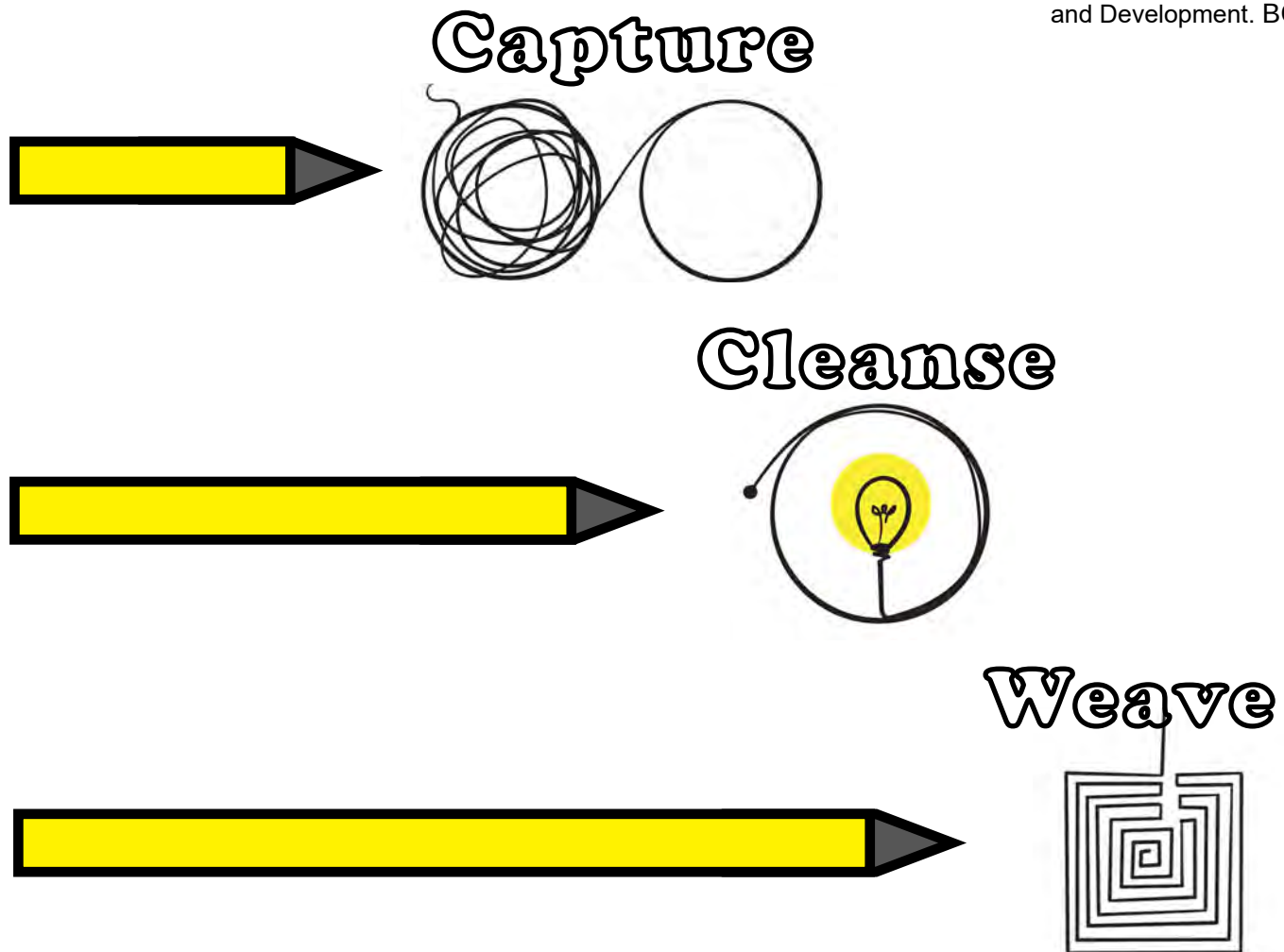


A Process for Reflection on Organizational Renewal

As Shared by Dr. Simon Breakspear

by
Elizabeth Bell
Director of Professional Learning
and Development, BCPVPA



In January 2020, we were aware of a deadly virus in China but it seemed to have only a distant impact on our daily lives here in Canada. At the beginning of March, we were still looking forward to a Spring Break of travel, or upcoming visits with friends and family. Then, on Friday, March 15, our individual fears were realized when the official word came that, in fact, we too were in the midst of a global pandemic. Not only was it necessary to restrict travel and gatherings, but schools in April would look nothing like they did in March.

Indeed, for the next two months in BC—as in many other jurisdictions – staff, students, leaders, and parents

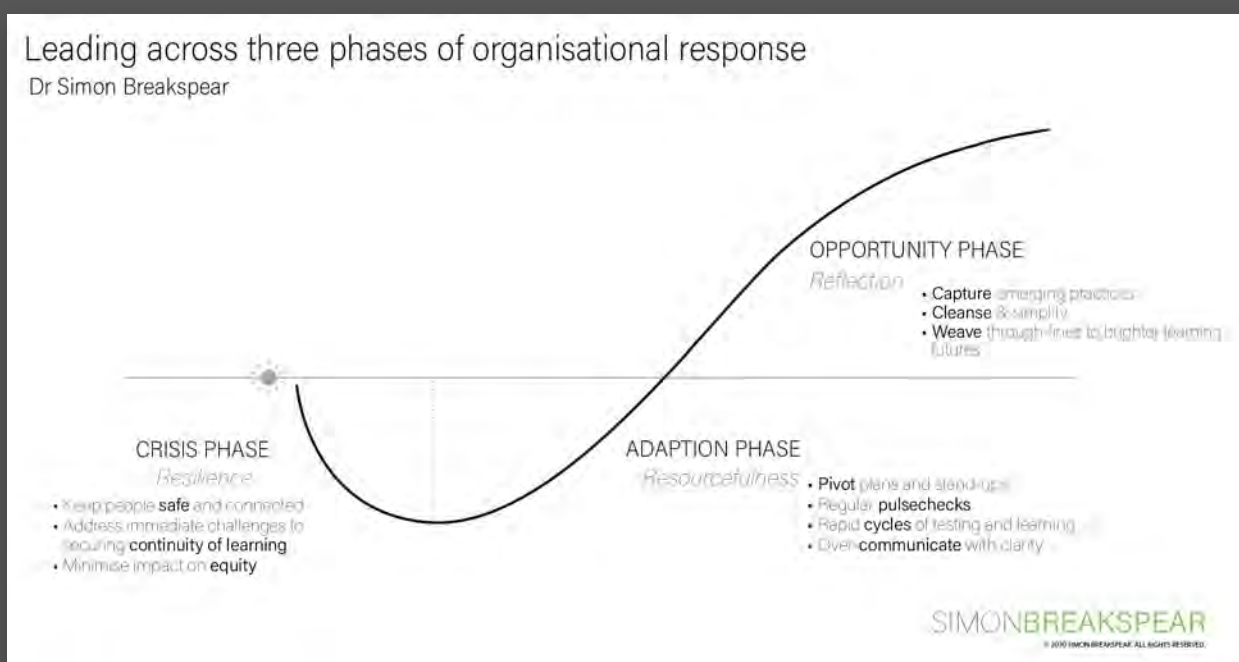
were required to adapt to new ways of thinking about school in order to provide an equitable continuity of learning for all. The inclusion of technology became a necessity at all levels of education, and required equipment, training... and willingness.

It is amazing to look back at what we were able to accomplish in the past 18 months. Teachers who thought they would never want to, or be able to, connect with students who were not literally in front of them, found that they could guide learning in a virtual setting. Principals, Vice-Principals, and district staff learned the intricacies of Teams, Zoom, or other platforms for staging meaningful and interactive

meetings. Parents learned to support their children's learning in a direct way, and students learned to manage their time more independently. Key to all of these adjustments has been the increased importance of the Social Emotional aspect of teaching and learning, and the necessity for consistent clear communication.

Sometimes change is thrust upon us in ways that are far beyond our control. And, sometimes we are intentional about creating change as we innovate curriculum and embrace world views of learning. Either way, when structures in schools change, there should be a means of meaningful reflection and evaluation in order to sustain that which is advantageous without overloading an already complex system.

In June of 2020, BCPVPA was fortunate to host a webinar presented by Dr. Simon Breakspear in which he emphasized the importance of school leaders as they lead organizational learning and renewal in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Breakspear led us through his explanation of three phases of organizational renewal: the **Crisis Phase**, the **Adaptation Phase** and the **Opportunity Phase**. His basic supposition is that at the end of a time of crisis that requires innovative change, we have two options: to return to a replica of the pre-crisis model, or to embrace the opportunities that have emerged as a consequence of crisis management.



Dr Breakspear suggests that in the initial phase of **Crisis**, school leaders are required to be extraordinarily resilient. The first natural and professional instinct is to keep people safe and connected, and to do so in a way that promotes an element of calm. When we think of the impact of COVID-19 and the ensuing school disruption, school leaders were called upon to be the voice of understanding, a conduit of information, and a beacon of hope, even if they did not have all the answers. The physical and emotional safety of students, staff, and parents has rarely been as exaggerated as it has in the past year when school leaders ensured a continuance of learning amid radical restrictions. This crisis phase is one in which leaders act instinctively, responsively, and with the intention that everyone endure in the most positive way possible.

As the crisis moment elongates into a newly-shaped reality, Dr. Breakspear suggests that the second phase of **Adaptation** emerges, and that this is when resourcefulness steps in beside resiliency. The notion of 'pivoting' with short, often minimal notification and with continual change rose to the surface for educators globally in 2020. Innovative ideas began to emerge around timetable structures, technology usage, implementation of safety protocols, and relational progress between educators, students, and parents. Dr. Breakspear notes the need for regular "pulse

checks” and “rapid cycles of testing and learning” during this phase to ensure that the intent of innovation is meeting the rapidly shifting expectations. School leaders were continually asking, “What have we done, how is it going, where are we getting stuck, what do we do next?” He suggests that during this phase, communication becomes of paramount importance and the element of trust within a constituency is critical. Resourcefulness and resiliency are part of the nature of change, and are at a premium for all who have been affected by the necessary adaptations.

One can note that Breakspear’s phases of organizational response can apply both to crises beyond one’s control and to intentional change. In many ways, these phases of organizational response and renewal echo Michael Fullan’s concept of an “implementation dip” defined in *Leading a Culture of Change* (2007) as “a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings.” The experience that accompanies any change often requires both resiliency and resourcefulness to withstand and sustain change.

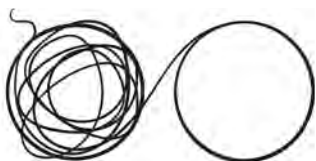
When a crisis recedes, Dr. Breakspear suggests that an organization has the potential to either “snap back” to the default of a pre-crisis reality, or advance to an **Opportunity** phase. Through an intentional reflective process, Dr. Breakspear suggests that the pivot to new ways of working, the skills learned out of necessity and the organizational changes made could renew an organization, and therefore the organization can capitalize on the crisis. He suggests that if we can “capture emerging practices, cleanse, and simplify what we know, we can weave through to a newness”. (Breakspear, 2020)

Reflective Process

Capture, Cleanse and Weave

The **Capture stage** is intended to be a rapid documentation of the collective experience. It should be simple and lean; it should be “street data” as Shane Safir might call it. It involves asking questions of staff, students, and parents not to directly evaluate a process, but to record their feelings and learnings.

Capture questions to students should be quick: he suggests two minutes, and it could be done through students asking other students.



Examples of Capture questions you might ask your **students**:

- What were the hardest parts of remote/hybrid learning?
- What is the thing you learned most about yourself over the last year of learning?
- What did you get better at over time in managing your own learning? What did it take in order for you to improve?
- What things should we keep doing from remote/hybrid learning after going back to school?

Asking staff Capture questions can be done through what Dr. Breakspear calls an “Innovation Jam”, a Google document remotely shared in a virtual staff meeting with 20 minutes provided for staff to enter their responses and to view those of others.

Examples of Capture questions you might ask your **staff**:

- What surprised you about your students over the past year?
- What surprised you about your colleagues over the past year?
- In what ways have you surprised yourself?
- What are you most proud of?
- What went well? What are the key factors that contributed to success?
- What have you come to understand more deeply about effective teaching?
- What did you learn about collaboration and teamwork?

- What are you sensing about what is now different in the ways we might be willing to work together?
- What question are we now willing to ask that we weren't willing to ask before?
- What is really clear now that wasn't clear before?

Parents should not be left out of the Capture stage, and questions applicable to your jurisdiction can elicit observations that parents have about their own child's learning.

Example of Capture questions to consider in surveys to **parents**:

- What has surprised you about your child's learning process?
- What have you learned about the connection with the school?
- What have you noticed about how can you support your child's progress?

Once you have Captured data, Dr. Breakspear suggests that you sit with it for a while, and then engage in the **Cleanse stage**: making sense of what was captured. This is a time to consider the behaviours, beliefs, practices, and ways of working that might affect organizational designs moving forward.



Here are some helpful Cleanse questions that can be used at a **staff meeting**:

1. *Don't return to:*

- What things have we discovered to be essential?
- What things that we lived without can we avoid letting back in?

2. *Deepen & sustain the new:*

- What have we recently gained that we don't want to lose?
- What new ways of working do we want to keep and deepen?

3. *Revive the old*

- What have we deeply missed?
- What things should we bring back in?
- What have we lost that was valuable?

These are questions that can be asked in relation to a variety of scenarios, including staff meetings and interactions, communication, professional learning, team planning, parent and family engagement, leadership structures, and organization design. We have all been working differently, and there is no doubt that we have learned much. This process of Cleansing allows for intentional reflection based on the data Captured.

The final stage offered by Dr. Breakspear is that of the **Weave stage**. This is done at a time of planning and preparation for the future, and can allow us to embrace the Opportunity phase of organizational renewal and avoid a 'snap back' to previous practices.



Here are some Weave questions that might be used with your **leadership team**:

- What are our collective aspirations for the type of learning community we would like to sustain?
- How can we connect our previous school plans and directions with our new ways of working?
- How did this situation help us accelerate desired transformation?
- What do we need to do next?

Through a purposeful process, school leaders have the opportunity to guide others in making sense of the lessons learned over the past year, and to make changes, not just for the sake of change, but based on what we have learned about ourselves and the organization in the midst of crisis, changes that might not have been considered previously.

As expressed by UBC's Dr. Mark Edwards to participants in the BCPVPA 2020 Essentials for New School Leaders program, there have been some "Gifts of COVID" that we can embrace. We have all learned to work differently and with a sense of hopefulness; the work and efforts need not be lost to a crisis, but in fact woven into newness and renewal,

keeping the jewels of the past, the best of the present, and the possibilities of the future.

Thank you to Dr. Simon Breakspear for sharing his thinking about how school leaders can lead for organizational renewal out of this time of crisis, and apply this process during any time of change.

If you have any questions or interest in this process, please contact the BCPVPA PLD Directors:

elizabeth@bcpvpa.bc.ca

andrea@bcpvpa.bc.ca

peter@bcpvpa.bc.ca

 @lizbell44



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