

In my role as President I'm frequently asked to provide perspectives that reflect a school leader's experiences.

Using a recent example, I was invited by the Honourable Shane Simpson, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, to discuss what accessibility and inclusion could look like in British Columbia as part of the process to develop a Framework for Accessibility and Inclusion legislation. During the briefing, we discussed ways to identify, prevent and remove barriers that limit the participation of people with disabilities in their communities and – specifically – in schools.

Typically, I am comfortable with and confident in these conversations through my 28-year career as a teacher, Vice-Principal and then Principal. In the past 6 years, in my current role and as a Director, my awareness of the diversity of the community contexts that Principals and Vice-Principals both work and live in has grown exponentially. Reflecting on my own experiences and recent visits to more than 45 school districts, I was able to share a number of pragmatic examples with Minister Simpson. We also discussed the complex nature of the systems that connect to and affect our schools, including our

Permission to Breathe

**Sustaining Leadership in
Complex Systems**

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communities and geography. The Ministry is engaged in very complex work, and I am grateful to support the process. With this in mind, I invited the Minister and his team to engage with students through our bi-annual BC Student Voice Summit and to hear their important contextual perspective.

As initiatives such as this intersect with the roles of Principals and Vice-Principals, I remain conscious of the complicated nature of our work, and the reality that our roles and responsibilities continue to place an increasing demand on our skills and capacities.

Many years ago, I fully engaged in the 'relationships, relationships, relationships' approach in my roles as a teacher, coach and leader, and I continue to be a 'relationships first' leader. I have worked with people my whole life, not widgets. I learned long ago that human connectedness is critical to individual and team engagement, and therefore necessary if we intend our generative work to lead to transformative change.

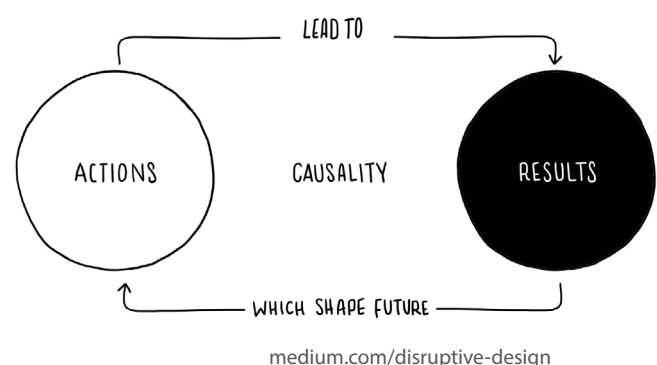
What I did not learn in those early days was the necessary skills to sustain myself when engaging in countless relationships, and the ever-increasing emotional toll that empathy can have when left 'unattended'. Supporting the diverse needs of others is the work I signed on for, but without a strategy to monitor and re-set myself to a baseline over the long haul, that is not sustainable. My strategy was more likely to keep moving faster, as the action of engaging in the work was easier than the development of new strategies to sustain myself. Or, even easier: how many weeks until Spring Break? Sound familiar?

To sustain our capacity to lead complex systems requires us to live in self-care, rather than setting aside time for self-care.

~Mette Boell

I see that same lack of strategy catching up to friends and colleagues, not just in education but in many different sectors and roles where care, support and positive relationships are necessary. Leadership roles are complicated, and time is finite.

Fortunately, and with gratitude to colleagues and mentors like Pippa Rowcliffe at HELP UBC, Jack MacNeill from humanworks, Dr. Mark Edwards at UBC and Peter Senge at MIT, I have learned a number of new strategies that I am now sharing with others, so that they have the option of incorporating the ideas into their vision for their leadership journey. Today, I give myself permission to breathe in the rhythms of the day and the work, with the goal of sustaining relationships and sustaining myself. I also apply systems thinking tools when I am working with my complex responsibilities.



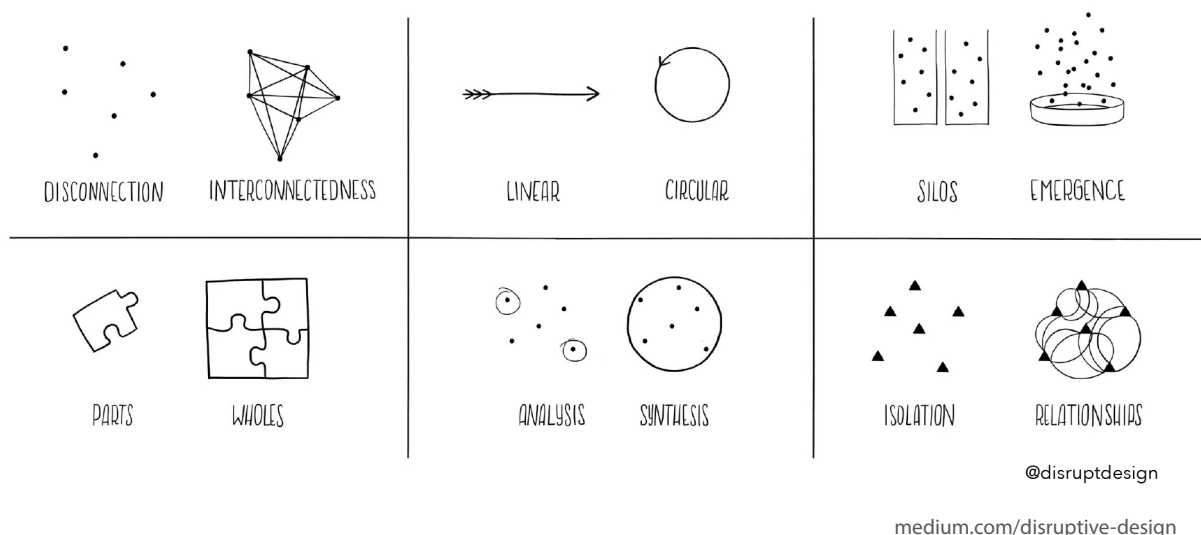
**Today's problems
are often
yesterday's solutions.**

~Peter Senge

When asked to engage in a problem-solving activity, I no longer look for the quick fixes related to the basic input and output of the situation. It's never that simple. Simple often leads to more challenges down the road. We work in very complex systems

that rely on human connectedness and relationships. Having an awareness of how we as individuals 'fit' in the system with our teams, and recognizing the many relationships that connect to our decisions, are skills that we can learn and utilize in our practice. Reducing complex problems to simple components to deal with in isolation eliminates the relationships that are critical to the success of the solution we are seeking, and limits our capacity to move forward with 'real' solutions.

TOOLS OF A SYSTEM THINKER



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I started on this journey 20 months ago and although there was no 'how-to' guide for the role of President, I made some assumptions and held a few beliefs regarding expectations. I assumed that my vision for this role and the work I was launching required communication, strategic planning, research and data analysis, and the development of a networking mindset.

All were true, but I missed one critical piece: I am no good to anyone if I am burned out and emotionally drained. When I developed an awareness of self within the system, I gave myself permission to breathe and I created the space to sustain my physical and emotional energy. By sharing and modelling this vision, I am hopeful that others will recognize a bit of their own journey in mine, and follow suit by giving themselves permission to breathe.

" Give yourself permission to breathe."