they are in. If we go back five years later, they are still whining, moaning, wallowing, and groaning—just about different things. They live in reactive tension. It is like walking through wet concrete. They are defeated. They have lost sight of their personal power. Their world is pushing them around, doing them over. And the world will readily supply such batterings regularly for anyone ready to sit around and wait for them. Breaking free from this is



Source: Used with permission from Fred Simon.

liberating. As an elementary teacher from the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, put it,

We are about to embark on a very exciting and inspirational journey with hopefully the results reflecting my longing of having an exceptional school with a shared belief. I'VE WAITED 28 YEARS FOR THIS!! Perhaps I have just wanted somebody, anybody, to encourage me (us) to take risks to do what we want, how we want.

This quote reflects the second choice: to focus on the vision, the future. A ferocious focus on the future leads to creative tension. Senge (1990) has found that mastery of creative tension brings out a capacity for perseverance and patience. We hope that you will know this delicious feeling, when you come to work filled with a mixture of calmness and confidence, matched with excitement and anticipation—working together with shared passion, shared commitment, on what really matters to you. This focus on the future drags the current reality forward; it transforms the reality into the future, the vision. This professional life is a joy.

A middle school teacher in Texas expresses this well:

Our vision has excited and renewed me. I came from such a negative atmosphere that I feel in shock over our positive climate. Burnout and depression were so prevalent that I had even considered leaving the profession. Our vision is the answer to so many things I see wrong with education. I feel challenged to grow and take part in this endeavor.

Every school we work with lives inside a current reality filled with mandates of all shapes and sizes. Accept the mandates and get to work on your creative responses to them. Put your energies where they have influence; do not put your energy into areas of concern that you cannot influence but can complain about long and hard. Stephen R. Covey (2004) has found that proactive people put their energy into their Circle of Influence, generating impact. Reactive people put their energy into their Circle of Concern, with no impact.

As one high school teacher from Detroit, Michigan, wrote to his principal,

As a parent of children in our school district I love our vision. I do want to share it. I do want to achieve it, but there is a problem. The problem is good old father time. The hours it will take to accomplish our vision are enormous. I teach, I coach, I counsel, I love our student body, I take care

of the people who mean the most in my life, my personal family. When am I going to have extra time to achieve our vision? In my teaching, our department has been bombarded with new state mandates. We must meet new standards. We have been thrust into teaching new curriculum we have no training for. In my coaching, I know it takes a full day on and off the field. As a result of my dedication, the workload between my students and my athletes is enormous. Sometimes I feel guilty and wonder what it would be like to be able to focus on only one area. I want to give more, but how much time for more is a major concern. Time is my worst enemy. I will help all I can. My time is yours. Help me to be able to give all I can.

Here is the cry for future focus. We are not suggesting that you should ignore your current reality. The issues this teacher raises are real, and they need to be addressed. This is the structural tension. But what we have learned is this: **only deal with the current reality through your future focus.** We do not put our initial energy into an analysis of the current reality. This is so seductive; people say to us, “How can we deal with the future if we do not know first where we are starting from?” You do not need to know this. This is a trap into which many fall. It will almost always bog you down in your present reality.

**In our work, we start with the Future—the Shared Vision.**

Once our Shared Vision is clear, we are ready to deal with the current reality, on our terms, using our strengths, our resources, our PPK. The current reality is addressed as we move powerfully forward toward our Shared Vision. There is no way we cannot deal with current reality. But, dealing with it from a future focus brings delivery not found in dealing with the current reality for its own sake. Five years from writing this plea, the teacher was a happy, fulfilled, energized member of a Blue Ribbon School in the state of Michigan.

This chapter takes you through our process for delivery. This will put you in touch with your collective power and with your collective creativity. Never again be daunted by mandates; embrace them. For many years, we have shared the joy of delivery in schools that have broken free from self-imposed chains and backed themselves and their rich inner resources. They have learned to balance autonomy and self-determination with accountability pressures by trusting themselves. This is seen by many as a dichotomy. In fact, autonomy and accountability coexist happily inside schools that deliver.

The second crucial explanatory model for us is **Daniel Kim’s Levels of Perspective Model (2001).**

### **Daniel Kim’s Levels of Perspective Model**

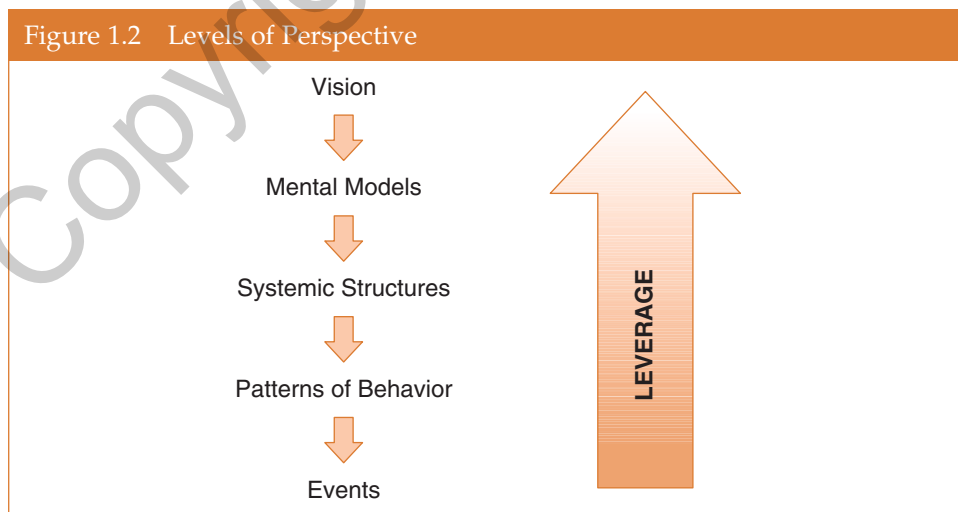
Through his book *Organizing for Learning: Strategies for Knowledge Creation and Enduring Change* (2001), Kim introduced us to the Levels of Perspective

(see Figure 1.2). This model has provided us with the most powerful lens we have ever found through which to view organizational life. The model allows us to view everything that happens at a school through each of the five perspectives.

**Shared Vision.** In this chapter, we share one effective process with a long track record for developing a Shared Vision. Our process draws on the mental models and PPK of the school community. Such a Shared Vision has a flavor of authenticity not found in a vision formed by hierarchy. Once the Shared Vision is formed, everything at the school can be viewed through this powerful lens.

**Mental Models.** As outlined earlier, mental models are our beliefs, values, and assumptions. Together they form what is often termed our *worldview*. Our mental models shape our actions and behavior. The mental models a teacher holds—even subconsciously—about teaching and learning drive their behavior. If I have a mental model of teaching as passing on information, then I might subscribe to a transmission model of pedagogy. On the other hand, if I hold a mental model of learning as understanding which is socially constructed, then I might subscribe to a more student-centered model of pedagogy.

**Systemic Structures.** Fritz (1987) suggests energy in organizations flows along a path of least resistance, like water across the landscape. We advocate that leaders at every level design and implement systems and structures to encourage energy to similarly flow toward realization of the vision. These are the enablers we put in place through which the desired mental models can be lived out. So, we see a classroom



Source: Used with permission from Daniel Kim.

behavior system, a school attendance system, a department curriculum delivery system, a peer coaching system. We can see these systems and structures at work.

**Patterns of Behavior.** These are those things we see happening over and over again: a team meeting every month, the same child comes to school late every Friday, a newsletter goes out the same day each month, a teacher with a continuing classroom management issue. We see patterns in what is delivered.

**Events.** These are those single actions we see each day: an assembly, a parent conference, one lesson, a school excursion, a coaching session. Schools are filled with thousands of events. Patterns of behavior and events are indicators of the current reality and of where we are at in relation to the vision.

Kim's leverage arrow is significant. The higher up the Levels of Perspective you take action, the greater the impact or leverage.

- Taking action to build your Shared Vision is the most powerful action.
- Taking an action to embed a mental model into your culture so the Shared Vision will be realized is the next most powerful action to take.
- Designing a system or structure that supports living out a mental model to realize your Shared Vision is another powerful action to take.

When there is a clear Shared Vision, staff can be confident about the mental models that must be lived to reach the vision. So can parents and children. Where designed systems and structures support living out those mental models, you have alignment. You see the patterns of behavior and events you want to see. You see a school that delivers.

## COLLABORATION AND CHALLENGE

In many schools, there is a high level of congeniality. People get along with each other; they share common interests. The staff room is a friendly and sociable place where staff can talk comfortably and happily with each other.

In other schools, there are high levels of cooperation. People are willing to help each other, to work together and support each other. There is teamwork here; staff are working for our mutual benefit.

Our experience is that these two characteristics are not enough. **To get the best from ourselves and from each other collaboration is needed.** Here staff are willing to challenge themselves and each other, to stretch

themselves and each other, in working to achieve a Shared Vision. This is more than the intersection of common goals seen in cooperative ventures. There is a deep collective determination to achieve the Shared Vision. This often involves experiencing periods of individual and collective discomfort, and facing the inherent challenges. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2012, p. 135) found,

Shared visions and values bind people together in collaborative pursuits.

Whenever we take on a learning opportunity, we take on a level of challenge; we also make decisions about the level of support we will need to respond to the opportunity. Each time a teacher hands a learning task to a child, that teacher also hands the student a designed challenge and a designed level of support. School leaders do the same with staff. Decisions about what are realistic levels of challenge and required levels of support will be determined by many factors. One of the key factors will be the mental models held about challenge and support.

Laurent Daloz (1986) provides a useful matrix for exploring challenge and support. His matrix suggests that

High Challenge/High Support produces growth,  
 Low Challenge/High Support produces confirmation,  
 High Challenge/Low Support produces retreat, and  
 Low Challenge/Low Support produces stasis (no change).

As we started to use this matrix inside organizations, we subjected it to the scrutiny of the PPK of the workforce, as we do with all models we use, including our own.

We have asked hundreds of people to map onto this matrix their most powerful learning experiences. The results of this process alerted us to something we had been missing. Coming from a background in teaching and education, we were strongly alert to the support needs of people while learning.

The pattern that emerges from collective experience is that the challenge axis is where the real action is. By far, the majority of powerful learning experiences are found in two quadrants: High Challenge/High Support and High Challenge/Low Support. Most people are hungering for challenge. Support is important, but challenge is the key to the deepest learning. Our data collection shows that many people are very busy but profoundly bored at work. Listening to the learning experiences of many people has added layers of meaning to Daloz's initial analysis.

High Challenge and High Support can indeed be a space for deep learning. Think of such times in your life: You are at the edge of your capability,



fully stretched and being given all of the support you need. In my early career as an author I lived in such an environment for three years. I was working on Australia's first National Curriculum project: the Australian Science Education Project (ASEP). The work was highly challenging with tight deadlines. I had colleagues supporting me, a team leader supporting me, and other support staff including typists, data analysts, a laboratory assistant, editors, and illustrators. For me, it was exhilarating learning. Some of my fellow authors crumbled under the strain and left.

High Challenge and Low Support has been the most contentious area for us. Time in this quadrant can drive people into retreat. Most of us have experienced this. At the same time, most people report this is the quadrant for the deepest learning: lessons that are seared into us, succeeding against all odds. When I was a young researcher, I was invited by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) to head up a group at a major international conference in Paris on Learning to Think: Thinking to Learn. The stretch was massive and I was expected to deliver on my own (Edwards, 1991b). I still remember the daunting feelings and the thrill of what followed.

What we suggest for those exploring the balance of challenge and support is to see it individually, with no set rules.

One of New Zealand's top research scientists shared that Low Challenge/Low Support is the space he looks forward to: holidays where he lies on the beach with his fishing line tied around his toe, dozing. He explained that this is where the germs of many of his best research ideas work their way into his mind. He then goes back to work and frames up his grant application: High Challenge and Low Support. He gets the grant and is into High Challenge and High Support and cannot wait to get back to that beach.

High Challenge/High Support does produce growth; it can also be a space of high stress from high expectations and a space from which one may need a break. Low Challenge/High Support is a space that provides confirmation; it is also where many ask, "Am I missing something here?" or "Why all of this support, do they think I lack capability?"

Decisions about challenge and support are based on deeply held mental models. What is experienced as support for one person can be experienced by another person as being ignored, or by yet another person as unnecessary interference. The key is to be crystal clear about your mental models. Ensure that your challenge and support decisions are aligned with them.

Marcia Reynolds, in her 2014 book *The Discomfort Zone*, argues that for true shifts in thinking and behavior to occur, you must be willing to challenge a person's beliefs, interrupt his patterns, and short-circuit the conviction to his logic even when it feels uncomfortable.

Jim Butler and I developed the Learning Pit Model to introduce learners and teachers to the key understanding that learners get worse

before they get better. This is outlined in detail in Provocation 2 in Chapter 2. **The learning pit shows that confusion, frustration, and challenge are essential elements in learning.** Many colleagues we have mentored have developed creative uses for our Learning Pit Model. For example, James Nottingham, in his book *Challenging Learning* (2010), explores the concept of challenge in learning. He has developed a Learning Challenge Model:

my version of Butler's and Edwards's model and their concept of the pit. (p. 185)

What has emerged most powerfully for us and those we work with is this: **Challenge is the key to creating a collaborative workspace and learning space; support creates a cooperative workspace and learning space.**

Our work parallels the work of Kouzes and Posner (2012, p. 39):

Opportunities to challenge the status quo and introduce change open the doors to doing one's best. Challenge is the motivating environment for excellence.

As you will see in our Shared Vision process, people are challenged to express their views openly, to vote openly, and to work collaboratively. Here are some typical responses to this way of working together:

Thoroughly enjoyable two days. This has been a great experience as a whole staff. The process you use to obtain data and create the vision, and the whole research process, creates a sense of ownership for ALL staff members. There are few other ways to unify a staff so rapidly and to clarify where they are going so well.

Whew! It's been humongous! To be able to finally take a full breath and be a voice amongst many. To be passionate about who I am and where I fit in, to have a go and see the roads we have taken together. It's great to be part of a team that has a vision to create an enormous change.

Staff members are feeling inspired and have a sense of professionalism that has never been bestowed on them before. The strategies removed the ego and placed everyone on an equal playing field when it came to decision-making. We created a team of players that normally would not work together, producing a unified team with an integrated vision in its refining stage in less than two days. The organisation and clear decisive methods employed are so well structured that they appear resilient.

Challenge as fuel for collaboration is not easy to work with. It can be volatile. Team challenges as part of collaboration require particular team skills:

- Team members must be skilled in dialogue, not discussion (see Provocation 4 in Chapter 2).
- Trust must be present that allows the “un-discussables” to surface and breathe air.
- Negative and cynical voices must be respected, supported, and valued through this test of collaboration.
- Be clearly aware of your own idiosyncratic challenge and support needs and their effects on those around you.
- If challenge and support needs and patterns are misinterpreted or ignored, we can stifle the learning and growth of people, rather than enhancing it.
- The context of learning has a crucial impact on learning. Challenge and support is also contextual and should be explored in this way.

Effective teams know how to work their way through challenging periods. We see many teams and schools retreat under serious challenge. Instead they need to hold their nerve. The process described in the rest of this chapter is challenging. It has been tested against the lived realities of many leaders, teachers, and communities over twenty-five years. It is a PPK-Based Process, a practical process. It takes courage, commitment, and collaboration.

As one teacher expressed it,

I loved the way you took on a strange, diverse bunch of lip-flappin’ people and made them all look in one direction. And we feel good about it too!

We appreciate how you have worked it down to us. Not like taking a strange philosophy home—makes a difficult bedfellow.

Those readers working in the area of social capital (Forsyth & Adams, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Wellman, 2014) will see strong parallels with the way we work. Our Shared Vision process helps a school to mine its social capital through invitation, challenge, reflection, collaboration, active public recording, and a shared repertoire of strategies, tools, and protocols.

## ALIGNMENT VERSUS AGREEMENT

Delivery requires disciplined aligned action. This continuously builds our momentum toward our agreed Shared Vision. If a staff member wants to

move in a different direction, this becomes the focus for rich, respectful questioning, dialogue, and leadership action.

As one principal explained to me,

Alignment is so elusive. The journey is strewn with obstacles and mysteries. Each person has gotten to this place on a personal, long and winding road. This reality makes leading alignment like herding cats. Every life is different. How in the world do you get them to go in the same direction? Once you figure this out you have found the holy grail of alignment.

It is important here to distinguish between alignment and agreement. So often the things that divide us are so small. Once we have alignment to a Shared Vision, this clarifies disagreements around how we may get there. These disagreements are healthy. What is not healthy is people undermining the agreed Shared Vision to get their own way. Some staff in schools we have worked with find it difficult to accept a genuine Shared Vision when they have dominated staff in the past and had their own way.

What a process! I have to admit I was very skeptical (What! Two days and 80 odd people to come up with a VISION STATEMENT??). I thought that's what the executive did!!

However, I am now totally sold on the incredible process of reaching consensus with a large group of notoriously, ad nauseously, argument-oriented people (teachers). Getting such a diverse group with so many different agendas and axes to grind to be heading in the same direction is nothing short of miraculous.

Alignment is of benefit to all people associated with the school. It means that we can all plan what we will do, knowing the direction will not change. For example, we know of school development coaches who prepare in detail for an initiative only to find out at the last moment that priorities have changed and all their work has been wasted. Knowing that there is sureness of purpose is a great gift.

Any school leader should think carefully before embarking on a Shared Vision journey. It takes courage and commitment for a principal to trust their school community to create the Shared Vision together. In our Shared Vision process, the principal does not vote, as you will read below. They trust their community to deliver the vision that is right for this context.

**Never promise genuinely participative decision making if you are not willing to follow through.** Making such a promise of longed-for freedom for staff and then reneging on it leaves you much worse off than if you had done nothing.

A common challenge over time is turnover of staff. How does this affect a Shared Vision journey? Our experience is this:

- Schools that send their Shared Vision to applicants for positions have a strong start on alignment.
- Schools that run effective induction programs based around their Shared Vision, as lived in the school, build more alignment.
- Schools that listen to and respect what new staff and families bring have a base for checking alignment and enriching the journey with fresh insights.
- Many schools revisit their Shared Vision after three years. Some revisit annually. It depends on the progress on the Action Plan that emerges and on the turnover being experienced. These are contextual judgment calls.

As alignment to our Shared Vision emerges, there is a change of language and a change in the way people relate to each other.

## WHEN VOICES ARE HEARD THAT ARE USUALLY STILLED

Our belief in alignment came from our strong, long experiences as young men in competitive sport. Anyone who has been a member of a great team operating together at the highest levels, and achieving success together, will never forget that exquisite feeling, that way of being. It is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as “flow.” Many researchers tend to talk about this in a much more disembodied way. The feeling of powerful alignment is visceral and hard to put into words. You really “know it” when you are experiencing it!

John Kotter (1996) is clear about the power of Vision, as are many other researchers we respect deeply. Creating desired futures together is at the core of Senge’s (1990) *Fifth Discipline* and his current writings (e.g., Senge et al., 2005, 2010). Senge is committed to people continually expanding their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. “Inspire a shared vision” is the second of Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*. Envisioning the future and enlisting others are the two commitments embedded in this practice. They argue that “shared visions and values bind people together in collaborative pursuits” (p. 135).

Our lives have taught us that people want to participate in the formation of the vision. When people have engaged with it, struggled with it together, challenged it, edited it, and written it, the power to act is already inherently theirs. Most people, in schools we work with, want to “own it,”

not be “sold it.” Then they will fully commit, fully buy in. So, our work is posited on the fundamental belief that everyone should be involved in the creation of the Shared Vision. This is in stark contrast to the vision being bestowed from above and staff then being “empowered” to deliver it.

As a teacher at a school in Sweden shared with us,

Det finns en växande Vi-känsla på vår skola.

(There is an increasing feel of WE at our school.)

Our processes are intentionally designed to be open, transparent, and democratic. They create a Shared Vision that is openly shared. This works best in a school where trust levels are high and where people are listened to with respect. Such a culture is ripe for open dialogue and together creating a shared vision. But we have learned not to wait for this or to spend time trying to set this up. If this exists, that is a bonus.

The key is to get started and let the processes work on people. This taps into our current reality in a fresh way. This enables us to experience other ways of interacting and creating together. We learn about working productively together through our collective PPK and mental models—by actually doing it, not by talking about it. This is the well-known process of **acting your way into new ways of thinking rather than thinking your way into new ways of acting.**

As our colleague Sandra Russell (personal communication, 2015) expresses it,

a process that listens to the participants and observes, dwells, and draws on the present context is always modern and up-to-date.

Here is one teacher’s description of our process, after experiencing it for two days:

What I enjoy is the fact that consensus p\*\*\*\*s off people who dominate, and when voices are heard that are usually stilled.

—Secondary School Teacher, Christchurch, New Zealand

## INTRODUCTION TO SHARED VISIONING

What follows is a précis of our Shared Visioning Process. We have refined and refined this over the last twenty-five years, alongside teachers, school leaders, and school communities.

This is the first step to become a school that delivers. It is a **crystal clear picture of what you plan to deliver**. The process is normally spread over two days: the first day involves a process of deep respectful questioning, the Inquiry Probes Process. This draws the mental models and PPK from the Vision Creating Community. These form the first drafts of the Shared Vision. The second day involves writing the second draft of the Shared Vision. We can then identify the Core Values and the research themes: the areas that we must address to **get to where we want to be from where we are now**.

As mentioned earlier, this is not the only process for successfully creating the school you have always wanted. The process shared here is working in many school contexts across many countries. It also is working well inside business and elite sports contexts.

### Underlying Mental Models for Shared Visioning

- A Shared Vision provides a base for alignment of everyone in the school.
- To be a genuine Shared Vision, everyone must be involved in the creation of the Shared Vision, knowing that their voice and their beliefs have been heard and respected equally with those of others.
- People who have been present and involved in the creation of the Shared Vision are usually willing to commit to its achievement, since it reflects their shared beliefs and values.

## SHARED VISION CREATION PROCESS

Schools commonly start this process by committing two consecutive days to the eight steps of the first phase of the process. When this is not possible, many creative variations have been designed to complete the process in other time frames.

Here are the eight steps we follow in creating a Shared Vision. At the end of this list, we will discuss the steps in more detail:

1. Select the people who will be involved in the vision creation process.
2. Design a broad set of Inquiry Probes (key questions) each of which will tap the rich PPK of those who attend the vision creation day. **The probes should cover all of the key aspects in the life of your school.**
3. Select the best eight probes.
4. Put people into groups of six to eight people, each with a trained facilitator.