

It's taking some time to catch up with Chris Horton these days: he's a busy guy.

In the middle of the 2019-2020 school year, Chris transitioned from his Vice-Principal role at Sa-Hali Secondary School in Kamloops SD 73 to become the Principal of Brocklehurst Middle School in the same district. While still a Vice-Principal, his team was required to do some intensive leading through critical incidents at his school. And as he took on his new role as Principal, the repercussions and extreme life changes of the COVID-19 pandemic hit us all. But anyone who knows Chris could predict that he's navigated it all with enthusiasm, a positive outlook and good humour. And that it would take more than a global health crisis to compel him to give up on a dream project.

Chris first approached the BCPVPA in the Fall of 2019 with an enticing offer: he would do the legwork to produce and host a BCPVPA-branded podcast if the Association could help with the platform and promotions. The show would feature interviews with Principals and Vice-Principals from all over the province, and would focus on the zigs, zags and occasional straight lines of the leadership journey.

While the pandemic slowed our progress in launching the series, we came out of the gate with The Princip(ed) Podcast on June 1, 2020 with a captivating conversation between Chris and outgoing BCPVPA President and current Past-President, David DeRosa. The candid interview centred on Compassionate Systems Leadership, relationships and self-awareness, and the tools that leaders need most in order to lead during a crisis. Episode Two in July featured Anneli Duncan, Principal of a small rural K-7 school that serves two First Nations bands in SD 59. Anneli revealed her deep learning in transitioning to a school with many vulnerable learners, and reflected on the eight years that she has spent encouraging calm, creating a school vision, and working to prepare students for high school. Episode Three dropped on August 1 after this interview was taped, and features Kamloops Principal Barb Hamblett.

You may be asking yourself why a busy Principal would add just one more project to his plate: we asked Chris the

same question. "I've been listening to podcasts for quite a while. I'm part of a professional Learning Network that meets once a week, and it's run by my friend and mentor Daniel Bauer who hosts the podcast *Better Leaders Better Schools*. I've been listening to that podcast for three or more years, and it is inspiring. However, when you look at the vast podcast landscape, there doesn't seem to be anything that is focused on the amazing work of BC's school leaders – we're one of the top educational systems in the world, and we're not talking publicly about what our school leaders are doing. We aren't sharing the impact that our leadership has on our schools, our teachers and our students, or the impact on the system as a whole. I felt like this was an opportunity to work with the BCPVPA to do something that highlighted that."

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Chris continues, "That's one big piece of it; another big piece was a little bit selfish. I gain a lot from listening to podcasts already, but very few are within our BC context. I felt like I could gain a lot of insight, advice and experience from other people who work within our system, and learn how I can become a better leader. I think the final piece was the opportunity to provide that kind of professional learning opportunity for all of our membership – and potentially beyond our membership – but really, my hope was that our membership would hear what other great leaders are doing within our system, and take away things that they can apply to their own leadership, to become better leaders."

Chris recognizes that it's important to listen to the experiences of other leaders. "It's easy for us to be in silos, even as we talk about moving teaching out of silos. I think leaders have their local networks, or maybe a few people that we connect with at a BCPVPA event or another professional learning event. But it's about expanding your network with provincial contacts. If we are hearing what other people are doing, or what someone has learned

from a mistake, I think that's really important because we can become very contained within our own small system and not think differently. We can get caught in the busyness of everything that we're doing, and not get that opportunity to hear a totally different approach or way of leading that we never thought of. I believe that podcasts in general do a good job of opening your world to other potential ideas or ways of doing things."

So far, Chris has interviewed a half dozen members for the podcast, and he's reaching out to more contacts each month. We asked him what he's learned so far. "With every leader I've talked to, there's something that I've taken away: with David, it was Compassionate Systems, and how we can create a system that has those pillars as a part of what we do. Even if I don't take on the whole Compassionate Systems framework in my leadership, I can still take little pieces that



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will impact how I interact with people or how I lead staff meetings, for example. With Anneli, it was the connection to your community, and how important it is to move out beyond the walls of the school. Every person has a big idea or a little nugget and – no matter if it's a similar context or not – there's something that everybody can take from every episode."

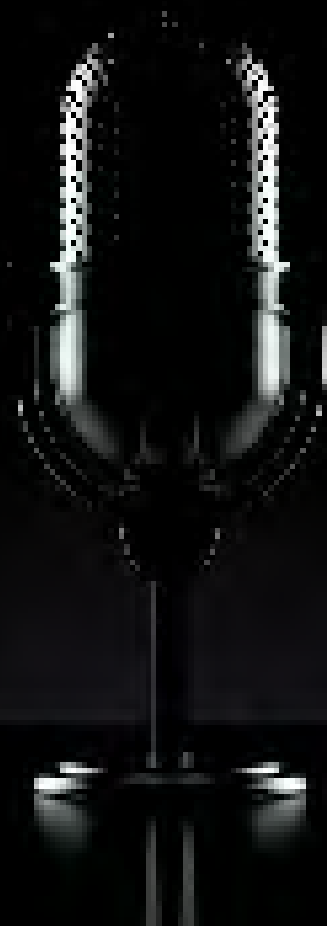
At the beginning of each podcast, Chris describes himself as the 'lead learner on this project.' One of the themes that has emerged in the episodes so far is something that he's hoping to better embed in his own practice. "We all work to get better at this, and it's something that I've had my mentors point out over the years, and it's to speak less and listen more. To not go in with your own agenda or your own biases, and to hear what people have to say. Sometimes that's really hard to do in the craziness, because you want to get things done and that's what you're being paid to do. Just slowing down and listening, actually hearing what people are saying and not passing judgment, and giving them the opportunity to share their story and a bit of themselves – people are going to value that. I'm very fast-paced, and I think over the years I've become better at listening, but it's still a journey." Chris laughs. "And I will never say that I am 'the best' at listening, because you can ask my wife and she'll assure you that's definitely not the case."

Chris is someone who is very comfortable with technology, programs and apps, but a podcast requires a steady hand when it comes to interviewing: that was a new challenge for this lead learner. "How do you create a conversation that engages the people listening to it? The most challenging thing has been the listening, of course, along with learning how to interview. We have conversations, but interviewing is not something that we do in our work. I think this project is helping me to consciously listen to what my guest is saying – to hear what they're saying, and to be curious about what they're saying. I have to be so intentional about that listening. It's been a really interesting journey."

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"I've also been really grateful for the collaboration with the BCPVPA on this project. It's been hugely beneficial in keeping me accountable for moving things along, and also for the conversations we've had about the process and what we want to achieve for our members – that's been great support."

Beyond the learning, what Chris has most enjoyed about producing the podcast is the connection that he has made with people through their deep conversations. "An example of that would be my interview with Darren Danyluk, the new President of the BCPVPA. Although I know him peripherally, I don't know him very well, and our conversation (*available September 1, 2020*) really gave me a very deep appreciation for his experience, his leadership approach, and what he's done through his career. It's incredible the people that we have in our system and the work that they're doing, the way that they think, the way that they approach people and problems. The podcast is giving me the opportunity to talk to exceptional leaders across BC for a reason, but I also get to build a bit of a personal connection with them where I know that I could reach out to that person about something down the road – support, information or advice. I believe that anybody listening to the podcast now has that opportunity as well."



Chris hopes that listeners will learn something from each of the podcast episodes. “If every leader can take away one nugget of information or a new idea from each episode, and then apply that to their leadership, it makes them a better leader which makes them have a greater impact on their staff and on their students. That’s my ultimate goal: helping our leaders be better. The quote that my friend Danny Bauer is constantly saying is that ‘Everybody wins when a leader gets better, everybody wins when you get better.’ I truly believe this is the case.”

“Think of that one little piece of information that makes someone a better leader, that’s going to impact their little system. If you extrapolate that, all of those nuggets of information and all of those leaders, it’s going to impact so many different systems all over the province. Think about the capacity of the leadership within BC if we’re able to – just one piece at a time – build out all of our school leaders to be just that little bit better. Think of the impact that will have on our students and the life outcomes of our students. There’s such potential for ripple effects – it’s like a ‘pay it forward’ kind of approach where that one little thing could make a huge difference.”

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“At the end of the day, the number of listeners is not important. The purpose of the podcast is not to accumulate ‘listens’ or to create a personal profile for myself. It’s about sharing our power as a provincial Association, as provincial leaders, a place we can share our stories and talk about what we do so well. We can learn so much from each other, and other jurisdictions, countries and leaders around the world can also learn from our work.”



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The Principl(ed) Podcast?

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