



GROWING COMPASSIONATE SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP: A Toolkit

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All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better.
- Emerson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide is the culmination of a two-year experiment in building leadership in the early childhood system designed and undertaken by Pippa Rowcliffe and Joanne Schroeder.

Throughout, we learned as we went, sharing and gaining insights from the participants in the project and adapting the approach as these insights emerged.

We envisioned that there was a deeper, more authentic, more collective, more aware approach to bring to the work of improving the life chances of children. At the end of this phase of the experiment, we haven't figured it all out, but we feel we are on the right track.

We have been inspired by our colleagues at the Human Early Learning Partnership and by the hundreds of individuals we have met working for change in communities across Canada. We are especially grateful for the teachings and inspiration of HELP's Aboriginal Steering Committee.

The initial spark for this work, though, comes from the mind and the heart of Clyde Hertzman. Clyde truly understood interconnectedness and the important role that the relationship between researcher and community plays in creating change. At the time of his passing, he was turning his attention to the science of complex systems as the next important avenue for HELP's work.

We hope that our work represents a portion of his envisioned path.

Joanne and Pippa





SECTION 1: WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Leadership

Leadership has a variety of etymological roots and meanings: to go forth, to travel, to cause to go with, to step across the threshold. We have drawn from these in our use of the word leadership. In the development of this Toolkit, we have assumed leadership as a process and way of being, rather than a role or position of power. We have based our work on the assumption that leaders exist at all levels of an organization, in communities and in every family. Creating systemic change requires that leaders at multiple levels go forth together.

Our Context

The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) is an interdisciplinary research network based at the University of British Columbia. HELP's unique partnership brings together many scientific viewpoints to address child development issues, with a focus of ensuring that research is applied and used to guide to community and policy action.

Childhood Vulnerability

For nearly two decades, HELP has been monitoring the development of children across B.C.. Using a questionnaire called the Early Development Instrument (EDI), kindergarten teachers in every community in B.C. provide data about the social/emotional, cognitive and physical development of the children in their class. Currently, HELP has collected data for nearly 300,000 individual children. These data are analyzed and reported for groups of children - populations that we report data for include schools, neighbourhoods, regions, and the province as a whole. Using EDI data and research about child development, we have been able to gain important perspective about how our children are doing developmentally and to see trends in their development over time. The data shine a critical light on a pressing social issue in B.C. and provide a catalyst for action.

Sadly, since 2004, we have continued to see, that our children are not doing as well as we would like and expect. In the latest round of province-wide data collection, one third of children are behind where we would want them to be at kindergarten entry in at least one aspect of their development. Many children are behind in two, three or more aspects of their development. This level of vulnerability has been relatively consistent for many years and in fact, has been rising over time. Clearly if we do nothing different, if we do not mount a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of children and families, we can anticipate these kinds of vulnerability levels to continue.

How is it that the path to healthy development for children in B.C. seems to have become increasingly broken for so many? Increases in the incidence of child and youth mental health concerns, continuing high rates of child and family poverty, and the prevalence of challenging behaviours across settings are just some of the worrying social trends that also illustrate this issue. They are another lens onto the kind of childhood vulnerability that we see in the EDI data.

Making meaning of data - Shining a light on the issue

Since its inception, HELP has known that improving outcomes for children requires a partnership between researchers, policy makers and community members. HELP staff and faculty, and ourselves as core members of the HELP team, have worked tirelessly to make the research accessible to all, and to inform efforts to build effective policy and practice. Underlying the work of HELP has been a belief that “shining a light” on how our children are doing would act as a catalyst for change.

In communities across B.C., EDI data have acted as catalyst for inter-sectoral action - HELP can point to over 1,000 initiatives and plans that have been based on EDI data and research. A province-wide network of hundreds of local early and middle childhood multi- agency coalitions, community service providers, researchers and policy makers have endeavoured to create more integrated approaches to supporting children and families. These efforts have created pockets of significant impact yet have not been able to sustain or spread that impact. Over two decades of doing this work, we must acknowledge that overall children are doing less well than when we started. It is clear that, as a society, we have not mounted the coherent and consistent response to childhood vulnerability that would lead to improved outcomes for children.

Systemic issues underlying childhood vulnerability

On reflection, we can identify some systemic limitations to the approach thus far:

- The community-based coalitions have been structured to bring together existing siloed systems in collaboration, rather than intending to blur the lines between those organizations and create a truly integrated, comprehensive system;
- The participation of policy makers and government service providers has been limited with many of them pulled to the demands of their individual organizations rather than being able to consider the whole;
- Child serving ministries are not structured for collective work to be effective, but rather hold siloed mandates and objectives;
- Compounding these structural challenges, has been a universal lack of understanding and acknowledgement of, or attention to, the complex behaviour of child serving systems; and
- There has been an absence of individuals with the personal leadership capacity to negotiate this labyrinth.

The impetus for the Compassionate Systems Leadership approach emerged from a recognition that if we hope to improve children’s development outcomes, we need to move towards the creation of a truly shared, or integrated system for children from conception to school leaving. We envision a system that is designed around the development of children, and that can be responsive to their changing needs.

The approach must be **multi-level**, including provincial, regional and local actors. It must be **multi-institutional**, with a key focus on health, education and child development systems. It must be **multi-disciplinary**, harnessing the expertise of educators, physicians, social workers, and public health among others. It must **recognize the diversity of children, families and communities** we aim to support. Most importantly, it must **build the capacity of leaders at every level** to work within and between systems.

We developed the Compassionate Systems Leadership approach as a mechanism to jump start our vision. While we are aware that effective system-wide leadership is not the only ingredient necessary for systemic change for children, we believe that it is the essential first step.

Why Compassionate Systems Leadership?

The journey for developing this approach has its roots in so many of the experiences of our careers. Each of us has deep experience in community engagement, collaborative practice, child development and knowledge translation. We have known for many years that real progress emerges from the magical soup created when knowledge and structure combine with the heart-led efforts of **people** committed to change. The human component of systemic change has historically been poorly understood yet recognized as indispensable.

We began the development of this model drawing heavily on two bodies of work that resonated with our emerging ideas.

Firstly, the work of Peter Senge primarily as articulated in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*. In this hallmark publication, Senge talks about the five disciplines of effective learning organizations: Shared Vision, Mental Models, Personal Mastery, Team Learning and Systems Thinking. This framework encompasses an integration of systems thinking and intra and interpersonal capacity and while it was originally built from a business management perspective, it is highly relevant for any organizational system. We have also been fortunate to have participated with Peter Senge and his colleagues, Mette Boell and Robert Hanig, in their Systems Leadership Institute. This training program was instrumental in progressing our vision and providing us with specific tools to include with the model. We have continued to use many of these tools and concepts within our approach and are deeply indebted to particularly Peter and Mette for their generous support and mentorship.

Secondly, we drew from the literature on and experience of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is a process by which those involved learn to develop a positive sense of self, manage emotions, set and achieve goals, make responsible decisions, act from a place of empathy and maintain respectful relationships. These are the skills that we hope for our children and that we need as system leaders. The principles of SEL are completely aligned with the tenets of learning organizations and systems thinking. HELP's Director, Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl is a renowned expert in the area of SEL research, particularly in relation to the identification of the processes and mechanisms that foster positive human qualities such as empathy, altruism, and resilience. We are very grateful for Kim too for her generous guidance and her connecting us to so many resources and wise individuals that have contributed to this work.

As you will see, we have used the work of many individuals in creating the curriculum thus far. Two others whose work has been highly influential are Otto Scharmer and Robert Fritz. Otto Scharmer's ideas of learning from an emerging future with an open mind, open heart, and open will increasingly resonates with us as we delve deeper into the layers of his thinking. Robert Fritz' ideas on using structural tension to create paths for change have guided participants in the development of their next steps. (specific works we have drawn on throughout the project are referenced in Appendix 2).

Compassion as a Foundation

The integration of compassion practice as the foundation of the model only really emerged after we got started. We talked about compassion as a core component of the training right from the beginning but faltered initially in understanding how we would translate that into specific tools and practices across the learning domains. Pippa's decision to undertake the Cultivating Compassion Training at the Compassion Institute/Stanford University provided the body of knowledge and local expertise to advance our approach. As she completes this training, our capacity to apply compassion as a taught skill will deepen.

Compassion a mental state endowed with a sense of concern for the suffering of others and aspiration to see that suffering relieved."

— Thupten Jinpa

Compassion is the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's, or your own, suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion implies an openness to see our own and others discomfort or suffering. It acknowledges our essential sameness: our common humanity. Compassion implies the capacity to empathize deeply with this suffering, to realize that it is completely the same in nature to our own or loved-ones suffering: that our experiences as humans are common. And compassion then goes beyond empathy though to a willingness and commitment to act in some way to alleviate our own and others suffering. These components mirror the systems leadership emphasis on intra and interpersonal awareness and skills. From a place of compassion for ourselves and others, our actions influence not only ourselves and the individuals we work directly with, but also the entire system.

Compassionate systems leadership approaches are growing across the education, health care, environmental and business sectors. There is a deepening recognition that to address current challenges we must have the capacity to cognitively and emotionally understand the interconnectedness of all things, to reflect on our role as actors within the system and respond from a place of compassion.

SECTION 2: THE PILOT PROJECT

The development of our initial concept took place over about two years. Both of the authors continued with our “day jobs” while carving out bits of time for this project. We delved into the literature, wrote and rewrote, went on retreats to deepen our ideas, and reflected alone and together.

Once we had the initial model developed, we wanted to trial the approach in the real world. We approached the Max Bell Foundation with the idea and thankfully, they supported us through providing a Fellowship for Joanne to dedicate some of her time to fine tuning the model and trying it out within three B.C. communities. Throughout, Pippa was supported by HELP to co-lead/co-facilitate the project.

Our first step was to strike a multi-disciplinary advisory committee (*See Appendix 1 for the names of our Advisory Committee members*) to give feedback on the project materials as they were developed and to support the promotion of the project across organizations. We also met with HELP’s Aboriginal Steering Committee to receive their input to the project. We recognize that many of the tools we were adapting were consistent with and borrowing from Indigenous ways of knowing and being: these are inherently systemic. The contribution of the Aboriginal Steering Committee members, not only currently, but over the many formative years, has been invaluable.

The first year of the Max Bell work centred on building a curriculum and promoting awareness of the project. Again, this involved a series of retreats, research and writing, and lots of presentations. Following this, we developed a Community Call for Proposals and there was a significant interest from communities across the province. We chose the communities of Surrey, Gold River and Prince George. Our final selection was based on our desire to have a range of community types (rural, urban, Indigenous, multicultural) and on the demonstrated commitment of the applicant communities to the process. The community groups were made up of 6 to 10 representatives from a variety of child serving organizations – school districts, health care, First Nations, non-profits, universities, libraries and municipalities. The intensive model involved a considerable commitment, with three two-day training sessions in community, as well as follow up coaching calls for each community group.

Simultaneously, we worked with the Vancouver Early Years Partnership in the creation of a Community of Practice where the tools were trialed, but within a less intensive setting. The Community of Practice, a group of fifteen child development professionals, participated in five half day sessions.

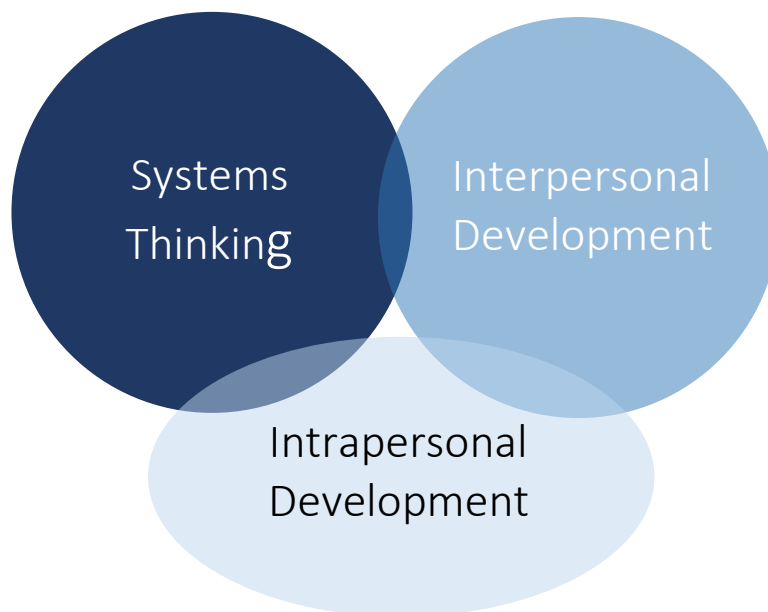
We also knew that, as we embarked on the training, we were all learners. This was an experiment and we needed to be prepared to adapt as we discovered what was working, and what was not. It was also essential for us to be continuously deepening our personal practice of Compassionate Systems Leadership as we went. We continued to read, work together on retreat, and take informal training.

Weaving the Story

Three key principles guided the training process that we developed and these principles applied equally to participants and to us as trainers:

- Inner change creates outer change. The first step in building leadership capacity is to increase awareness of yourself: your values, biases and ways of being.
- Learning is continuous. Skill and knowledge acquisition are built into a cycle of practice, reflection and adaptation.
- Collectively more impact can be realized when connected individuals learn and act together. Often individuals attend learning and development sessions on their own and then return to their context to introduce the new ideas. Given the tendency for systems to continue existing patterns, this can be challenging for a person that is not working collectively.

The Compassionate Systems Leadership framework we evolved consisted of three interconnected domains of learning:



The remainder of this guide will provide insight into the learning tools and approaches that we used in each of these domains of learning.

It is the intention of this guide that the majority of the tools will be able, to some extent, to stand alone. We believe that the use of any of these tools will strengthen your leadership capacity. We do not think that any user must be practiced in all of them before trying them out. Like we did, we encourage anyone interested to experiment with the tools and/or practices that resonate with you and are appropriate to your context. It is never a bad idea to spend more time in self-reflection, to listen more carefully to colleagues, or to step back and take notice of the interconnectedness of the system in which you have a role.

We do however, recommend, a specific approach to the use of the tools if you are intending to nurture a holistic approach to building compassionate systems leadership in a consistent and planful way. Our methodology in delivering the training as a whole package was to focus initially on building intrapersonal capacity, followed by more intensive use of interpersonal tools, and then of systems thinking tools. This recognized the profound importance of “inner change” as a pre-requisite for the other two domains of learning.

After this initial introduction sequence, we moved through the domains in an interconnected fashion, tailoring what we did to the energy and needs of the specific group. Most of the practices and tools we introduced and used more than once, knowing that as learning emerged in each domain understanding in other areas would also be enhanced.

Intrapersonal Development - Personal Mastery

Establishing a grounding and commitment in the personal domain is critical, in our minds, to the effectiveness of the process. One of the things that makes this approach different is the requirement to bring yourself, your humanness, fully to the process. Most of us are not practiced at emerging our principles, our values, or the passion that brings us to the work. Regrettably, many of us are trained to do just the opposite; to have a professional self and a personal self and to not mix the two. Often being “human” in the workplace is frowned upon as being weak, or unprofessional. It is the premise of this work that when we maximize our humanness, when the work we do aligns with our values and vision, and when we show up with care and compassion, the potential for impact is also maximized. As such, a foundation of self-awareness, compassion, mindful practices, and ongoing self-reflection must be laid and continually tended to.

Building Interpersonal Capacity

Moving next to the interpersonal domain continues to build the capacity for awareness, of seeing and understanding interactions and relationships in the present. It is intended that at the early stages of the training, participants are engaged fully with their senses – hearing, sight, intuition – and are not relying on “what they know” to determine their actions. The training had a strong focus on intentional listening, the importance of clear and respectful communication, and the power of generative conversations.

The “check-in” is a specific tool that we will mention in more detail later. It deserves special emphasis here as it used across all of the learning domains as a method for emerging into awareness new learnings, personal challenges and strengths, or particular questions. The importance for creating the time and space for check ins cannot be overemphasized. With check-ins participants have time for self reflection, both quietly and through writing, and then have an opportunity to share with their colleagues, potentially emerging a place of shared learning as they go forward.

Systems Thinking Approaches

The systems thinking tools are an essential component of the training but introducing them too early might suggest that there is a cognitive-only solution to the challenges we face. Opening our minds to the complexity of the issues is an essential step but one that must build on intra- and interpersonal capacity, as a foundation. The goal for us was to find a balanced interplay between the heart and the mind in learning.

In Summary

The interconnectedness of the learning is complex, and each new topic, skill or tool requires time for reflection on how it contributes to the whole.

We very specifically designed this approach as a collective learning process. Certainly, there is benefit for individuals to use these tools within their context. However, the possibility of realizing impact increases exponentially when people are working together on the same challenges. The interpersonal tools and practices are purposeful in incrementally building this collective capacity.

We were struck throughout the process as to how each group was so different – some going very deep in the personal domain, while others wanted to spend more time on the systems work. It was essential that as trainers we were alert to these different rhythms and were able to adapt the agenda based on what we observed. It was also critical that we reflected alone and together after each session to determine our path for the next day.

SECTION 3: TOOLS AND PRACTICES

Drawing on Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being

We acknowledge that many of our ideas for the Compassionate Systems Leadership approach we have learned from our Indigenous colleagues. Indigenous cultures, in our experience, embody the concept of compassionate systems through an interconnectedness of people, the earth, and the Great Spirit. We have so much to learn from the traditions of our First Peoples.

We intend that this work contribute to a path towards Reconciliation and a brighter future for all children and grandchildren.

Each of our sessions begins with an acknowledgement of the traditional territory of the local First Nations and, as they are known to us, we have endeavoured to follow local protocols as guests in that territory.

Setting the Stage: Creating a safe and positive learning environment

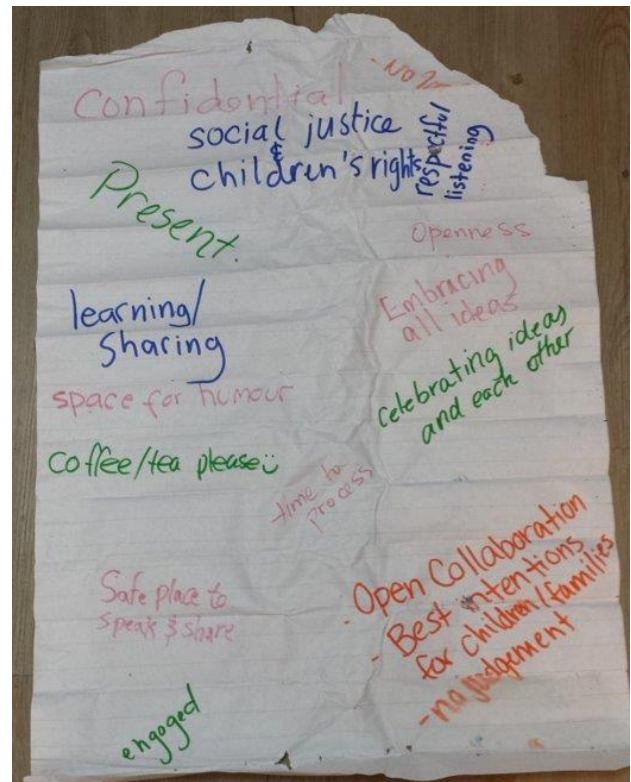
In the initial session of each of the trainings, time is spent in developing key components of the shared culture for the time together.

The group is asked to reflect on the qualities of the working environment they aspire to: those qualities that they value, and feel are necessary for effective work to take place. Each person reflects alone and then shares their ideas with the larger group. We post this depiction of culture throughout the training as a reminder to participants.

The shared environment influences the depth of work that will emerge. Creating a space that is safe and where participants feel trust and confidence allows the group to negotiate some difficult and potentially conflictual dialogues within that space.

As with all aspects of the training the culture is not stagnant, but really a continuous cycle that influences not only the current work but implies how people may continue to work together in the future.

Much of this work is deeply personal and for many participants, the practices are new and discomfoting. As such, the decision about how and how much to participate must lie with each



Source: VEYP Community of Practice

individual. There is no expectation in the training that individuals take part in all activities. Participation is an invitation only, not a requirement. All information written in journals is solely for the purpose of the writer who can choose to share as much or as little as they like.

There is an expectation of participants that they attend all sessions; develop a practice of self-reflection; practice the tools and strategies in their context; and connect with colleagues to reflect together on the training process and the efficacy of the tools and strategies.

Intrapersonal Tools and Practices

“Real change starts with recognizing that we are part of the systems we seek to change. The fear and distrust we seek to remedy also exist within us—as do the anger, sorrow, doubt, and frustration. Our actions will not become more effective until we shift the nature of the awareness and thinking behind our actions.”

—The Dawn of Systems Leadership

The initial components of the CSL training arise from the premise that “inner change, creates outer change”. The tools are designed to build social-emotional competencies or what Daniel Goleman termed emotional intelligence. The intent is for participants to increase self-awareness, to understand their personal journey, to manage emotions, to envision and implement personal goals, to act from a place of compassion, and to embed mindfulness practice into their daily lives.



SETTLING AND INTENTION SETTING

Following the acknowledgement of Indigenous territory, each session begins with a breath-focused settling and intention setting exercise.

This is a brief (3 - 5 minute) guided meditation. There are a variety of scripts that can be used for this exercise. Here is one example:

“Close your eyes and place your hands comfortably in your lap. Sit up straight. Imagine a string is tugging the top of your head. Feel your self firmly sitting in the chair and your feet firmly on the ground.

Begin by taking three deep, slow, conscious breaths. Follow your breath to the end of the inhale, notice the small pause and then follow it all the way to the end of the exhale. Now just turn to the natural rhythm of the breath. Allow the breath to be your anchor, your resting place. (Here pause for a minute of silence).

*Now think about your intentions for our time together today.
(In order, speak each of these questions and give time after each one for silent consideration)
What would you like to leave with today?
What would you like to let go of? Worries, recurring, planning, thoughts.....
What values you want to express in your interactions today?*

(After each question has been asked and considered)

Now return to the breath. (Pause here)

When you are ready come back to the room in your own time.

Now take out your journals and write about the intentions you set for the day.

As noted, there are many ways to undertake this exercise. The key is to provide a mechanism for all to arrive into the session with awareness and intention.



MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Mindfulness has been growing in popularity in western cultures over the last couple of decades although its roots are in Buddhist traditions more than 2500 years old. Increasingly we are learning the benefits of mindful practices to our overall sense of well-being.

We drew initially on the work of Jon Kabat-Zin as an introduction to mindfulness. Kabat-Zin defines mindfulness as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, as if your life depended on it”. He reminds us that mindfulness is not a technique, but rather a way of being.

There are though many techniques to cultivate mindfulness that we introduce as part of the training. Like many aspects of the training, the efficacy of these practices hinges on the participants’ commitment to adopting and refining the practices in their daily lives.

Every Day Mindful Practices

- *Mindful living:* Participants are encouraged to identify daily habits such as hand washing, eating, or dressing, which they could intentionally increase focus and awareness as a way of enhancing mindfulness.
- *Mindful Communication:* Building awareness as both a listener and a speaker are practices to which considerable time is dedicated in the training. We will look at this in more detail as part of the Interpersonal Tools.
- *Building a practice of Gratitude:* The scientific benefits of practicing gratitude are well documented. In one experimental comparison, those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Within the training we typically close the day with a gratitude circle and we use a gratitude jar where participants can note their appreciations as they occur. Participants are encouraged to integrate gratitude into their mindful practices, either through journaling, meditation or sharing gratitude with others.
- *Beginner’s Mind:* “If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.” (Shunryu Suzuki). To cultivate Beginner’s Mind, participants are encouraged to approach every situation as if they have never experienced it before and they have no knowledge or expectation of what the experience will bring. This can be particularly impactful in those experiences that

participants have had multiple times and typically approach almost on automatic pilot – like a regular commute or a monthly staff meeting. With Beginner’s Mind, many new things can be learned and experienced in these daily events.

Mindfulness Meditation

We introduce a basic technique for breathing that participants can use throughout the day to slow down and focus, calm anxiety or collect their thoughts before a difficult conversation. Breathing is an integral part of the meditation practices in the training as well as in settling and intention setting. We also refer participants to a range of mindfulness resources with the encouragement that they develop a practice that works for them



COMPASSION PRACTICE

We introduce through the training sessions, the value of compassion meditation as a route to building personal and interpersonal awareness, and interacting more effectively with others. There is increasing research evidence about the benefits of compassion cultivation practice when used regularly. Participants are strongly encouraged to adopt a regular practice: one that fits their context. The specifics of this practice need to be determined by the individual based on their preferences.

Within the course, we use compassion meditations to promote settling, enhance the clarity of participants, and encourage greater empathy for self, for others and for the wider community. The scripts for these are still in development and are adjusted for each session based on the specific content and intent.



REFLECTION THROUGH JOURNALING

At the start of the training, each participant is given a journal. These are used regularly throughout the training. Many of the exercises involve a time of quiet self-reflection followed by a time to process the experience through writing. The participant’s journal is completely private and its contents are only shared by the participant as he or she chooses.

We also recommend that participants adopt a regular journaling practice. The inclination to journal is quite personal. Many participants report that journaling can seem more like a chore than other types of self-reflection. We provide a variety of journaling techniques with the intent that particular techniques may be more appealing to participants.

- *Free Writing:* just start writing. One technique called “morning pages” involves writing whatever comes to your mind, a stream of consciousness, to fill three pages each morning.
- *Daily Intention:* write a few words on how you want to be today. Not goal setting, but emerging how you intend to present to yourself and others that day.
- *Dialogue:* write a dialogue between two parts of yourself or yourself and someone else. One technique of this evokes a “wise guide”, a real or imagined personality who you think can offer guidance on the questions you are considering.

- *List Making*: write lists about anything that emerges for you. What I Want, What I Fear, What I Appreciate, What Annoys Me are some examples.
- *Perspective Taking*: write entirely from another’s perspective. This technique can be particularly effective if you write from the perspective of a person you have difficulty with.
- *Unsent Letter*: write a letter to someone that you never intend to send, but explores any unresolved or unspoken matters between you and that person.
- *Captured Moment*: just write what you observe right in front of you. Use lots of detail to capture all aspects of the moment.



PERSONAL JOURNEY

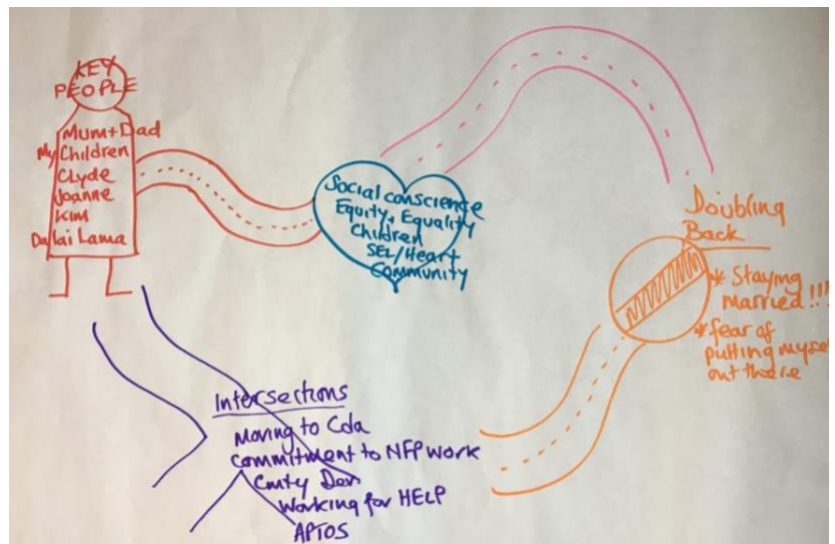
Each participant begins the training by depicting the personal journey that has brought them to this point in their life and career. The rationale for this exercise is to emphasize that no one comes to this work an empty vessel. We all bring our experiences, our passions, our dreams, our values and our assumptions. Bringing these into awareness provides a deeper understanding to our roles and influence as actors in the broader system.

This is a simple exercise: participants are asked to depict the answer to the following questions:

- What key people, places and events have led you to today?
- What values and beliefs have underpinned your journey? Have they shifted over time?
- Were there intersection points where you made important choices?
- Did you ever double back or lose your way?

The depiction of the journey can be done in many ways. Some participants choose to simply write the answers, others to make small diagrams and others to produce large and colorful drawings. Any of these is appropriate.

At the completion of the journey exercise participants are asked to share with the larger group. As the content may be quite personal, participants are free to share as much or as little as they are comfortable with. With one group the sharing of personal journeys took much of the day and was an important foundation in their being able to deeply engage with one another throughout the training process. Other groups were much shorter in their presentation. It can also be effective to have participants share in dyads or triads, particularly with larger groups.



Source: P. Rowcliffe



PERSONAL VISION

Having a clear personal vision for your life supports us to act in alignment with that vision. Too often, the role of personal aspiration in career choices is underestimated. There is a disconnect between personal and professional vision, negating the potential to wholly engage with work that is personally important. Unearthing a personal vision for all aspects of our lives and aligning that vision to the work that we do, enables us to more fully leverage the power of our passion and commitment and to monitor whether our actions remain aligned to our vision as we progress.

Our visions are not something that needs to be created—they already exist within us. We just need to get in touch with them. Our vision is the big picture of our desired outcomes. It's an internal representation of what is most important to us; it's exciting, inspiring, compelling, and filled with positive emotions.

The work we did in respect to visioning, both personal and collective, drew primarily from the work of Robert Fritz on structural, or creative, tension.

"I call the relationship between the vision and current reality structural tension. During the creative process, you have an eye on where you want to go, and you also have an eye on where you currently are."

— Robert Fritz

Often when we undertake visioning as an individual or group, we set our sights high. It is not uncommon to develop visions, like "live joyfully", that have no possible path or structure that links the vision to the current reality. That is why so often personal aspirations or visions are not obtained. They are not grounded. Fritz proposes that the space between the reality and vision creates a tension that propels you to act. When we achieve our initial aims, setting further intentions recreates the tension for continual progress.



The personal visioning exercise is done in three stages:

STEP 1: Guided Visualization: we lead participants through a guided visualization during which they reflect on a variety of aspects of their life – career, personal development, relationships, environment and physical health. The visualization can be adapted to just focus on one or on any number of these areas.

Each participant gets into a calm and alert state using a breath focused meditation. Participants are asked to think, not about what they want to achieve, but rather what their life will be like in their vision. They are invited to use all of their senses in the visualization process (what will things smell, feel and sound like). We guide them through the visualization with specific questions in each area. Here is a sample script with questions for each area. This script can be modified to fit the context of any facilitated session. Typically visualizations require 15 – 20 minutes. When each of the areas has been considered, we prompt participants to return to the breath and then slowly return to the room.

- *Career:*
I want you to think about your ideal job. Where are you working? What are you doing? Is it the same job you are doing now or something different? Is this your own business or do you work in an organization? Who are the people you work with? Are you spending time with children and families? Do you work mostly in an office? How long is your work day? How do you get to work – walk, ride your bike? What is your compensation?
- *Personal Development:*
Now let's think about your own development. Is there any specific education or training you are taking? Do you have a daily reflective or meditative practice? Do you have any personal goals like running a marathon, writing a book or playing a musical instrument? Do you see yourself traveling? Where are you going?
- *Relationships:*
Now let's turn to how you envision your relationships. What is your relationship like with your family – your partner – your children and grandchildren – your parents and siblings? Who are your friends? What do you spend time doing with your friends and family? How are you supported in these relationships? Are you in love?
- *Environment:*
What kind of home or location do you live in? Be specific in picturing your home environment. Is it in the city or the country? A condo or a large home? What do you see when you go through your front door? What do you see when you look out the window? Try to picture each room in your home. What kind of car or vehicle do you drive? Do you have more than one vehicle? Maybe a boat or RV?
- *Physical Health:*
Envision your ideal body. Do you exercise regularly? What sorts of exercise do you do? What is your diet like? How are you sleeping? Do you have any health challenges?

STEP 2: Writing Your Vision and Your Current Reality: Following the visualization, we ask participants to take out their journal and write down in as much detail as possible what they visualized in each aspect of their life. Following this we invite them to reflect, again in specific detail, on their current reality in respect to each part of their vision. At this stage in the training, time is not taken to begin to plan or develop the structures needed to progress towards vision. This is simply a mechanism to create the state of structural tension that is returned to at a later stage of the training.

STEP 3: Dyad Sharing: The final stage of the personal visioning exercise is to share whatever seems appropriate with another member of the group. Each participant relates the work that they have done and more generally how they experienced the visioning exercise. The other member of the dyad listens without judgement or feedback. As always, participants share only as much as they are comfortable with.

Interpersonal Tools and Practices

Intrapersonal capacity builds into interpersonal capacity: the tools and practices we use to enhance interpersonal learning rely heavily on an increased capacity to know yourself, to understand your values and assumptions and to be able to bring self awareness and focus to all your interactions. Like many of the intrapersonal tools, the method of delivery of these techniques also involves practice followed by self-reflection and dialogue.

Building the Community

Much of the knowledge and intention we have brought to the development of this training is based on the experiences that we have had in community development and engagement over several decades. Fundamentally we believe that learning and subsequent action is enhanced when there is a true sense of community among participants. Clear and connected relationships are essential to maximizing the process. Really, it's about creating an integrated system of learners that through collective passion and commitment can create the most impact. Many of the tools in this section are designed both to increase the interpersonal capacity of the individual and to build the conditions for the emergence of the learning community.



THE DAILY CHECK-IN

Following the settling and intention setting activity, each day begins with a check-in for all participants. This is an opportunity for participants to personally connect with themselves and with each other, to share how they are, and to reflect on their experience of the training process so far. The discussion can be broad ranging and typically does not require the facilitator to provide much structure. Basically, participants are asked to share how they are feeling today and any specific reflections they have on the learning of the day before.

Ideally, the check-in is done in groups of three or four. These smaller groups provide a level of safety and comfort that promotes sharing. It is recommended that the small groups are rotated daily to ensure that each participant has an opportunity to connect with all members of the group.

Each participant is given a turn to check-in. The other members of the group are asked to simply listen to the speaker without judgement or comment. When each participant has checked in, all can engage in a shared discussion with the time remaining. The small groups are given about 15 minutes total. Following the small group time, all reconvene and each group is asked to share any themes or salient points from their discussion.

As noted above, a similar check-in process can be used throughout the training and is particularly valuable in allowing participants to process new learnings or experiences. The structure for these is

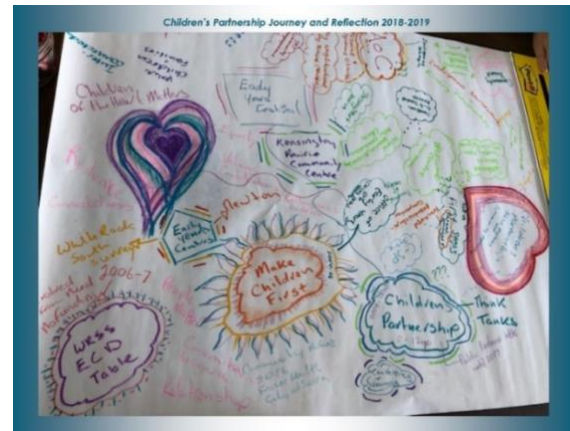
simply: quiet time for self-reflection (either through meditation or journaling) followed by a time to share with a partner or small group.

Check-Ins are an essential part of the training as they provide the space for personal and shared reflection that contributes to the continuous cycle of learning and adaptation for participants. We would recommend that the time for check-ins be carefully protected and used as a core component of the team development and learning process.

SHARED JOURNEY

Like the personal journey exercise, the shared journey tool provides a mechanism for those who have worked together previously to illustrate and acknowledge the path that has led them to this point in their collaborative work and to gather some of the key learnings from that path. The questions used to elicit the aspects of the shared journey are very similar to those used in the personal journey exercise.

- Where and when did your shared journey start?
- What values and beliefs have underpinned your journey? Have they shifted over time?
- When and where did paths converge?
- Did you ever double back or lose your way?



Source: Community of Surrey

This is most effectively done by having the whole group gather around a large flip chart and collectively depict the journey. Once completed, the entire group presents the journey to the facilitators.

SHARED ASPIRATION

Again like the personal visioning exercise, we conduct a process of building shared aspiration/or vision amongst the collective. This aspiration is then used at the end of the course to guide collective planning. Our premise in developing shared aspiration is that it must be built on the personal aspirations of the group. Too often, we engage in processes that force participants to create one vision for all. Necessarily this vision is so high level it becomes meaningless. Our approach is built on the idea that integrating personal aspirations enriches the collective vision with passion and diversity.

The first step is a guided visualization towards each individual's aspiration as it relates to the intended impact of the change efforts. Participants begin by closing their eyes and envisioning how they would like things to be for children and families in their context.

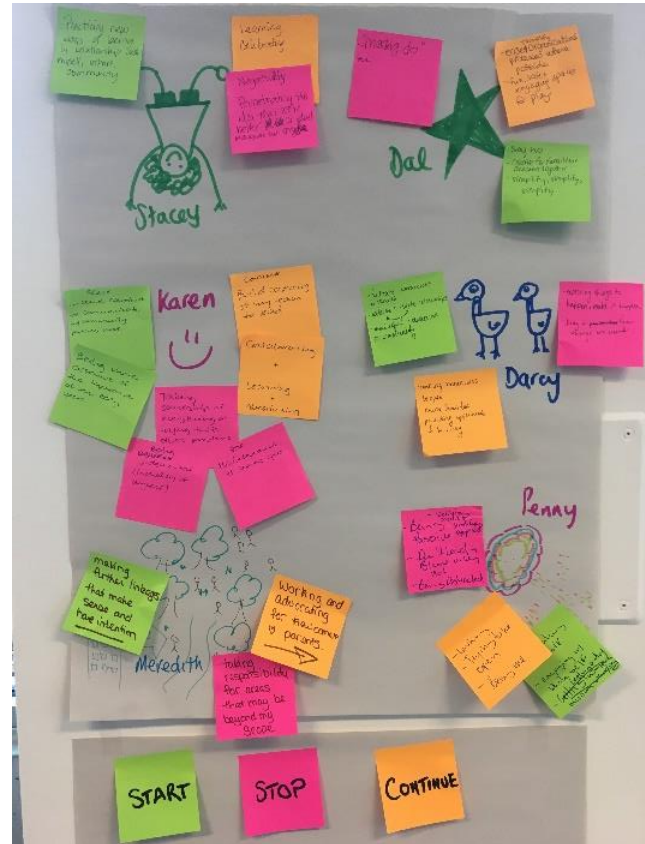
Then they are guided through each of the following questions:

- What are you doing within the system you visualize?
- Who are you working with?
- What are your colleagues doing?
- What are your relationships like? How often do you see other people and in what context?
- What do you discuss?
- What are you doing the same as now and what are you doing differently? What have you stopped doing?

Following the visualization, each person takes time with their journal to write and reflect on the process. We then have people get into groups of two or three to share the key aspects of their aspiration.

Next participants are asked to record on different colored stickies things that they are doing – what they have continued to do, what they have stopped doing and what they have started doing. These stickies are placed together on a large flip chart and each person shares with the entire group.

Through the sharing common themes emerge and the shared aspiration begins to take shape. Time is not taken at this point to consider structures to progress towards this aspiration. This is done during the planning session of the training.



Source: Community of Surrey



MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

— Shaw

There are many reasons that our communication can be ineffective. As you will see below in the section on the Ladder of Inference, we often hear what we expect to hear rather than what is actually being said, leading us to jump to conclusions and reinforce old biases. Often our minds are busy listening to our own internal chatter or planning what we want to say rather than listening to another. Or we may just be too busy to slow down long enough to actually listen. We use mindful communication as an introductory tool to mitigate these challenges.

Mindful communication occurs when we are present in the interaction. It requires both the speaker and the listener to slow down and to be intentional in their actions and words. It is non-judgemental and has the potential to increase connection between those communicating.

We introduce the simple exercise below on the first day of the training. We then return to it repeatedly as a mechanism for subsequent dialogues. In the initial exercise each member of the dyad is given two minutes to relate any experience that was impactful for them in the last few days. They then switch roles. Following the exercise, we do a debrief of the experience of each of the roles with the whole group.

SPEAKER

- Focus your attention
- Pause to think about what you want to say
- Describe your experience
- Speak directly and simply, slow down, pay attention to your body
- *When you are done, thank the other person for listening*

LISTENER

- Focus your attention
- Don't process what the other person is saying or about what you are going to say next. Listen to the content, how they are speaking, their tone, the emotional content, the energy behind what they are saying and their body language
- Listen with an open, non judgemental heart
- *When they have finished speaking, briefly thank them for sharing, without comment or judgment*

Generative Conversations

While the technique for mindful communication described above increases the awareness, understanding and connectivity between the dyad, there is a recognition that more movement and change can be realized when people engage in generative conversations. Generative conversations are conversations that generate shared meaning and lead to action. They involve an authentic exchange of sharing and inquiry, leading to the emergence of new knowledge or understanding that could not have been created individually.

We explored a couple of methods to deepen communication and to build skill for generative conversations. It was our experience, however, that we only scratched the surface of this area. Supporting the development of honest emotional expression, trust, empathy and collective commitment is a complex practice that requires more time than we spent in this training. There were two methods, however, that we would recommend as worthy of further study and practice.

Non-Violent Communication

Non-Violent Communication was developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. According to The Center for Non-Violent Communication, NVC is "based on the principles of nonviolence — the natural state of compassion when no violence is present in the heart. NVC begins by assuming that we are all compassionate by nature and that violent strategies — whether verbal or physical — are learned behaviors taught and supported by the prevailing culture. NVC also assumes that we all share the same, basic human needs, and that all actions are a strategy to meet one or more of these needs. People who practice NVC have found greater authenticity in their communication, Increased understanding, deepening connection and conflict resolution."

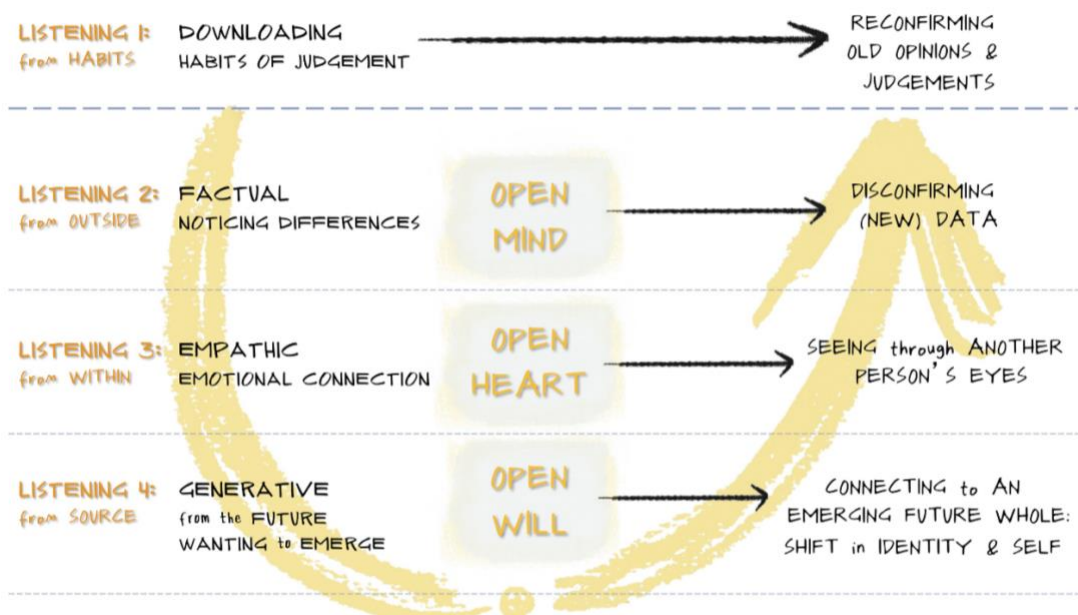
The practice of non-violent communication involves participants cycling through a sequence of interactions encouraging them to express their observations, feelings, needs and requests.



Source: Marshall B. Rosenberg, Center for Non-Violent Communication

Levels of Listening

The levels of listening is one tool from Otto Scharmer's work outlined in "Theory U". Theory U is an approach that focuses on personal leadership and innovation as a path for change. We drew on this work extensively in many aspects of the course. The levels of listening tool is a valuable framework for conceptualizing how you can progress to more generative conversations.



Source: Presencing Institute, Otto Scharmer

Level 1: Downloading. At this level, the individual is only listening for “what they want to hear”, based on old habits. They are selecting data based on their experience and assumptions and filtering information to reconfirm old opinions and ideas.

Level 2: Factual. At this level, the individual is able to open their mind, truly listen and accept information that may not align with their existing experiences and assumptions. When listening at this level, the individual can disconfirm data and accept new ideas.

Level 3: Empathic. At this level, the individual is able to create an empathic connection and see through another’s eyes. This is sometimes referred to as perspective taking.

Level 4: Generative. It is at this level, that generative conversations emerge. Individuals are able to “listen together”, to hear new possibilities and emerge ideas for collective action.

As we explored different frameworks to understand and build capacity in effective listening, we came to realize the overlap among them. Common is the need to suspend judgement, to enter conversations with an open mind and heart and to speak in an intentional, authentic manner. Straightforward, yet we have typically developed habits and processes that make simple communication quite difficult.

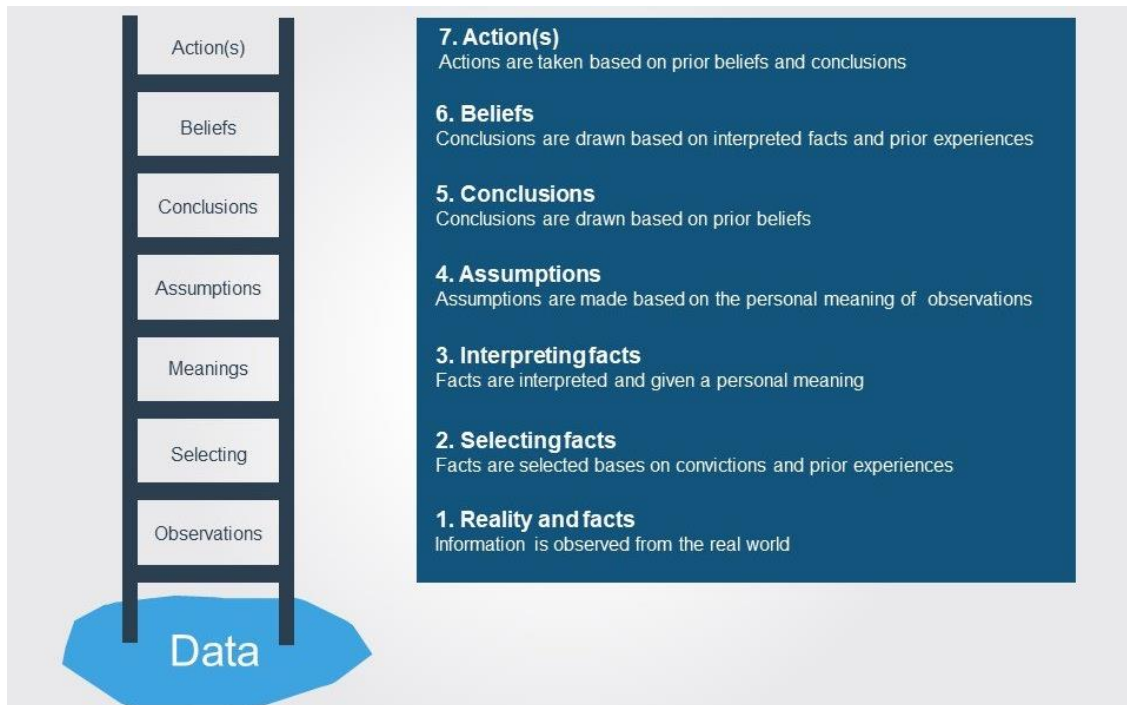


THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

The Ladder of Inference, first developed by Chris Argyris, is a model for understanding how we can often jump to conclusions based not on the facts or what we have observed, but rather based on our own values and assumptions through which we filter the reality. It is a useful tool to help us all understand how quickly we jump to conclusions and interpret the world around us based on our biases and history of experience. Going “up the ladder” happens very quickly in our head and we are typically unaware of the escalating processes that may be leading us to an incorrect conclusion and subsequent action based on that conclusion.

The concept of the ladder helps us to slow down, pay attention to our thought process and the emotions evoked by certain experiences. It also trains us in understanding that by slowing down, we can see things more clearly and respond in more rationale and balanced ways.

In our experience, the Ladder of Inference resonates with most people and it was felt by our participants to be one of the most helpful tools we worked together on.



Source: Developed from toolshero.com

Unpacking each rung of the ladder allows us to slow down, notice what may be happening and disrupt the sequence. It is helpful to ask questions, particularly in more challenging or stressful interactions, to check on “your ladder”. Some examples of questions are:

- Am I drawing the right conclusion?
- Why did I assume this?
- Is my conclusion based on facts?

System Thinking Tools

Building systems thinking capacity is the third interconnected domain of learning in our approach. Systems thinking as we use it is not purely a cognitive skill, but a holistic way of seeing the world around us. As we begin to understand the interdependence of all things, and particularly our own role and impact within the system, we are compelled to look at our own values and behaviours as contributors to change.

Improving the well-being of children and reducing the impact of childhood vulnerability qualify as “wicked” problems, social problems that are difficult to solve due to the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems, and the number of people and infrastructures involved. Peter Senge draws on this as the rationale for using systems thinking:

“The fundamental rationale of systems thinking is to understand how it is that the problems that we all deal with, which are the most vexing, difficult and intransigent, come about, and

to give us some perspective on those problems in order to give us some leverage and insight as to what we might do differently.”

David Peter Stroh in his book “Systems Thinking for Social Change” contrasts systems thinking to the conventional or linear thinking that we typically, yet ineffectually, use to address complex problems.

CONVENTIONAL THINKING	SYSTEMS THINKING
The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace.	The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.
Others, either within or outside our organization, are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change.	We unwittingly create our own problems and have significant control or influence in solving them through changing our behaviour.
A policy designed to achieve short-term success will also assure long-term success.	Most quick fixes have unintended consequences. They make no difference or can make matters worse in the long run.
In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts.	In order to optimize the whole, we must improve the relationships among the parts.
Aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.	Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce large systems change.

Source: developed from “Systems Thinking for Social Change. David Peter Stroh



PERSPECTIVE TAKING: THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

The Blind Men and the Elephant is an old Indian fable that provides a depiction of how different perspectives must converge for the entire system to be understood. In the fable, each of six blind men approach an elephant in a different place. Each of them touches the elephant to determine what it is and as such, each thinks the object is something different. The one who touches the trunk thinks it is a snake; the one who touches the leg thinks it is a tree; the one who touches the tusk thinks it is a spear, etc. In the fable, the men initially argue adamantly that their belief is correct. It is only when they are able to listen to each other’s perspective and knowledge that they are able to emerge the collective wisdom to understand that it is indeed an elephant. This is a simple tool that serves as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging the limitation of our own perspective and of integrating a diversity of perspectives before taking any action.

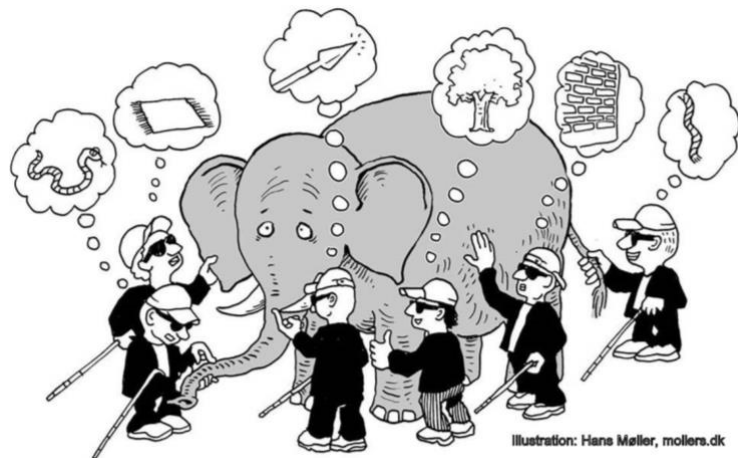
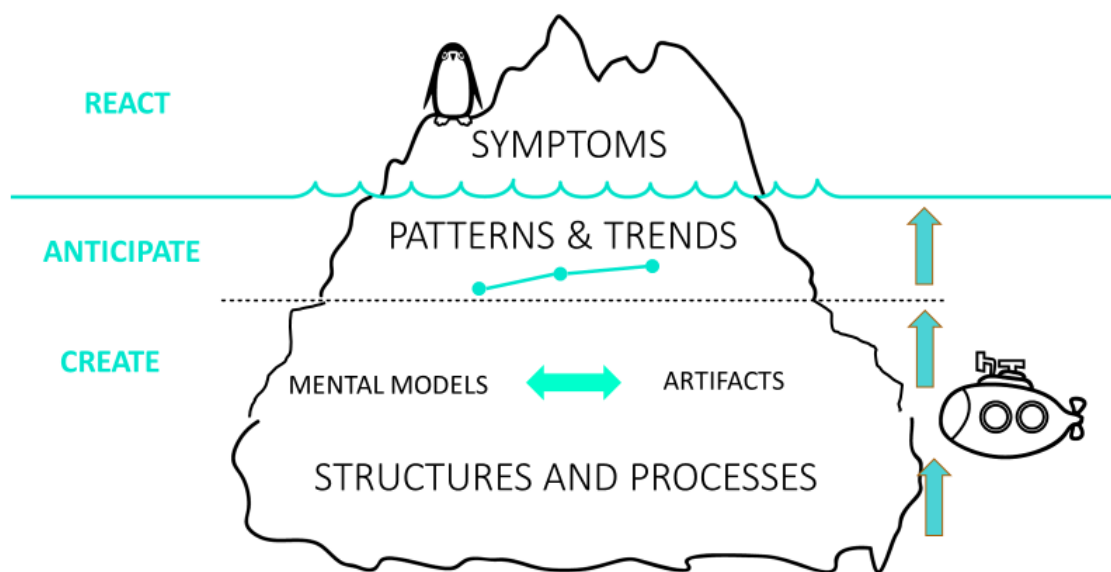


Illustration: Hans Møller, mollers.dk



THE SYSTEMS ICEBERG



Source: Developed from materials shared by Mette Boell and Peter Senge

The Systems Iceberg is a commonly used tool in systems thinking. Its creation is most often credited to American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, but there are now many variations in regular use. The version that we use in the training was taught to us by Mette Boell and Peter Senge. The iceberg provides a framework for understanding an entire system and reminding us to not focus solely on a particular problem or event, but to dig deeper. In nature, only ten percent of an iceberg can be seen above the water, yet what shapes the iceberg, the water temperature and currents, takes place below the surface, out of sight. This mirrors what often happens in social change efforts where we spend time focusing on what we see (child poverty for example) and not delving deeper to determine the systemic drivers. We used the iceberg many times throughout the course. We introduced it as a concept and then returned to it as a framework for participants to apply it to their own context and challenges. Our participants reported that it was one of the most helpful tools in the course. Participants felt confident to try it out in a variety of situations.

We initially used an iceberg model that has four levels: symptoms or events; patterns and trends; structures and processes; and mental models. We adapted this as the course progressed based on new learnings and understandings about the interaction between structures (or artifacts) and mental models. The iceberg we use now has three levels: symptoms or events; patterns and trends; and structures and processes (which includes both mental models and artifacts). Let's walk through each level using the problem of children's challenging behaviour in an early childhood or classroom setting as the tip of our iceberg.

Level 1: Symptoms or Events - This is the level at which we have the daily experience of issues and challenges. In our example, we would be experiencing children's challenging behaviour in a classroom. This might involve aggression or withdrawal or running away. At this level of the iceberg, all we can do is **react** to the behaviour we see. Typically, we respond to this behaviour by applying consequences or

seeking extra support for the child. We may be able to temporarily manage the behaviour with some of these solutions, but we are not able to plan for or prevent other incidences of challenging behaviour. The problem endures despite our efforts. This is the level that we are often stuck at when we address complex social or cultural problems, by only addressing symptoms.

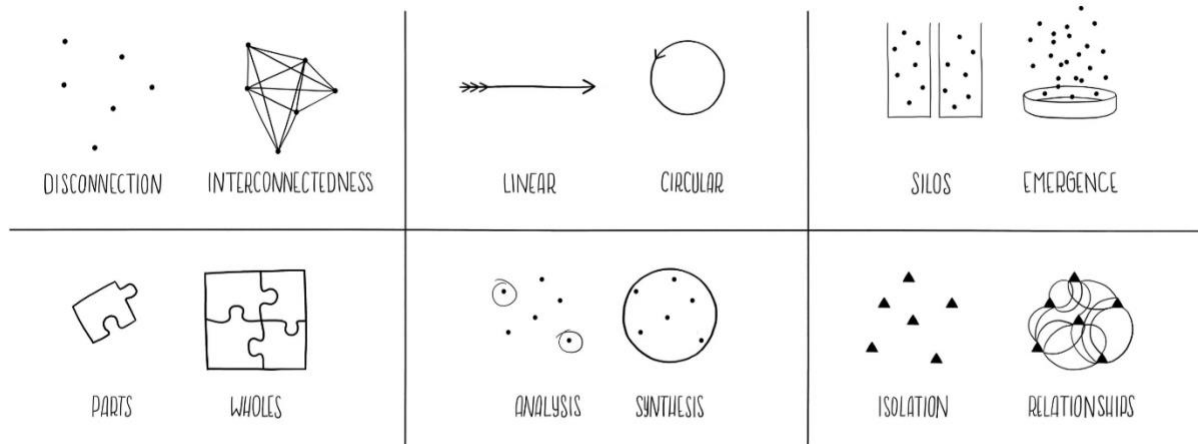
Level 2: Patterns or Trends - This is the level just below the surface where we can observe patterns and/or trends in the problems we are facing. In our example, if we considered the incidence of challenging behaviour in classrooms over the last decade, we would see that this behaviour has been steadily increasing. Identifying a pattern or trend allows us to **anticipate** and to form a plan that is proactive. If we can forecast that there will be children with challenging behaviour arriving in the classroom, we can put additional supports in place and potentially reduce or mitigate the incidence of the challenging behaviour.

Level 3: Structures and Processes - It is at this deepest level of the iceberg that our actions have the potential to **recreate** or **transform** the system leading to long term change in outcomes. Structures and processes represent an interaction of both artifacts and mental models. When we consider the fundamental causes of the patterns we observe (in our example of increasing challenging behaviour), you will likely think about an artifact or mental model. Artifacts include: policies, organizational mechanisms; distribution of resources, cultural norms, rules etc. An artifact that might be contributing to the incidence of challenging behaviour could be the way the classroom is organized for example. Hypothetically the set up of the classroom constrains the child, creating stress that leads to difficult behaviour. That would be an artifact that was contributing to an unintended outcome. Mental models include: values, experiences, judgements, beliefs and biases – those deeply held personal ideas about how the world does and should work. A mental model that might contribute to the incidence of challenging behaviour might be our beliefs about what is acceptable behaviour in a classroom. Perhaps we believe that children should speak quietly and not shout. We categorize shouting as “challenging” and set off a whole series of reactions based on that categorization.

Both artifacts and mental models are included together in the Structures and Processes level because they can interact to create impact or change in the system. To continue with our example: a belief that children should not shout could lead to the implementation of a particular classroom schedule that consisted mainly of quiet working time. In this instance a mental model has driven the creation of an artifact. Conversely, if the artifact was changed and the classroom schedule was developed so that children had time to run and shout outside, challenging behaviour could be reduced. Potentially then our belief that shouting was unacceptable could change. This is how artifacts can nudge mental models. Identifying and understanding the impact of both mental models and system artifacts, and how they interact, is what can lead to transformative systemic change.

CORE CONCEPTS OF SYSTEMS THINKING

We introduced six core concepts as a simple way of differentiating systems thinking from more conventional or linear thinking.



Interconnectedness: thinking systemically means seeing the interconnections and interdependency of all agents or actors in the system, both human and inanimate.

Circularity: complex systems do not behave in a linear fashion. While we can introduce strategies that have intended outcomes, we need to be aware of the causal loops that may create unintended consequence.

Emergence: From a systems perspective, we know that larger things emerge from smaller parts: emergence is the natural outcome of things coming together. Emergence is the outcome of the synergies of the parts.

Holistic: The whole is more than the sum of its parts is a common expression with a simple meaning. When you connect distinct parts a new system emerges that has different qualities than the individual parts.

Synthesis: synthesis refers to the combining of two or more things to create something new. When it comes to systems thinking, the goal is synthesis, as opposed to analysis, which is the dissection of complexity into manageable components.

Relationships: like interconnectedness, this concept reminds us that the links between components of the system contribute to the behavior of the system as a whole.



SYSTEM ARCHETYPES

System archetypes are commonly occurring ways that systems behave. They consist of two or more balancing or reinforcing loops. Each archetype has a characteristic theme, story line, patterns of behavior over time, structure, mental models and effective interventions. Archetypes can help us explain what has happened over time in a system and can help us predict what will happen in the future if we do not take any action.

Depending on the source, there are up to a dozen named system archetypes. Many of these were identified by systems dynamics pioneer Jay Forrester and added to over the years by others. Peter Senge popularized the concept in the Fifth Discipline.

We drew on the article “Systems Archetype Basics: From Story to Structure” by Daniel H. Kim and Virginia Anderson. In this article eight system archetypes are listed:

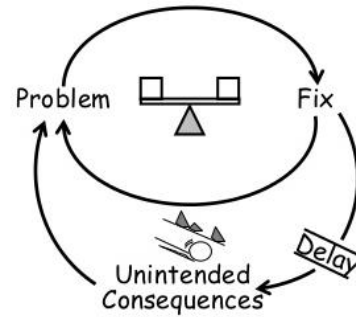
- Fixes that Fail
- Shifting the Burden
- Limits to Success
- Drifting Goals
- Growth and Underinvestment
- Success to the Successful
- Escalation and Tragedy of the Commons

We find the introduction of system archetypes challenging. They can seem highly theoretical and somewhat irrelevant for the context of our participants. We did not dedicate a lot of our limited time to building an understanding of some of the basics of systems science: inflows and outflows; balancing and reinforcing loops, behaviour over time etc. It certainly would have facilitated the understanding of archetypes if participants were grounded in these concepts.

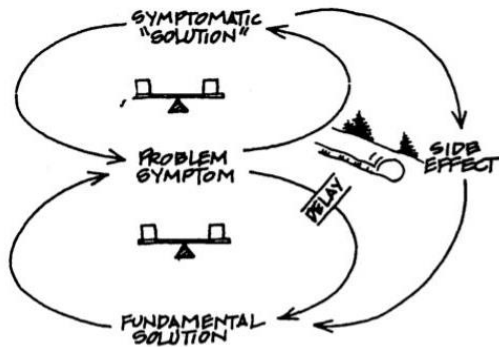
We introduce three archetypes for the participants to explore and apply to their work. We feel that these were ones that were most often seen in the realm of child-serving systems.

Fixes that Fail:

In a typical “Fixes that Fail” situation, a problem symptom cries out for resolution. A solution is quickly implemented that alleviates the symptom, but the unintended consequences of the “fix” exacerbates the problem. Over time, the problem symptom returns to its previous level or becomes worse.



Source: systems-thinking.org



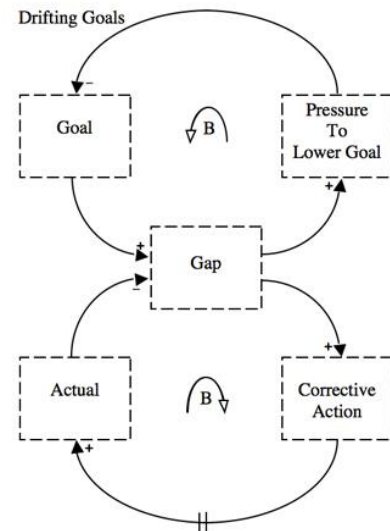
Source: systems-thinking.org

Shifting the Burden:

This archetype usually begins with a problem symptom that prompts someone to intervene and “solve” it. The solution (or solutions) that are obvious and immediately implementable usually relieve the problem symptom very quickly. But these symptomatic solutions divert attention away from the fundamental problem, often making the fundamental solution more difficult to achieve.

Drifting Goals:

The Drifting Goals Archetype applies to situations where short-term solutions lead to the deterioration of long-term goals.



Source: systemsthinker.com

SYSTEM MAPPING

An essential component of systemic change is a shared understanding of what the system is – its components, its relationships and interconnectedness, its boundaries and its intended outcomes. There are many ways to map a system – by hand, with computer software, using causal loop diagrams or behaviour over time. We use the following methods in the training.

System Boundaries

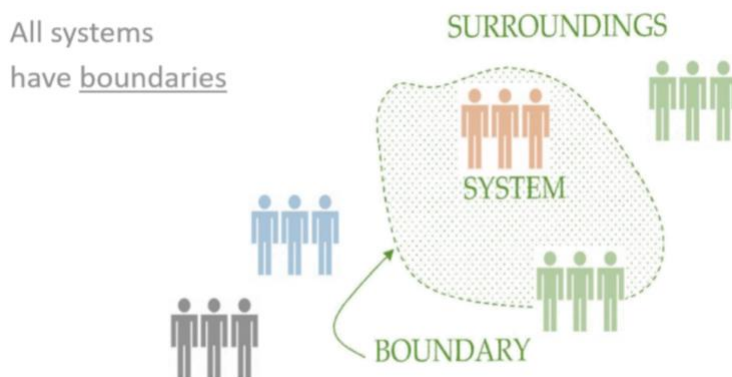
Ultimately, everything has an interdependency and as such, the universe in its entirety is a system. As a first step to understanding the system that is the focus of our change efforts, it is important to determine a boundary and decide what is in and what is out of the system. In setting a boundary, there is a recognition that the boundary will be permeable as it makes sense to engage more broadly. However, the initial boundary allows a concentration of collective effort and awareness.

It is helpful in determining the system boundary to ask a couple of questions:

- What or who are we trying to impact with our efforts?
- Where do we have access to levers for change?

An example from our group in Gold River might be helpful to illustrate this. Leaders from the Vancouver Island West School District are central to the coalition in Gold River. This school district has a large and complex geographic responsibility covering a number of small and remote communities. Potentially the group could have drawn the system boundary around all those communities and the children who live there, increasing the complexity exponentially. However, it was the consensus that the focus of their change efforts would be children and families in Gold River and the neighbouring First Nations community of Tsaxana. Additionally, they identified that their primary focus was children under 6 in these communities. Establishing this allowed the group to draw the initial system boundary to include only those individuals and organizations that were most closely connected to the work in the identified communities.

Continuing with the example from Gold River another consideration in drawing the initial system boundary was identifying levers for change. In B.C. much of the policy development and resource allocation decisions are controlled by a variety of Ministries within the provincial government. These processes often seem enigmatic and uncontrollable to people in communities, especially rural and remote places like Gold River. It is common for local service providers to point to the big “system” outside



Source: Meg Hargreaves

as the place where change is needed. Change is indeed needed at that level, but such a stance leads only to frustration and disempowerment. A core tenet of systems change is that it must start “in here” not “out there”: the initial system boundary needs to be drawn around those components that the main actors in the change effort can personally impact or have leverage. In Gold River this meant including some key relationships between local participants and provincial ministry employees as a potential route to broader impact, but excluding the large organizations with which there was no opportunity for influence.

Drawing the System

Once the system boundary is identified, the groups go on to depict all the components of the system – the individuals and organizations, and the interrelationships between those components. They also include some individuals and organizations that are just outside of their identified system boundary.

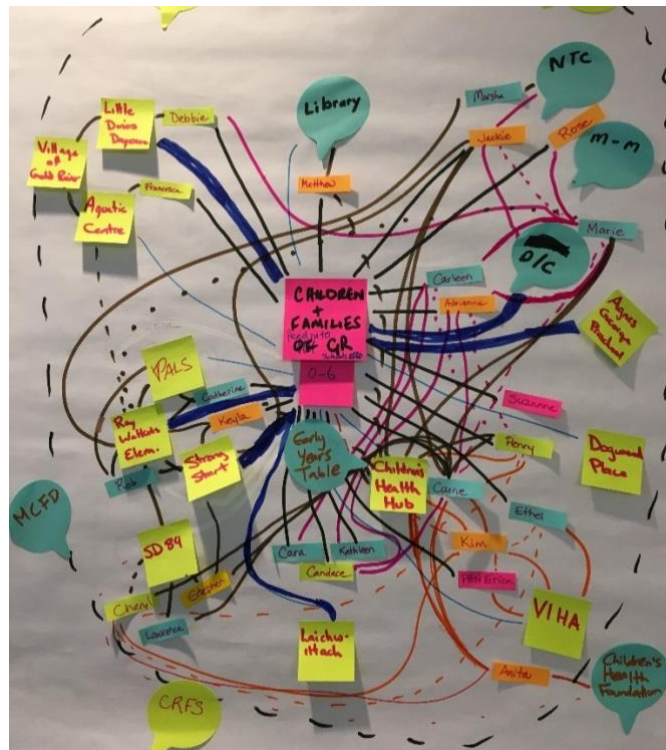
This task is done simply – the group convenes around a piece of flip chart paper with felt pens and stickies and draws the system. Intensity of connections are depicted by the thickness of the line. When connections are tentative, they are represented by a dotted line.

This is a straightforward task, and during this exercise there is no attention paid to causal relationship or feedback loops within the system. However, the biggest learning often is that even when only considering these basic dimensions of the system, the system is extremely complex.

Having this initial map allows participants to build the shared understanding of their system and an easy mechanism to relate this to other people. Recognizing the complexity of the relationships and interdependence provide a valuable lens for the consideration of any next steps.

4D Mapping

4D mapping is one output from a process called Social Presencing Theater. The technique was developed under the leadership of Arawana Hayashi and has been used extensively by Otto Scharmer in his social change and innovation efforts around the world. We experimented with the technique as a way to bring “the system to life”. It embodies the current reality of the system and presents an opportunity to emerge a new reality.



Source: Community of Gold River

We only scratched the surface of this technique. It can be a profound exercise but would require significant training and commitment of time to wholly engage with the process. Nonetheless, it was still a surprisingly powerful experience in all the communities.

To begin the exercise, the group identifies a number of key actors or organizations within their system of focus. Typically, this includes children and families, schools and teachers, child protection services, the municipality, and a range of other service providers and funders. Each member of the group assumes the role of one of the actors. Each places themselves in relationship to the children and families who are at the center of the tableau, as well as to the other actors in the system. Each person also takes a posture that epitomizes the character and emotions of the role they are playing. This could be big or small, powerful or fearful, open or closed etc. A few minutes are given to allow people to adjust their positioning in relation to others and then all are asked to be still. Staying in their positions, time is taken for reflection on the experience and what insights have emerged for the participants. Next, all participants are asked to reposition themselves to what they envision could be a future reality for the system. This is not necessarily what people see as ideal, but rather what their insight on the current realities has led them to want to change or move within the system. Again a few minutes are given for all to adjust and then all are asked to be still. The exercise ends with a full debrief on the experience of each participant.



Source: Community of Prince George

This exercise can be very effective in illustrating the perceptions, real or assumed, of different actors in the system and their relationships with one another and the children and families they serve. Typically it highlights power imbalances, allegiances, and learned cultures.



PLANNING FORWARD

The principle of continuous learning and adaptation is foundational to this approach. As such, we resist the idea that the tools and knowledge can be gathered into a neat package that determines the specific go forward for any individual or group. It is necessary to get out and try some things, reflect on how it went and then try some more things. It is critical that participants do not think that learning ends at the completion of the course. That being said, we recognize that as we complete the course, the participants need a beginning road map to guide the next steps in their system change efforts. For this, we return to the visioning work that was done earlier in the course and again draw on the work of

Robert Fritz in creating structures to progress from current reality to vision or aspiration, whether it be individual or collective.

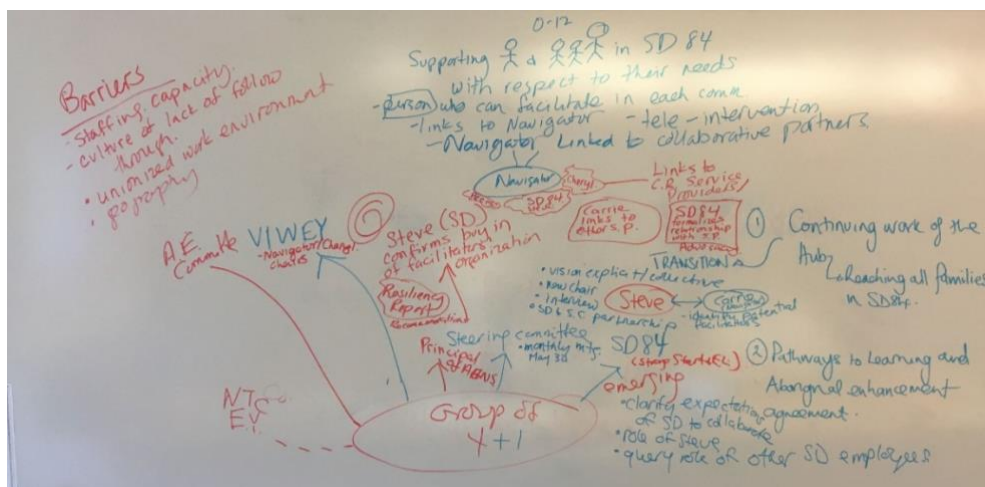
Fritz' model uses a simple tool called a structural tension chart. Participants review their career vision and current reality and develop action steps – **which are specific and measurable with timelines** – with the aim to realize each aspect of their vision, and to renew the vision as initial objectives are met.

Following the personal planning exercise, we undertake a collective planning exercise using the same method.

It is common for strategic planning processes to set up goals and objectives with little attention to the current reality or to the enabling structures needed for the actions to take place. Predictably those goals and objectives are often not achieved.



Source: robertfritz.com



Source: Community of Gold River

The intent of this planning is to tie the vision or goals directly to the current reality and be very specific about the steps for progression (who, what, how, when). In each of the communities a road map was developed to frame the collective action going forward.

In each case, one of the actions was to continue to convene the group to sustain connections and learning, monitor progress and adapt the direction based on learning. In short, they all knew they were just getting started!

SECTION 4: WHAT WE LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

With this project, we brought a specific systems leadership training approach to a group of people who were working together to create change for children. This is distinct from other approaches that typically train people as individuals, outside of their community, and do not apply the learning directly to collective change efforts. We believe this method presents a unique opportunity for impact and we intend to deepen this work going forward.

Our Experience

Reflecting now on the experience, we realize how profound our learning has been and how much we appreciate the opportunity to have undertaken this work.

Approaching our first training sessions, we were anxious. Both of us have long experience in presenting to and facilitating groups from five to five hundred, but this was something quite different and we were definitely outside of our comfort zone. What a happy relief to complete those sessions and to realize the resonance and value of the material to all participants. Certainly, over the course of the project, we have become more comfortable with the tools and our efficacy in teaching them and using them as leaders in our own organizations has flourished.

Participant Feedback

A summary of project evaluation data can be found in the Appendix 3, but broadly, the key learning was how highly applicable and welcomed this approach was with participants. For most people in the child serving sector, their recent experience is of working harder yet feeling like they are accomplishing less. The negative population level trends in children's development play out for service providers as a higher demand for services, an increase in the number of children with challenges and longer wait lists. This within the backdrop of a hurried-up world that floods inboxes with continual emails and expects a quick response to everything. For professionals, this often leaves them feeling stressed and frustrated. This can be compounded by a cultural belief that they must work ever harder and that self-care is a luxury that can be ill afforded in these times. For participants, the recognition that they could step back from this vicious cycle and build skills that would not only strengthen personal and interpersonal capacity, but potentially contribute to better child outcomes, was indeed liberating. The prevailing sentiment was "it's the time, to take time".

The participants reported that they trialed many of the intrapersonal and interpersonal tools within both their private lives and organizational contexts. We also heard that some participants had introduced the ideas to others and that this had been greatly appreciated.

The system thinking tools were also introduced into participants' practices. The iceberg, for example, was widely trialed and participants reported finding it very helpful for providing an alternative view of enduring issues. Overall participants felt better able to understand and interpret systemic behaviour. However, they did not feel that the increased understanding had yet empowered them sufficiently to intervene in the system to effect significant change. It was felt that the levers for change were often either unknown or unreachable. There was a prevailing view that it would be beneficial to have more senior managers involved in the process.

Reflecting on Next Steps

This project has been a phenomenal first step in presenting the concepts and growing compassionate systems leadership for children in B.C. In each of the participating communities, the capacity of the collective to lead a systemic approach for change has increased. Additionally, the awareness of the importance of a systemic approach, incorporating systems leadership development, has grown both in communities and with policy makers. Of note, the BC Ministry of Education is exploring how compassionate systems leadership can form a core component of a provincial strategy for promoting mental health in schools.

It is though, only a first step, and we recognize that the next steps need to involve deepening and applying all aspects of the work. Our learning thus far will inform the specifics of that deepening.

One of the greatest gifts of this project has been the opportunity to research and train in the breadth of related work. There are a multitude of linked theories and methods to draw on as we further develop the approach. In fact, the burgeoning body of relevant knowledge can be a bit daunting. Each of us has experienced the concurrent joy and confusion of discovering another publication that we know is important, but yet we can't quite figure out how it best aligns with our work.

As we deepen our methodology, and expand our own learning, we will rely on our shared principles and experiences to filter and prioritize the new content and processes we incorporate. We know that the path forward requires letting go of many of the ways we have done things in the past; bringing our minds (curiosity), our hearts (compassion) and our wills (courage) fully to the process; and generating shared vision and action with all who participate.

We have had the opportunity to further study with Peter Senge and Mette Boell and we will continue to draw on their thinking, particularly as it applies to building systems awareness. Joanne and other BC colleagues are currently participating in a Masters Certification program with Peter and Mette at MIT. Pippa has also attended training at the Society for Organizational Learning, Executive Champions network, delving more extensively into the work of Otto Scharmer and Theory U and recognize that his thinking on the path to the future aligns beautifully with our own.

Our ongoing work will build on the growing research into the importance of social and emotional learning for both children and adults and we will continue to work with Kim SR and others who are leading that work.

Our Envisioned Future

As we complete this initial phase of the project, we are envisioning the future development of a multifaceted approach to building Compassionate Systems Leadership capacity in B.C. This would include activities in a number of areas.

Intention 1: Improving our training model and toolkit

It is our intention to be more rigorous and more thorough in building content in each of the learning domains. As noted, the writing, understanding and practices of Compassionate Systems Leadership are continually growing. We want to be familiar with what is emerging in the field and be prepared to adapt it to our context. We envision continuing to train interested individuals in a variety of settings and to offer sessions that go in depth in particular domains, while holding the importance of the interconnections between domains. Our intention is to develop an approach that spends full days on single tools and/or practices, as always in an order guided by participants.

Intention 2: Developing 3-4 3-year Prototypes

We want to create prototypes – learning communities that having had the introduction to the tools are ready to engage in a full application of the practices in promoting the healthy development of children with our support. We are planning for 3 – 4 prototype communities over the next year. Important to these prototypes will be the inclusion of senior managers in the child serving systems increasing access to the levers for change that participants in the initial project often felt were missing. We envision these as three-year projects, fully evaluated, that have the potential for transformative impact.

Intention 3: Working with policy makers

Training for policy makers will be a critical component of the next stage. We want to work with at least two inter-ministerial groups. Although, it is often characteristic within policy environments for the focus to be single ministry, rather than system wide, we would suggest that the B.C. government is presently well positioned to enhance existing cross-ministry approaches. Specifically, within the realm of mental health and addictions, and also in response to our present engagement with the Ministry of Education in promoting mental health in schools.

Intention 4: Developing the Science - Building Resources

With the work being located within HELP, we also see the opportunity to begin to build the science of Compassionate Systems Leadership. There is limited peer-reviewed evidence at this time that demonstrates the relationship between a comprehensive implementation of these strategies and improved outcomes for children. It is our intent to work with our academic colleagues in developing a program of research as we build the practices.

Intention 5: Building a Community of Practice

All of the participants in the project thus far have expressed an interest in continuing to be linked to the work as it grows. We envision that we will do this through the development of an on-line Community of Practice and the offering of Individual coaching. These platforms will continue to grow as more people become involved.

Intention 6: Advocating for systemic approaches

We intend as well to be continually active with advocacy and public awareness activities. It is likely fair to say that we are convinced of the value of introducing Compassionate Systems approaches within the child serving systems. Through workshops, papers and presentations we want to spread this work. We want others to work with us to create a new way of supporting children and their families.

In Conclusion

Of course, realizing this vision will require infrastructure and resources to support and coordinate activities. We want to build an Institute for Compassionate Systems Leadership housed at HELP that will serve as the greenhouse for these ideas to grow.

It's a big dream, but not undoable. We realize after the first phase of this project that we are much better prepared than we were when we started. With each step, we gain understanding and confidence. With our partners and colleagues, we can make structural advances for B.C.'s children.

By learning you will teach, by teaching you will learn

— *Latin Proverb*

APPENDIX 1 - WHO HAS BEEN INVOLVED

Project Advisory Committee

- Chris Atchison, Human Early Learning Partnership
- Helen Davidson, Community Development Strategist
- Maureen Dockendorf, B.C. Ministry of Education
- Eric Hallman, B.C. Office of the Early Years
- Maria LeRose, Maria LeRose Associates Ltd.
- Marna McMillan, School District #43, Coquitlam
- Allan Northcott, Max Bell Foundation
- Brenda Poon, Human Early Learning Partnership
- Kimberley Schonert-Reichl, Human Early Learning Partnership
- Stephen Smith, B.C. Ministry of Health
- Tracy Smith, Raising the Village Consultants
- Jan White, B.C. Office of the Early Years

Community Participants

Gold River

- Kimberly Black, Island Health
- Rose Jack, Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation
- Cheryl Jordan, Early Years Community Developer
- Stephen Larre, Vancouver Island West School District
- Marie Lavoie, Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation
- Carrie Tarasoff, Early Years Hub Coordinator
- Lawrence Tarasoff, Vancouver Island West School District

Prince George

- Ignacio Albarracin, Prince George Public Library
- Lori-Ann Armstrong, United Way of Northern B.C.
- Darcy Dennis, Prince George Aboriginal Head Start
- Jenessa Ellis, Carney Hill Neighbourhood Centre
- Ashley Gueret, Family Nurse Practitioner

- Brandi Hall, Prince George Native Friendship Centre
- Andrea Maurice, Prince George School District
- Lisa Provencher, Prince George School District
- Caroline Sanders, University of Northern B.C.
- Sandra Sasaki, United Way of Northern B.C.
- Tasheena Seymour, Lheidli T'enneh Band
- Alisha Wilson, Child Care Resource and Referral

Surrey

- Karen Alvarez, Surrey School District
- Penny Bradley, Alexandra Neighbourhood House
- Daljit Gill-Badesha, City of Surrey
- Stacey Rennie, City of Surrey
- Hema Shrestha, Fraser Health Authority
- Meredith Verma, Surrey School District
- Darby Wilkinson, Options Community Services

Vancouver

- Sabrina Bantong, Collingwood Neighbourhood House
- Sandra Bodenhamer, Vancouver Coastal Health
- Nilda Borrino, Mt. Pleasant Neighbourhood House
- Diana Dicesare, Vancouver School District
- Joseph Dunn, B.C. Council for the Family
- Jamie Fong, Vancouver Public Library
- Ileana Gavrilă, Mt. Pleasant Neighbourhood House
- Kate Hodgson, Ray Cam Community Centre
- Danielle Hollander, Vancouver Society of Children's Centres
- Brenda Lohrenz, Eastside Family Place
- Maryam Naddaf, Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House
- Iosefina Para, Kiwassa Neighbourhood House
- Marisol Petersen, City of Vancouver
- Maria Valenzuela, Little Mountain Neighbourhood House

APPENDIX 2 - RESOURCES

Table of Contents

1. Foundational Books and Papers
2. Personal mastery
3. Inter-Personal skills and capabilities
4. Systems Thinking

Foundational Readings

The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge

Theory U, Leading from the Future as it Emerges, Otto Scharmer

We live in a time of massive institutional failure that manifests in the form of three major divides: the ecological, the social, and the spiritual. Addressing these challenges requires a new consciousness and collective leadership capacity. This book invites us to see the world in new ways and in so doing discover a revolutionary approach to learning and leadership.

A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives,

Thupten Jinpa shows us how compassion works as a powerful inner resource that can yield surprising and compelling benefits for ourselves and others.

Inside Out: Stories and Methods for Generating Collective Will to Create the Future We Want, Tracy Huston

Builds on U-theory by exploring collective presencing approaches for developing the personal, relational, and systemic conditions needed to support leaders in collaborating across their institutional boundaries.

Presence, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer

An intimate look at the development of a new theory about change and learning. In wide-ranging conversations held over a year and a half, organizational learning pioneers Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers explored the nature of transformational change.

Who Do We Choose To Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity, Margaret Wheatley

Summons us to be leaders for this time as things fall apart, to reclaim leadership as a noble profession that creates possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil.

Daring to Lead, Brené Brown

Brené provides both the research and practice underneath leading with vulnerability; as a human.

Personal Mastery

Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself, Kristin Neff

Offers expert advice on how to limit self-criticism and offset its negative effects, enabling you to achieve your highest potential and a more contented, fulfilled life.

Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body, Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson

Shows us the truth about what meditation can really do for us, as well as exactly how to get the most out of it.

Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life, Robert Fritz

Demonstrates that any of us has the innate power to create. Discover the steps of creating; the importance of creating what you truly love, how to focus on the creative process to move from where you are to where you want to be, and much more.

Meditation for Beginners, Jack Kornfield

“Insight” or vipassana meditation is the time-honored skill of calming the spirit and clearing the mind for higher understanding. Now, in this course created especially for beginners, Kornfield offers a straightforward, step-by-step method for bringing meditation into your life.

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, Parker J. Palmer

With wisdom, compassion, and gentle humor, invites us to listen to the inner teacher and follow its leadings toward a sense of meaning and purpose.

Interpersonal/Collective

Non-Violent Communication, Marshal Rosenberg.

Improve the quality of your relationships, to deepen your sense of personal empowerment or to simply communicate more effectively. Unfortunately, for centuries our culture has taught us to think and speak in ways that can actually perpetuate conflict, internal pain and even violence. *Nonviolent Communication* partners practical skills with a powerful consciousness and vocabulary to help you get what you want peacefully.

Reading the Room: Group Dynamics for Coaches and Leaders, David Kantor

Addresses the fundamental issue that leaders can be inept in conversation and in managing groups. Leaders and managers at all levels should be learning these concepts in order to improve their own ability to analyze what is going on and be prepared to respond.

Everyone Leads: Building Leadership from the Community Up, Paul Schmitz

A guide to inclusion, collaboration, and community building that will inspire readers to see leadership and opportunity in places we don't usually look.

Systems Thinking

Thinking in Systems, Donella Meadows

A crucial book offering insight for problem solving on scales ranging from the personal to the global. This primer brings systems thinking out of the realm of computers and equations and into the tangible world, showing how to develop the systems-thinking skills that thought leaders across the globe consider critical for 21st-century life.

The Habit-Forming Guide to Becoming a Systems Thinker, Tracy Benson and Sheri Marlin

An accessible and hands-on guide for applying systems thinking to education, business, leadership, parenting, citizenship and much more. In the simplest terms, systems thinking is a way of seeing the world in motion, recognizing that the big picture is a web of factors that interact to create patterns and change over time.

Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences and Achieving Lasting Results, David Stroh

We usually have the best of intentions to serve society and improve social conditions. But often solutions fall far short of what is truly needed. This book helps us understand what systems thinking is and why it is so important in our work. It also gives concrete guidance on how to incorporate systems thinking in problem solving, decision making, and strategic planning without becoming a technical expert.

Websites

Personal

- Greatergood.com
- Ccare.stanford.edu
- mindtools.com
- Centerhealthyminds.org
- Soundstrue.com

Systems Thinking

- donellameadows.org
- systemsthinker.com
- systemsfieldbook.org
- watersfoundation.org
- ottoscharmer.com
- tamarackcommunity.ca
- bbbf.ca (Better Beginnings, Better Futures)
- helpingkidsprosper.org

- winniepegboldness.ca
- aletmanski.com

Course Video Links

Personal

- John Kabat-Zin on mindfulness:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmEo6RI4Wvs>
- Dacher Keltner on the evolutionary roots of Compassion:
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>
- Matthieu Ricard on Compassion:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB2fcZpxBLE>
- Thupten Jinpa on developing Compassion (A Fearless Heart):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_gV3voD7MY

Interpersonal

- Julian Treasure on speaking clearly:
https://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_how_to_speak_so_that_people_want_to_listen?language=en
- Otto Scharmer on listening:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLfXpRkVZal>
- Heineken Ad on valuing others:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKggA9k8DKw>

Systems Thinking

- Peter Senge on an introduction to systems thinking
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXdzKBWDraM>

APPENDIX 3 - EXCERPTS FROM PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Participant from Gold River

“I am writing to tell you about my experience in participating in the Growing Systems Leadership program with Pippa Rowcliffe and Joanne Schroder. Over nine months I got to spend an amazing 6 days and several video conferencing calls with our Early Years Team in Gold River. I feel the time spent together was so valuable, and the process just enhanced the experience. This program allowed us to spend quality time working on ourselves and our vision for the community.

At first, I had no idea what to expect, but I knew I needed to be present for the children in that region to improve outcomes for them. The first meeting had us participating in exercises about ourselves: our personal values, our personal experiences, and our personal goals. We learned tools and were given resources about personal reflection and personal development that focused on mindfulness, gratitude, and meditation. All of which I walked away feeling was this worth my time, not truly understanding the relevance.

Things started to click the following sessions when we began to look at interpersonal relationships, both personally and professionally and digging deeper into systems thinking. After practising levels of listening and identifying deadly habits of speaking I became quite aware of different ways I need to work with some colleagues. The iceberg model was not new to me but discussing it in this context with the work being done and moving forward with my colleagues in Gold River was hugely beneficial. This opportunity brought out discussions that might not otherwise have happened by viewing the whole system when deciding to make changes or evaluating our work.

The predominant theme was compassion:

- compassion for ourselves;
- compassion for others;
- and compassion in our work.

I had never thought about compassion in my role when working with various agency leaders, community partners, and government leaders. This shift has allowed me to move past a few hurdles that I face when working with multiple partners. My biggest take away: the interconnectedness of our personal experiences/development, our interpersonal relationships/development, and the system in which we work is so important and valuable.

The last day was bittersweet. I have never participated in anything where you get to participate in such an experience with colleagues and get to better understand those that you work so closely with. Growing Systems Leadership training allowed for the group of us to create a vision with concrete next steps to be shared with other community partners that will go towards improving outcomes for children in the region.”

Participants from Gold River

Excerpts

“Although I think of myself as a genuinely compassionate person, I had never thought about compassion as necessary to my working with others (with clients, definitely; but not with colleagues, supervisors, or government ministries). Shifting my thinking to being compassionate to the people I work with has decreased my stress and frustration, especially in situations I previously avoided. For example, my organization was able to partner with another organization that we had not worked with before. Because we are a small town, I cannot give details but believe me when I say this would not have happened without the implementation of compassion for colleagues. Where I would have normally felt frustration, I was able to have compassion for the members of the organization and the difficulties they were facing.

During the process, our group was able to develop concrete next steps for our organizations; steps that we believe will go towards improving outcomes for children in our region. Instead of the dread I was feeling regarding the expectations of some of my supervisors, I am looking forward to seeing these next steps implemented. I am actually not going to be working in my current role but I am glad I have a plan to pass on to my successor.

While I am very happy I was able to be a part of this entire process, one of the best parts for me (and it happened several times) was when Pippa and Joanne shared the science behind the practices we learned. I loved it when they talked about the parts of the brain and how they “lit up” during studies of these practices. While I recognize not everyone is interested in this, I would love to see even more of it.

In terms of next steps, I would like to see further training for our Gold River cohort in GSL. It seems like we have just surfaced the potential, but not fully realized the opportunities of this powerful tool for building the capacity within our small rural communities.”

Participant from Surrey

“This process is an opportunity to look at my own individual leadership and how I contribute to collaborative spaces in systematic and compassionate ways. It’s a process that brings together our heart, mind & soul. It goes beyond an intellectual exercise of skill development or traditional leadership development, and incorporates the many ways in which we intake information – through readings, discussion, art, movement and mindfulness practices. I would like it an integrative leadership practice and journey.

I particularly enjoy the opportunity to reflect and be challenged in my thinking. This process didn’t challenge us directly but rather in gentle ways and through hearing from others perspectives, so the diversity of perspective which provides greater understanding, is a different way to be challenged. It has helped me to better understand the view of my community partners and where we are aligned and maligned. But more so, where our values, hopes and dreams intersect. That is so helpful as we continue to move forward together to face the many challenges facing our community. As a public partner, its always important for us to understand where our community partners are experiencing challenges and how we can assist. Personally, it has helped me to better connect with my partners and understand what sits in their hearts. That will translate to increased collaboration and better outcomes for children in our community.

I think this process provides an opportunity to deeply reflect and unpack thinking, assumptions and knowledge, in a way that this into built within our institutions or collaborative spaces. It helps one unpack how you show up in the work and to really look at it in depth, which is critical to develop systematic and effective leadership. I especially enjoyed the slowed down space to reflect and share. We just do not get that time in our regular day and regular business of collaboration. But its essential to understand the deeper issues at play, not just the bigger issues at play.

I liked how the facilitators slowed down the process as needed so that tells me that the ambitious agenda is simply that. If we want time to go deep, the agenda must reflect this. the facilitators were great at adjusting as we went along and that was helpful. At the same time, the tools introduced were super helpful to ensure this is a professional exercise that we could repeat with our own teams and organizational spaces. I think we want to make sure that participants do not stay in an individual space with the learning and reflection and ensure webring this forward to collective spaces.

I have access to specific tools to use and how I consider my work in an increased systems way. It has impacted how I am in personal and professional spaces.”

Participant from Surrey

“Participating in “Growing Systems Leadership for Children” has been one of the most enriching professional and personal learning experiences I have been involved in. Most professional learning opportunities are concerned only with how to strategies; this began with who we are. While Pippa and Joanne taught and modeled a variety of practical strategies that could be used across all areas of our work they also modeled and created space for a different way of being in relation in leadership (both for ourselves and with each other). I have worked with members of the Children’s Partnership for six years and I can honestly say that after participating in this learning process together, our relationships, understandings, and approaches to our work have shifted and deepened significantly.

An intentional space was created for thoughtful and relational work to take place. We committed to coming together for two consecutive days three times throughout the year for focused and purposeful dialogue and learning, with check-in calls between sessions. Each two-day session involved teaching of specific strategies and theories and, importantly, time to put them into practice for ourselves and reflect on our understandings. There was a balance of teaching (and modeling), reflection, and dialogue.

Materials were relevant and useful in our work contexts; everything we learned together was transferrable to all areas of our work. For example, I was able to take one strategy (the Iceberg Model) and apply it to work with kindergarten teachers. Using this tool to focus the conversation meant the dialogue was deep, thoughtful and reflective.

Similarly, I used the personal journeys activity we did on our first day together with a new team I hired at work. As a result of modeling vulnerability and openness (as Pippa and Joanne did for us), this new team responded in the same open way. Despite the ever-present time pressure, we committed to monthly meetings together that include reflection and dialogue. The team has developed strong relationships with each other and their work is connected, coherent, and purposeful. In other words, they are functioning as a team as opposed to a group of individuals doing similar work. Members of the CP who participated in this learning opportunity are also functioning more as a team, in a way we never did before.

My growing understanding of compassionate leadership was particularly meaningful for me. I realized that I cannot truly extend compassion to others if I am critical and unforgiving of myself. As a leader it is imperative that I pay attention to my own well-being if I hope to support the well-being of others. Healthy organizations create healthy outcomes. I no longer believe it is possible to separate my self from the outcomes I want to see.

I hope others will have the same opportunity in the future. The impact has been tremendous for creating foundational change. The only thing that might deepen it is the opportunity for individual check-ins as well as group time. If we could continue as a cohort in a smaller capacity, perhaps meeting for three individual days instead of six, or having Zoom check-ins, would be helpful in solidifying our growing understandings. We will continue to meet, but having the guidance and expertise of Joanne and Pippa makes the difference in pushing our understanding.”

Participant from Prince George

Excerpts

“Despite not being sure what it was I was getting myself into, I am so glad I was able to be a part of this group. Beyond getting to know the team of people working in early years, this training gave me the knowledge and skills to approach my work in a new way, going forward. This training was to guide our team through theories and practices around compassionate leadership and systems thinking and provide guided support for both personal and project development.

The first two sessions were designed to help us understand the system we are working in, its boundaries, key players, barriers, etc. We worked toward identifying our personal values and journey and identified our collective aspiration. We explored the importance of mindfulness, and its strength in finding compassion for yourself and others. Some of this information was straight forward, and easy to digest, while other information was harder to grasp (I still don’t fully understand systems archetypes). The final session was used to plan our vision – how can we improve child development outcomes through improving parental capacity in the region, using a renewed systemic approach.

For myself, this systems leadership training was very beneficial. This training helped me to better identify why I do what I do, connect with others working with children and families, and try to work toward a common goal. It is so easy to get buried in your own day to day work and forget about all the other work being done to support the same groups. Prince George has a fairly connected group of people working with Early Years, so most of the participants had already known each other some capacity. Despite that, this allowed me to connect more deeply with these people and have stemmed some new projects and collaborations.

I think a big struggle for our group was finding times we could all commit to attending. It was very difficult for all of our group to meet, and in the end, it was only a small number of us who were able to attend. This made it difficult to explain projects others were working on or make decisions as a group. It is difficult to commit to thing on behalf of others. This illustrates the reality we all live in – finding two days to commit to anything is difficult, especially with our hectic workloads.

I would love to continue working with Pippa and Joanne. They are a wealth of knowledge and insight they have is incredible and has really taught me a lot. As someone who struggles with anxiety, the reminder through the sessions on the importance of mindfulness, and the power it has in our daily lives. This training taught me to look at the work myself and my organization are doing through a different lens and helped me realized that the work we are doing is just one piece of the puzzle (or the elephant). Some of the work we are doing perpetuates the system we are trying to change, and although that’s hard to avoid, this training helped to identify and acknowledge that. So much of the work done is reactive and is tailored toward the symptoms rather than challenging the structures and processes. Overall, the information taught, and the skills learned during these sessions will continue to be used in both my own work as well as the collaborative work we do as a group.”

Participant from Prince George

Excerpts

“The compassionate systems leadership process began to help me unpack and reorganize the way we think about systems and how those systems interact and perhaps hinder the work that we are trying to accomplish. This course helped me realize that in top-down systems, leadership tends to be based on profit or productivity and when it comes to the business of humans in learning, healthcare, or early childhood education, it is too unpredictable and changes so rapidly that we cannot base the leadership in a stagnant, hierarchal system. This experience allowed us to see that while we may never be able to get away from a systems approach, the way we work within the system and the way we conduct ourselves can be done in a more mindful and creative way that allows for pushing past our individual or organizational boundaries to be creative and more wholesome in the larger systems we are all part of. By leading from a place of compassion and empathy, we leave room for individualism as well as productive team work in a way we can all grow from and foster a system of collaboration instead of silos and repetitive work.

This experience directly relates to my role in healthcare because truly health is not just about fixing your illness and disease with medications, it is about having access to affordable housing so you can take your medications every day, it is about education so that your children have a place to learn, it is about low income options for daycare so that you can go out and get a job and afford to have someone who is trained to look after your job, it is about having the skills to get a job so you can afford healthy food and pay for your medications. Health care involves every ministry of government and yet none of these players work together on a large-scale level. However, in Prince George, many key players (though not high-level players) do work together to help achieve some of these goals and it is these smaller systems that this experience tried to target, so that even if they ministries are impossible to change, the actual groundwork and services delivery to clients can be affected in a way that is organized, thoughtful, clear amongst services, and client/family/child focused.

The benefits of this process are the new way in which I now think about a system and work within it. To lead from a place of compassion and empathy that starts from within. I feel this work could have been improved by having a clearer objective and end result, a lot of the time it felt as if we were rehashing previous terms and knowledge but never truly got to an end product that allowed us to embody the compassionate leadership.

Currently I have not had much time to practice these concepts in my work or personally and with any new skill we must use it and integrate it for it to have an impact. Thus, I feel it would be helpful to have some more information about how to integrate this and opportunities for practice. I think it would also be beneficial to have some follow-up about helping the group achieve it's goal.”