

An Invitation

To Lead Through a Compassionate Lens

by

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You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself in any
direction you choose.

Oh, the Places You'll Go
Dr. Seuss

From my early career as a primary school teacher, to my surprising and unexpected transformation into a school leader, I have been a self-professed Queen of Professional Development. As you know, educational leaders are presented with myriad directions we can choose. I have shelves full of books on educational leadership, and I have attended countless leadership workshops over the years, always striving to move myself and my school toward a more authentic, student-centred model of education. But nothing has had such a profound impact on how I engage with this work as my encounter with Compassionate Systems Leadership.

Compassionate Systems Leadership is best visualized as a three-legged stool, with each leg representing the capacities we, as leaders, strive to build: personal mastery; awareness of our relationship with others and with Mother Earth; and systems thinking, or recognizing how our decisions and actions impact the systems in which we live and work.

THREE LEGGED STOOL



Graphic courtesy of the Center for Systems Awareness: systemsawareness.org

Compassionate Systems Leadership is endorsed by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care as one of the foundations of their Mental Health in Schools Strategy.



In fact, Compassionate Systems Leadership recognizes that every person in our system – from the bus driver to the Education Assistant to the Superintendent – is a leader, and encourages shared leadership and shared responsibility for the conditions within our schools and school districts.

In some ways, Compassionate Systems Leadership confirmed what I already knew: that how we show up matters, and that authentic relationships are key to meaningful change. It provides tools and dispositions to support the mental health of the adults working in our buildings, acknowledging that **we** must be well before we can hope to address the alarming levels of stress, anxiety, and depression presenting in our students.

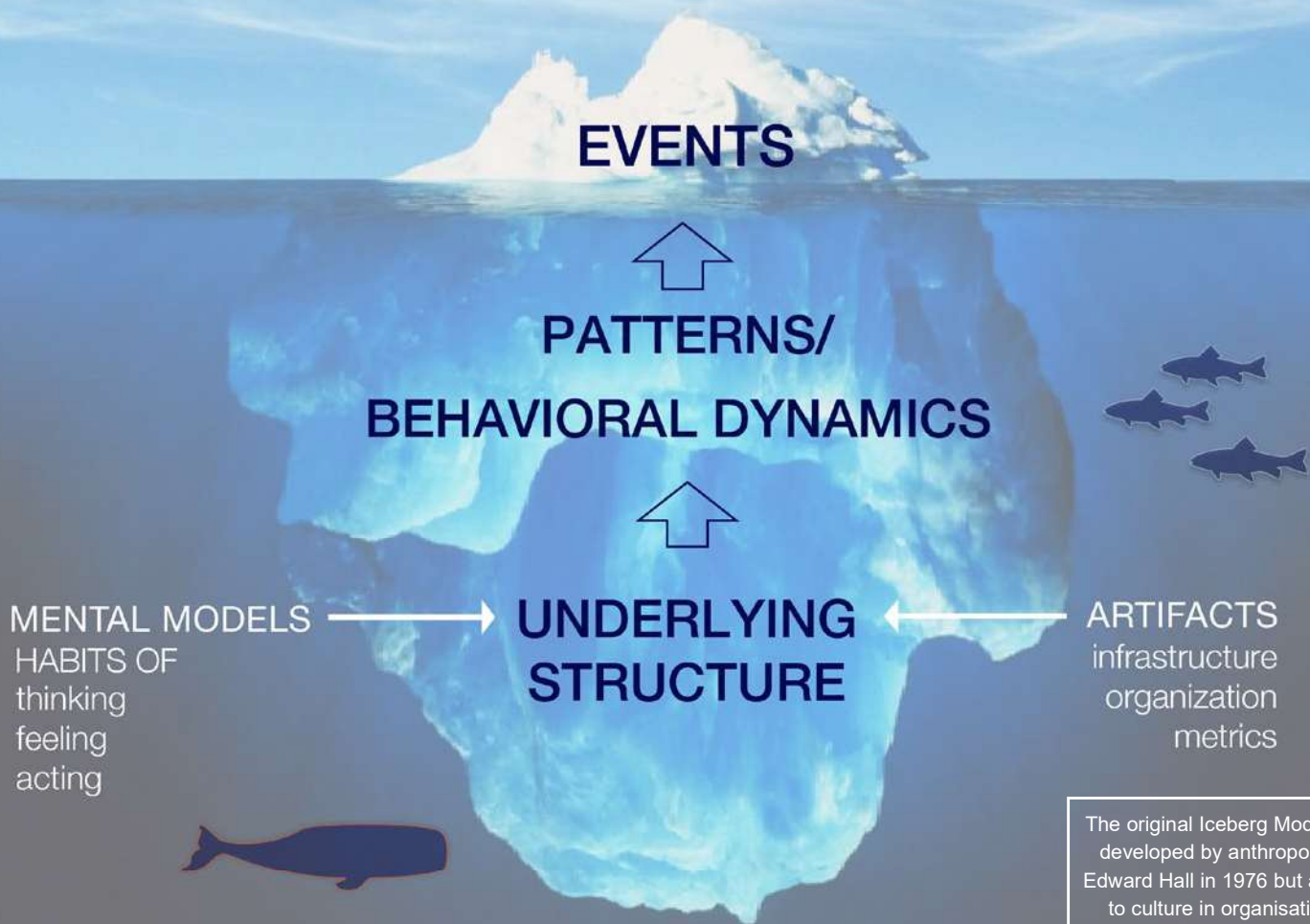
In other ways, Compassionate Systems has challenged me, and my staff, to slow down and examine many of our traditional practices, acknowledging their colonial foundations. It has allowed us to recognize that, for many educators, we “do” school the way we *experienced* school, because it worked for us, without thinking about all of those students for whom school was – and is – associated with failure. Sadly, these are often our most vulnerable and marginalized students.

Let me provide you with one example of how Compassionate Systems thinking helped us, as a school, to address a problem of practice. When I arrived at my current school, our Student Code of Conduct mandated that, if a student intentionally hurt someone, they would be suspended from school. This put me in a difficult position, where I was dishing out suspensions to students, knowing that my actions alienated them from school, and from opportunities to learn. Using systems tools, we were able to collectively examine our school’s Code of Conduct.

Using the Systems Thinking Iceberg (*shown on next page*), we were able to dive below the surface and examine why some of our students hurt others. We recognized that, in many cases, they had been taught to “fight back” if someone bothers them, and they did not have any other strategies to deal with conflict. We also realized that these students were often targeted by other students, who were quick to use hurtful words, choosing to use them when we were out of earshot.

Another tool, Shifting the Burden (*shown on next page*), helped us to interrogate why we, as a staff, kept returning to the suspension model of discipline. We recognized that when a student is suspended, we all breathe a collective sigh of relief because, for a few days, we don’t have to worry about the student “getting into trouble” at school. In addition, the community looks upon suspension as us “doing something” about the problem. An interesting observation is that those parents who demand punitive consequences for students who have harmed their child often seek

SYSTEMS THINKING ICEBERG

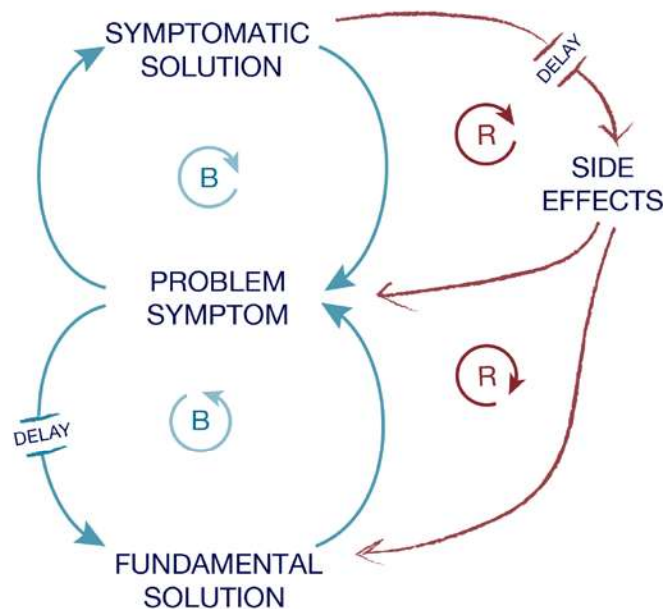


“STRUCTURE SHAPES BEHAVIOR”

Graphic courtesy of the Center for Systems Awareness: systemsawareness.org

The original Iceberg Model was developed by anthropologist Edward Hall in 1976 but applied to culture in organisations. It was then adapted and evolved by systems and management theorists.

SHIFTING THE BURDEN



B = BALANCING LOOP R = REINFORCING LOOP

Graphic courtesy of the Center for Systems Awareness: systemsawareness.org

Shifting the Burden is recognized as a systems archetype that is part of the palette of systems thinking tools

compassionate and restorative consequences when it is their own child who perpetrates harm against another.

Shifting the Burden also supported us in recognizing that there are alternative ways of dealing with hurtful students, ways that build long-term skills and a greater sense of belonging. When they return from a suspension, most students do their best not to get into trouble again. However, because they don't have conflict resolution tools in their toolbox, and because, inevitably, someone will come along and say something mean, the cycle begins again. Soon we end up with students on chronic suspension, negatively impacting both their academic and social development. By taking proactive steps to address the root cause of the behaviour, we began to see more positive outcomes for our students. In some cases, we provided additional supervision and coaching to help students learn new ways to deal with conflict. We also addressed the negative and hurtful comments being handed out by other students with the same lens we applied to the violent responses.

Although we did not see overnight results with this more compassionate approach, we have certainly seen many students, over time, learn to deal with their emotions in pro-social ways. I wish I could say that this process was seamless, but in fact it was often messy and uncomfortable, and frequently forced us to confront our biases and core beliefs.

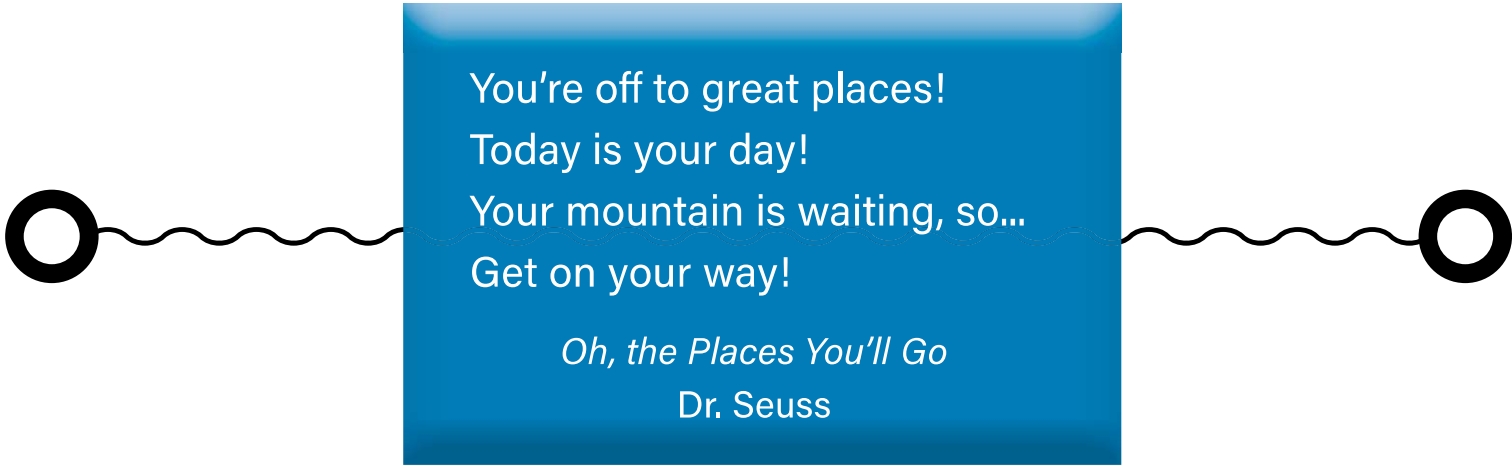
Compassionate Systems Leadership is not a quick fix, a course, or a program: it is a journey. It is an

invitation to develop a deep, reflective relationship with yourself, with those around you, with the earth that sustains us, and with our shared history. For me, that journey has often been difficult, as I began to explore dark crevasses and unfamiliar terrain. However, in a world that presents uncertainty across so many realms, Compassionate Systems Leadership encourages us to be leaders who, in Margaret J. Wheatley's words, "use their power and influence, their insight and compassion, to lead people back to an understanding of who we are as human beings, to create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community, and love, to be evoked no matter what." It provides tools and opportunities to reimagine our schools as "islands of sanity in the midst of a raging, destructive sea." ¹

I am coming to the end of an amazing career, filled with powerful learning, wonderful staff and students, and awe-inspiring mentors and colleagues. My biggest regret? That I did not come to Compassionate Systems Leadership sooner.

If you, like me, are looking for new ways to look at yourself and your role as an educational leader, new perspectives on teaching and learning, and new tools to address an increasingly complex world, I invite you to embark on this incredible journey. It will not be easy, but it will be infinitely worthwhile. Whether you are new to your role, or a seasoned school leader, you cannot help but be transformed by the Compassionate Systems experience.

¹ Wheatley, Margaret J., *Who Do We Choose to Be?* p.8



You're off to great places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting, so...
Get on your way!

Oh, the Places You'll Go
Dr. Seuss