How to Build an Adaptive Education System.

Real world practices and examples

Evolving culture and building adaptive capacity in schools.

Written by
Andrew Brown & Dave Runge

Adaptive Cultures *enabling cultural evolution* **Future Schools**

Evolving the Education System

"The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn…and change" - Carl Rogers

As our world becomes ever more complex and the pace of change continues to accelerate, the education system has a pivotal role in equipping society with the skills and capacities to adapt, grow and shape this emerging future.

Education is one of the most critical elements of an active and healthy modern society. The importance of this system in supporting the growth and development of young people personally, emotionally, socially and academically cannot be overstated. Education influences the future of society, it helps us make sense of our humanness and social dynamics and shapes the minds of future leaders, entrepreneurs and employees. It truly is a pillar of social health and human development that informs community growth and harmony.

With the profound impact of the above in mind, we contend that the traditional education system has not kept up with the changing needs of society. The standardised and non-personalised nature of the system does not adequately prepare students for the challenges and opportunities they will face in their futures. As the world becomes more interconnected and complex, we need an education system that; alongside core literacy and numeracy development, teaches students to think critically, problem-solve, collaborate and most importantly be resilient and adaptable.

The case for change has been well put by many before us. There is a compelling need for an education system that enables equity, engagement, wellbeing, and future pathways.

The idea that system change is called for is resonating loudly.

With the case for change made, it's time for action. As the saying goes, If not you then who and if not now, then when. There is a social imperative that demands our attention and although there are many drivers of this urgency, the following themes really do create a compulsion to act.

1. **Growing levels of student disengagement and passive resistance.**
2. **Declining outcomes on a broad cross section of educational measures.**
3. **Rising health and wellbeing issues, leading to withdrawal and at times profound loneliness.**
4. **Significant workforce issues; teacher resignation rates, substantial staff shortages and leadership burnout.**
5. **Community disconnection and inequity across the education sector.**

The education system is experiencing a heightened level of stress. It is crucial to identify the underlying causes of that stress and seek to proactively and positively intervene.

What is clear is that the current education system needs to evolve more rapidly to enable the learning and capacity building necessary for our changing world. We use the term 'evolve' intentionally as it implies building off the best of the existing approaches, as we collectively seek to develop an education system that is more fit for future purpose. A system that supports the development and cultivation of the skills and dispositions required to deal with the changes occurring in the environment, society, workplaces, and our personal lives. In short, to a system that is more adaptive.

In our experience, working across multiple countries and education jurisdictions, the opportunities and challenges in progressing education systems are similar. Whilst there are differences in the histories of varying education systems, there is a remarkable convergence towards desired futures and the interventions required for transformation today.

The challenge seems not to be articulating the 'why' for system evolution but rather providing a pathway to the 'how'. Throughout this paper we have included a number of frameworks and tools that have been useful in supporting teams, leaders, schools, departments, associations and governing bodies progress change in their areas of influence.

These stories are captured in short case studies throughout the paper to highlight what is possible. We invite you to consider the relevance and application of this paper to your sphere of influence and context, as we collectively explore system evolution.

A Critical Challenge in Progressing the Education System.

The critical challenge we face in progressing change in the education system, stems from our lived experiences of the system that inform and perpetuate our personal perspectives and worldviews about education. The common sentiment of *"that's not how it was when I was at school"* is evidence of the power of lived experience, it informs our thoughts and actions.

These personal perspectives and worldviews determine our perceptions of what school 'should' be and look like, what 'should' be taught, how young people 'should' behave, and what the role of the teacher 'should' be. This lived experience disrupts our ability to conceptualise and enact an education system that could more effectively fulfil society's evolving needs and demands.

When such perspectives and worldviews are so tightly held, it is confronting to make change. Any movement toward change may invoke all kinds of defences and limit our openness to alternative approaches and perspectives. Consequently, the vulnerability of our education system to being politicalised is deepened as decision making, messaging, funding and measurement of education revert to populism rather than progress.

For the education system to adapt and meet the opportunities before it, existing worldviews and perspectives of the varied stakeholders will need to evolve.

Progressing in the face of this challenge

The intention of this paper is to suggest some ways to progress this challenge and explore how to evolve such a complex system. This paper will examine how to enable progress towards a set of aspirational qualities of the future of the education system. It will offer a set of frameworks, tools and methodologies that can be used to support this type of change, whilst also encouraging hope by providing examples from those who are already on the journey towards transformation.

Some core questions to be explored as we collectively endeavour to evolve the education system include:

1. How do the roles, beliefs, identities and experiences in education need to evolve for the various stakeholders – students, teachers, educational leaders, governing bodies, parents and educational advisers, researchers and philosophers?
2. How could thinking differently about teaching and learning bring about adaptation and liberate possible future opportunities?
3. How do we enable collective sense-making of the current education system and shared exploration of its potential?
4. What kind of structures and practices would enable the system to evolve? For example – physical and virtual spaces, policies, measures, roles and governance.
5. What worldviews may currently be holding the school/education cultures in place, and what would need to happen to release or transform the worldviews that no longer serve us? What new narratives of education are required?
6. How do we develop the capacities of all stakeholders and focus on the education of the whole human being?

We all have a crucial responsibility and opportunity to evolve how we consider, talk about and support the evolution of this profoundly important system we call education. Through our actions, insight and involvement, we are co-creators of the future education system.

Collective sense-making, the Board's role in system evolution.

An education association identified the need to build capacity to manage emerging complexities for the schools it represented. This included deliberate development of adaptability in the operating rhythms of these schools.

A series of workshops were developed for governing bodies (Boards) and Principals to work collaboratively, exploring their role in enabling a more adaptive school culture. Working in partnership with the Principal of the school, the Board deepened its understanding of the role it plays in supporting the Leadership Team to enact culture in service of the future of the school.

Follow up interviews identified that a focus on culture brought a sharpness to strategic alignment, increased transparency, and deepened working relationships. The intent to increase the adaptive capacity of individuals, teams and the school more broadly has had positive effects on the capability and prospects of the schools involved in this initiative.

What is Possible?

"Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another" - G.K Chesterton

For the education system to evolve, greater levels of personal agency across all stakeholders in the system is crucial.

Imagine being part of a school of the future. As a young person enrolled in the school, you are actively engaged in designing your own curriculum, alongside your learning partners and facilitators (formerly known as teachers).

Education has moved beyond the social control of young people and the traditional knowledge transfer from a 'teacher' to a 'student'. New learnings take place between different participants in the learning experiences. Group learning experiences are often designed and constructed by learners, for learners.

For what purpose do we educate? This core philosophical question is front of mind at all times; for those facilitating the learning, for those enrolling their family members in the learning, for those overseeing the learning paradigms and for those reporting and measuring on what learning is taking place.

The school exists within, rather than separate from, the external world. As the world around the school continues to evolve, new fields of knowledge emerge, with some fields becoming less relevant. Some areas integrate or blend together, the fields of study naturally evolve and gravitate towards what are likely to be core life skills for the 21st century.

The facilitators of learning readily challenge and support each other to create the most powerful space for transformational thought and learning to take place. New technologies, learning needs and opportunities are at the centre of school discussions and regularly take place in innovative learning spaces. New ways of educating and learning are beginning to emerge.

What were once referred to as classrooms have been replaced by spaces of learning and development; these take whatever form is necessary and are easily constructed and deconstructed in order to most effectively meet emerging learning needs.

These spaces are intentionally constructed to enable experiential environments that learners can step into, to craft their educational journey. The educative approach taken within these spaces supports the highest capacity and authenticity of learners to be liberated.

All this is made possible through eliminating barriers and re-designing parts of the system (curriculum, learning approaches, measurement techniques) that no longer have a place in the 21st century. Responsibility for the growth and development of the school is truly shared and leadership distributed. The fluid social networks that bring this to life have superseded the older models of a governing body that instructs on what is required.

To contemplate a move towards such an education system, the perspective we hold about students and teachers, and the roles they take up in the system, need to be explored.

About the Students

- How does the term 'student' limit the potential of learning participants and what term (if any) would better liberate their potential?
- To what extent should students be co-creating their learning journey, and how can space be provided to enable that?
- To what extent are students able to hold their own learning journey, and how can the system enable each student to hold as much of their learning journey as they possibly can?
- How would we create an experience that sees the learning journey originating from the point of interest and passion of the learner, to enable a personal growth experience?
- What would we need to believe about students to consider them to be part of the co-creation journey? To what extent is this already true?
- How would we need to evolve the constraints that currently suppress students' growth/development potential?

continue...

About the Teachers

- How does the term 'teacher' limit the potential of learning facilitators and what term (if any) would better liberate their potential?
- What worldviews have traditionally been embodied within teacher training, teacher behaviours and the broader educational system; for example - teacher as an expert, teacher as authority? How would these need to evolve or be disrupted to enable the kind of evolution required?
- In what ways would relationships and power dynamics need to evolve in schools?
- How would the educator need to begin to see their role and the associated identity of being a teacher?
- What teacher demographics would be required to support evolution in the system?

About the Leaders

- What worldviews have traditionally been embodied about what leadership is (or 'should be') in the education system? Have leaders traditionally been seen as only people in positions of hierarchical authority? How would these need to evolve or be disrupted to enable the kind of evolution required?
- If leadership was a quality which was imbued in each and every person (learners, facilitators, educators, administrators etc), what would that mean for how learning spaces may be constructed and roles distributed?
- In what ways would the traditionally hierarchical nature of schools need to transform and how would the taking up of positional power of leaders need to evolve?
- What educational methods would enable this liberation of personal agency and self-leadership across the education system?

"The point isn't to be the hero and solve things; the point of the leader in a complex world is to enable and unleash as many heroes and as many solutions as possible."
Jennifer Garvey-Berger

Principles for transforming complex systems

"Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole" - Margaret Wheatly

The behaviour of a system depends on how the parts of a system are connected. Transforming a complex system is a complex task! Virtually every system is unique in its own right, is influenced by a unique set of other systems, and is subject to constant and ongoing disruption.

Some transformations require ongoing evolution (a building on and refining of what has come before), while some transformations may require a more radical disruption or rejection of the current ways (revolution).

This paper focuses primarily on evolution with its benefits of engaging all stakeholders and bringing about sustainable system change. We believe many aspects of the current system are a necessary foundation for transformation.

Is transformation possible? Has transformation happened in social systems historically? Absolutely. Energy for transformation typically comes from two key sources:

1. *When current ways of being no longer serve us and there is a concerted desire to move away from or to fix or reform the things that may inhibit progress.*
2. *When new possibilities and ideas emerge that are so compelling that people are drawn to these new possibilities, engaging in a larger purpose.*

As we focus on what needs to be reformed, and what compelling future we are moving towards, we need to consider the levers of transformation that can support us and the kinds of capacities required. The following diagram outlines these levers.
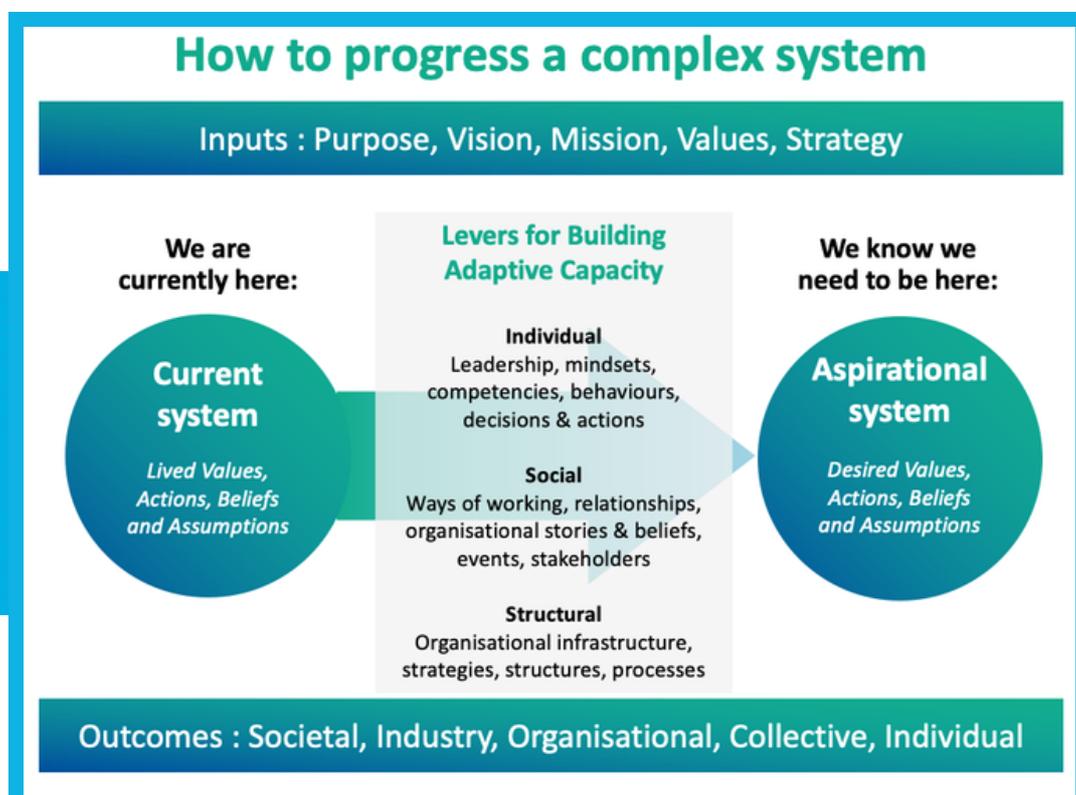

Diagram 1: Progressing a Complex System

How do we Identify these Levers and Build these Capacities within Education?

The following ideas have proven helpful in guiding progress in complex systems.

- **Evolutionary journey:** Transformation is an evolutionary journey whereby we focus on continuous adaptation. We progress through iteration; step by step, pilot by pilot, person by person.

- **Building awareness:** There is a need to deepen the awareness of all system participants of how they are holding the current system in place through their own worldviews and behaviours - and what worldviews or behaviours would be required to liberate the system.

- **Continuous learning:** Enabling learning in every activity so it is as much about learning about the system, about ourselves as part of the system and how the system evolves as it is learning within the system.

- **Personal agency**: Liberating all people in a system. Providing autonomy and voice and eliminating suppressive behaviours, governance and worldviews. Engage people at a deep level with a focus on motivation, commitment and personal ownership for progressing what we can.

- **Strategic alignment:** Aligning the intention of the system with what the external world is calling for to ensure that progress is towards the desired future.

- **Exploring curiously:** Honestly and compassionately airing uncomfortable or unpalatable differences while always focusing on how we can progress i.e., 'naming the elephants'!

- **Following the energy:** Find the initiatives that are working and elements that are liberating sufficient energy that promote evolution in the system. For example, purpose, language and narratives.

- **Re-framing the system:** Dismantling and reforming the micro elements within a complex system. These include the social systems, the technology systems, the systems of governance and hierarchies etc.

- **Celebrating positive intent:** Making it as easy as possible to progress and as difficult as possible to revert to existing ways. For example - pay attention to, communicate and celebrate or acknowledge progress.

- **Creating congruence:** Conscious measurement - ensuring the way measurement is implemented and applied supports the system's intent, rather than reinforce the status quo or suppressive aspects of the system.

- **Structural reinforcement:** Designing and implementing policy and processes that facilitate a shift in practice.

Letting go of unhelpful narratives - celebrating progress and exploring curiously.

With a mandate to improve Teaching and Learning Practice and Innovation across many schools within their jurisdiction, this departmental school improvement team was finding it hard to mobilise change. On several occasions, the team finished a project, thinking it had been embedded within the schools, only to see teachers revert to past behaviours and ways of working.

A lack of uptake and integration at the school level created tension for the school improvement team, leading to defensiveness and blame between team members.

A series of offsite meetings created a compassionate and safe space to constructively air frustrations. There was a focus on moving forward, liberating personal agency, and celebrating progress. The stress that had been building between team members began to subside as all involved came to understand the positive intent of others.

This growing level of awareness highlighted to those involved the importance of letting go of narratives that were no longer serving the future they wanted to create. As attention shifted to what could be influenced and how people could collaborate, this department experienced a profound upturn in sustained impact.

What qualities are required to enable transformation?

"It has become clear everywhere that the schools we have today will not be able to provide opportunities for students to learn what is necessary in the future"
- Pasi Sahlberg

If we were designing an education system that is future able and ready, what would the qualities of that system be?

Courageously Adaptive
Enabling a progressive, constantly learning education system; transforming barriers such as regulatory and self-imposed constraints that hinder student, teacher, parent and school autonomy and agency. For example - school leaders would seek to minimise the impact of regulation, policy and procedures that disable the ability of the school to be adaptive and agile in relation to new and emerging futures.

Coherence
All parts aligned, all parts understanding their impact and influence on each other. All players in the system understand their roles, influence, how they need to interact with each other, how they collectively show up, explore and ideate for future progression (collective intelligence).

Community Integration
Schools build relationship-based networks that extend beyond the physical campus with deep, ongoing, and seamless integration with family, businesses, community organisations, universities and into the global community, accessing wisdom through these networks.

Liberating Everyone's Highest Potential
Individual learning paths for all students and educators incorporating a developmental mind-set within a deeply inclusive culture that celebrates difference and embeds respect for all. Learning experiences are based on developing strengths with broad measures of success. Personal agency is a primary element of being a learner.

Educators Embodying Learning and Development
Wise, caring, creative and highly skilled educators are engaged in ongoing personal development that is embedded into their daily learning experiences, the focus of such experiences is personal growth, fulfilment and holistic development – the greater the development of the educator, the greater capacity they have to enable others to grow. Educators are able to move seamlessly into, and out of, the profession to build capability and maintain passion.

Co-Constructed Learning
Students and staff share the responsibility for co-constructing learning journeys that are relevant to the individual learner and contribute to the broader community. This includes, but is not limited to, problem-based learning, play-based learning, social enterprise and entrepreneurial activities.

Core Capability Development
Confident written, spoken and digital communication skills alongside numeracy, scientific and cultural understandings empower students to make informed choices in life and to be active contributors to their community.

Equity and Inclusion
All students have access to an acceptable standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend. Furthermore, within schools, personalisation is prioritised and individual learning needs catered for, so all learners are supported to grow, develop and realise their highest potential.

Building Capacity and Personal Agency- toward cultural evolution across a school.

The culture of this school was described as siloed, compliance driven and based on control. The new Principal committed to enabling a more innovative and collaborative culture, where deep learning, personal responsibility and transparent dialogue was central to the school's growth.

Open to all staff across the school, people were asked to commit to a series of sessions on cultural evolution. The sessions aimed to create awareness about how culture forms, how it can evolve and what people can do individually and collectively to support school transformation.

These sessions created an energy for change and led to a leadership development program that targeted personal growth and cultural adaptation. This program became the primary lever to enable innovation and collaboration. The team at this school, with the support of highly targeted tools and frameworks, were able to build the personal agency and adaptive capacity to navigate a pathway to the type of culture they desired.

By deliberately building the capacity of the team to positively influence the culture, the Principal distributed her leadership impact and fast tracked the improvement at the school.

Frameworks for Exploring and Catalysing Evolution

Insights on How to Evolve and Build Adaptive Capacity.

We offer the following adaptive frameworks as sense-making tools to support the journey in evolving our education system. Our observation and professional practice suggest that in order to make such a transformation, we need to focus on the evolution of individuals, social dynamics and structures across the many systems that comprise the broader education system.

Change often flounders when structural change occurs without considering individual capacity, social dynamics and ways of working. In our experience, ensuring stability across these three domains creates a reinforcing, balanced system that increases the likelihood of embedding change.

Levers for building adaptive capacity

The Individual, Social, and Structural levers are reflected in Diagram 2.

The following points provide examples of areas of potential focus during the transformation journey of the education system.

Individual evolution

- Understanding how current worldviews across the education system may inhibit progress, and what mindsets may be necessary to progress. Examples include possessive language ("my students"), projection of responsibility onto others ("the students need to grow up, the departments are too bureaucratic") and holding limiting assumptions ("that could never happen around here").

- There is a need to focus on building deeper insight and awareness to develop greater levels of personal responsibility. This growing responsibility has the potential to increase accountability and engagement and people's capacity to adapt, thus acting to enable system transformation. For example, the realisation that we form part of the systems that we are embedded in means that by taking different actions and making different choices we influence those systems.

- Leadership that is distributed and invites stakeholders into being involved in the development of solutions and the actioning of learning will be fundamental. Transformation such as this requires leaders to mobilise effort and draw attention to how priorities, values and assumptions need to evolve so that the system can transform.

Reflection: In what ways do individual worldviews and capacities inhibit or enable the potential for growth and development in the education system?

SOCIAL
Ways of Working
Relationships
Organisational Stories
Beliefs
Events
Stakeholders

Levers for Building Adaptive Capacity

INDIVIDUAL
Leadership
Mindsets
Competencies
Behaviours
Decisions
Actions

STRUCTURAL
Organisational
Infrastrucutre
Strategies
Structures
Processes
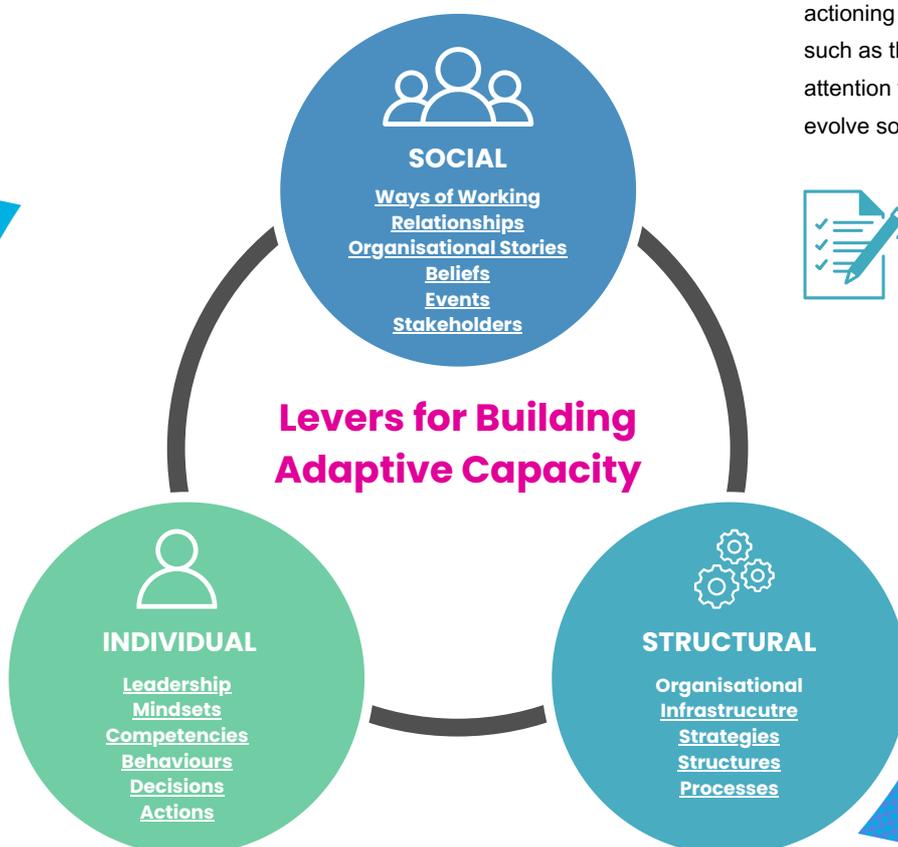
Diagram 2: Levers for Building Adaptive Capacity

Social evolution

How different stakeholders currently work together may inhibit the system. What would need to happen to progress this? For example, the factors that we have observed that may require attention include:

- Power dynamics and hierarchy ('my expertise gives me authority.')
- Unhealthy focus on progress creating unhealthy competition.
- Narrative, stories and ways of relating that fail to reflect the aspirational culture.
- Collective belief about the capacities of young people, about what a good educator looks like etc. can either enable or inhibit progress.

An unwillingness to move from 'I' to 'we' as the educational body seeks to share responsibility across educators, students and other stakeholders such as parents and governing bodies.

Reflection: In what ways do existing ways of working and shared beliefs or narratives inhibit or enable the potential for growth and development in the education system?

Structural evolution
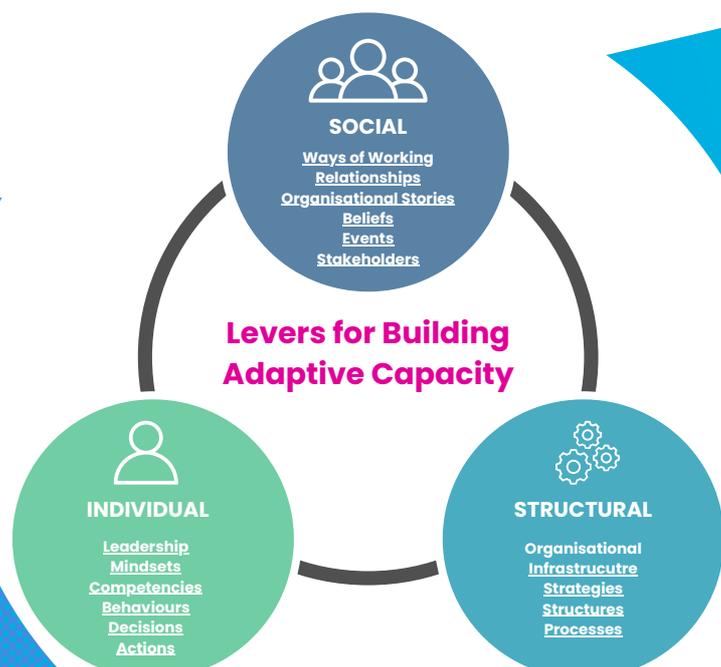
- How learning is currently managed, legislated, organised, and funded through the current education system needs to be evaluated and considered. How this may restrict innovation or put limitations on perspectives of what learning is or could be, and what would need to happen to progress this requires attention.

- The influence of policy, processes, and procedures, as well as the impact of system-wide strategies needs review and critique to assess the effect of such forces on the transformation journey of the broader system.

Reflection: In what ways do existing processes and procedures inhibit or enable the potential for growth and development in the system (for example, mandated number of teaching hours, few direct resources for personal development etc.?)

SOCIAL
Ways of Working
Relationships
Organisational Stories
Beliefs
Events
Stakeholders

Levers for Building Adaptive Capacity

INDIVIDUAL
Leadership
Mindsets
Competencies
Behaviours
Decisions
Actions

STRUCTURAL
Organisational
Infrastrucutre
Strategies
Structures
Processes

Stages of Cultural Evolution

So far in this paper we have explored the idea of building capacities to evolve the education system. These capacities include worldviews, behaviours, ways of working, stories, policies, processes and structures. When new capacities are fully embodied and held across the system, we describe this as a new stage of cultural evolution. The Stages of Cultural Evolution (Diagram 3) framework is a way of assisting the stewards of larger systems to visualise this journey and to hold an image of what the next steps might look like as they bring to life this aspirational culture.

The Stages of Cultural Evolution framework describes

- *How* people work together and how individuals grow and develop throughout the system (dependent > independent > interdependent > co- evolving.)
- *What* the system focuses on as being important and how this focus determines the adaptive capacity required of the system (compliance > results > capacity building > evolving systems.)
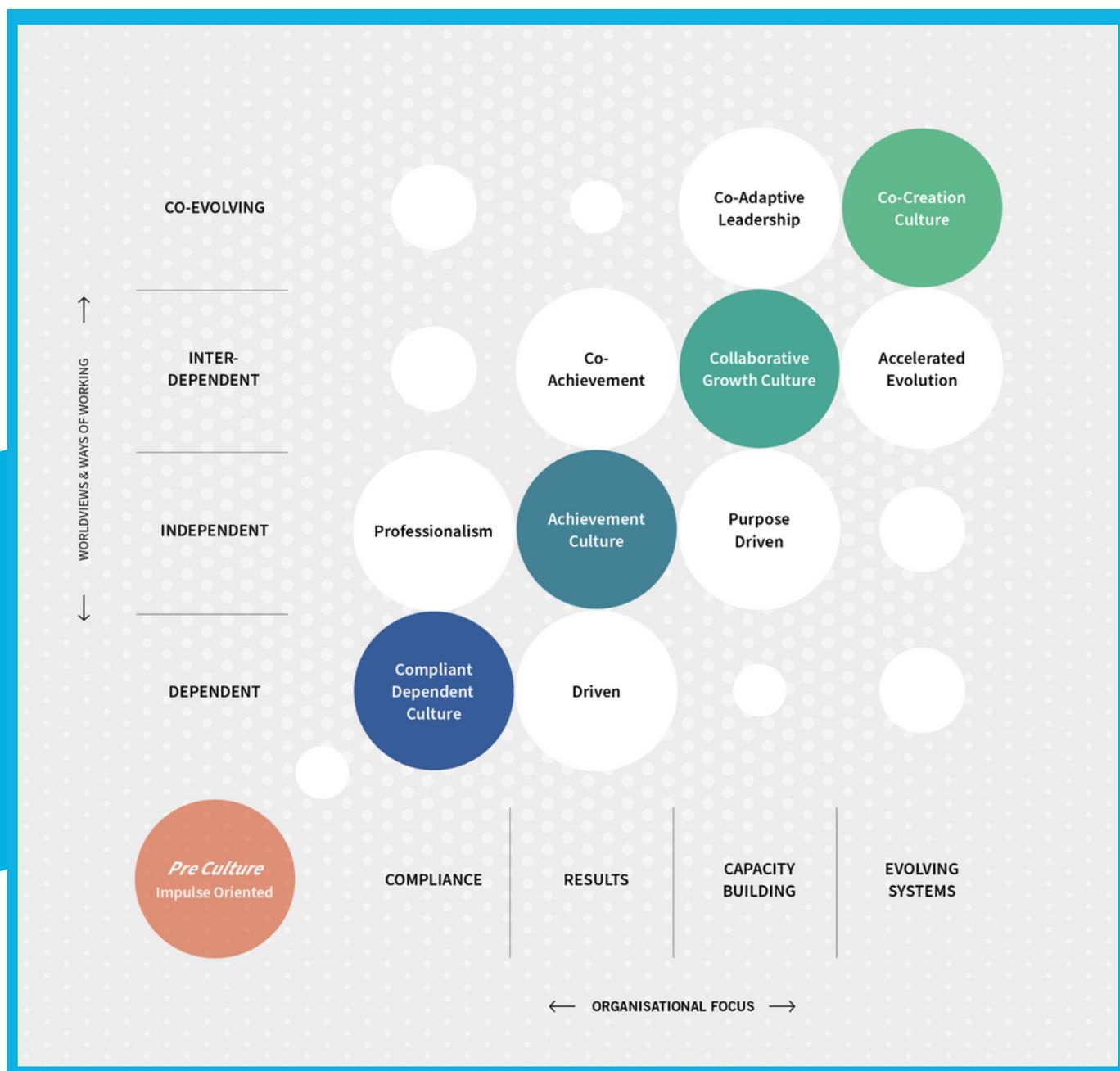

Diagram 3: The Stages of Cultural Evolution framework

Understanding the Stages of Evolution in an Educational Context

In the following table (Diagram 4) highlights cultural attributes of the education system. It has proven useful as a way to identify the current stage of cultural development, in turn providing a foundation from which to consider future possibilities.

The change in focus, expectations, and experience at different stages of cultural development expressed in Diagram 4 help us identify our aspirational stage of cultural evolution, giving rise to a greater appreciation for what would need to change for that aspirational culture to come to fruition.
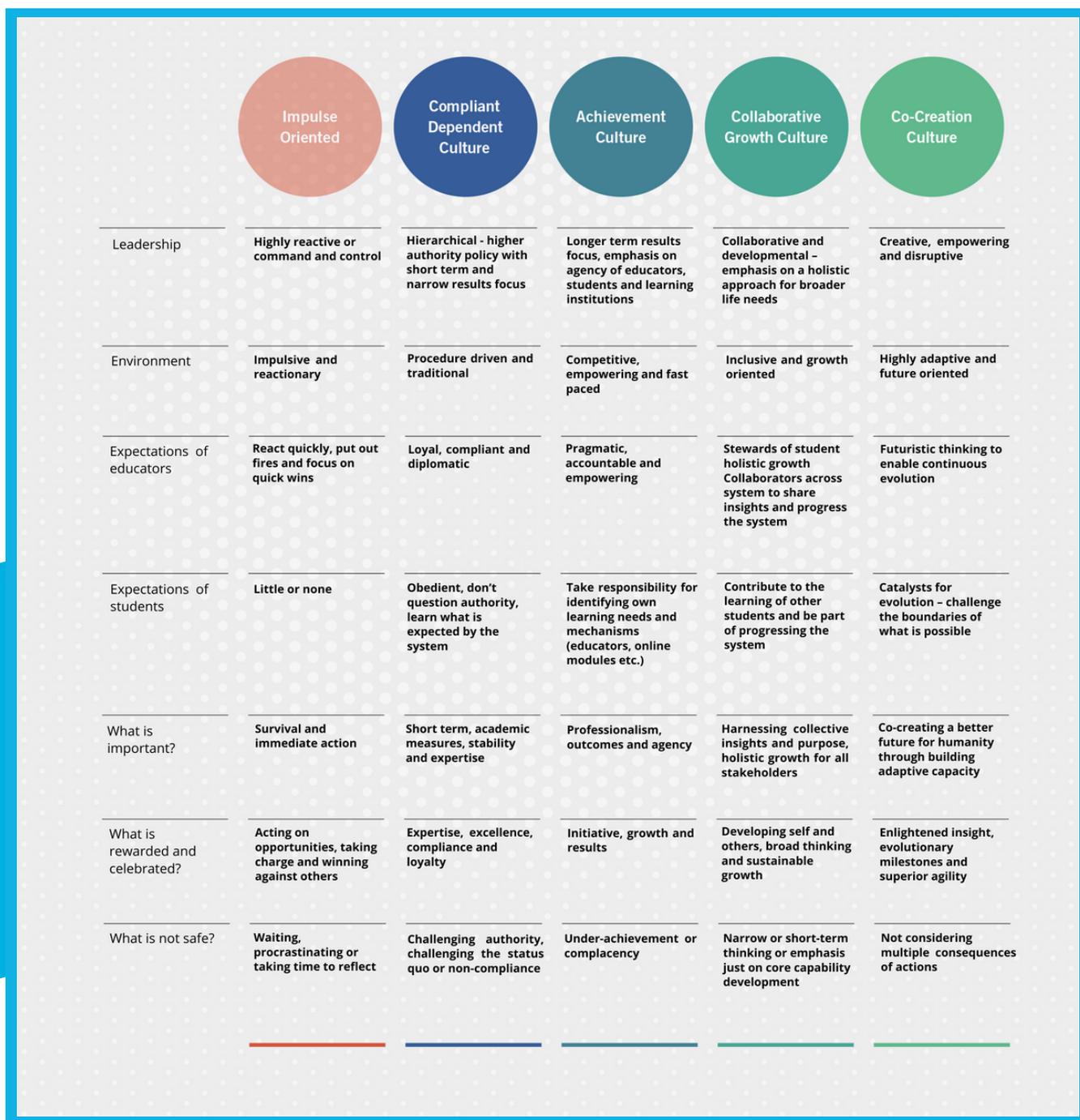
	Impulse Oriented	Compliant Dependent Culture	Achievement Culture	Collaborative Growth Culture	Co-Creation Culture
Leadership	Highly reactive or command and control	Hierarchical - higher authority policy with short term and narrow results focus	Longer term results focus, emphasis on agency of educators, students and learning institutions	Collaborative and developmental – emphasis on a holistic approach for broader life needs	Creative, empowering and disruptive
Environment	Impulsive and reactionary	Procedure driven and traditional	Competitive, empowering and fast paced	Inclusive and growth oriented	Highly adaptive and future oriented
Expectations of educators	React quickly, put out fires and focus on quick wins	Loyal, compliant and diplomatic	Pragmatic, accountable and empowering	Stewards of student holistic growth Collaborators across system to share insights and progress the system	Futuristic thinking to enable continuous evolution
Expectations of students	Little or none	Obedient, don't question authority, learn what is expected by the system	Take responsibility for identifying own learning needs and mechanisms (educators, online modules etc.)	Contribute to the learning of other students and be part of progressing the system	Catalysts for evolution – challenge the boundaries of what is possible
What is important?	Survival and immediate action	Short term, academic measures, stability and expertise	Professionalism, outcomes and agency	Harnessing collective insights and purpose, holistic growth for all stakeholders	Co-creating a better future for humanity through building adaptive capacity
What is rewarded and celebrated?	Acting on opportunities, taking charge and winning against others	Expertise, excellence, compliance and loyalty	Initiative, growth and results	Developing self and others, broad thinking and sustainable growth	Enlightened insight, evolutionary milestones and superior agility
What is not safe?	Waiting, procrastinating or taking time to reflect	Challenging authority, challenging the status quo or non-compliance	Under-achievement or complacency	Narrow or short-term thinking or emphasis just on core capability development	Not considering multiple consequences of actions

Diagram 4: Stages of Evolution

Reflections on Stages of Evolution in Education

Based on our experiences and reflecting on the qualities required for our emerging world, we believe that interdependence and capacity building (described in the framework as collaborative growth) are absolutely essential, while much of the current system reinforces compliance and dependence. The implications of this for the transformation required are significant!

For example, moving from an environment that is procedure driven and traditional to an environment that is inclusive and growth orientated requires significant transformation of many aspects of the system. To name a few; teacher worldviews and ways of teaching, student agency and empowerment, the recalibrating of the power dynamics in relationships and the ongoing reframing and refining of assessment, policies, processes and structures.

Reflection: What does Diagram 4 suggest about the current stage of cultural development of the educational system (overall) and what does it invite us to consider about a desirable future for this system?

In every education system, there are practices at the edge; individuals or groups who are reimagining the way educational organisations look, feel and behave. By seeking to better understand these examples, leaders are then able to contextualise the learning to their own settings, sparking innovation and progressing education.

The following case study exemplifies what is possible...

// CASE STUDY
Learning from the wisdom of the field

// Case Study

**Developing a more Adaptive School,
one school's journey.**

This case study provides an insight into the transformation story of a well-established, 120-year-old school in New South Wales, Australia. This school is undertaking a significant adaptation journey as it seeks to develop a culture that best enables young people to ready themselves for the emerging complexity of the future. A co-educational school, it aspires to co-evolve a new exemplar of future-focused schooling that contributes to the transformation of global education. This is a bold ambition that requires a deliberate and focused approach to adaptation and school change.

To guide and support their aspiration and build the adaptive capacity required for such a transformation the leadership team uses the following framework.
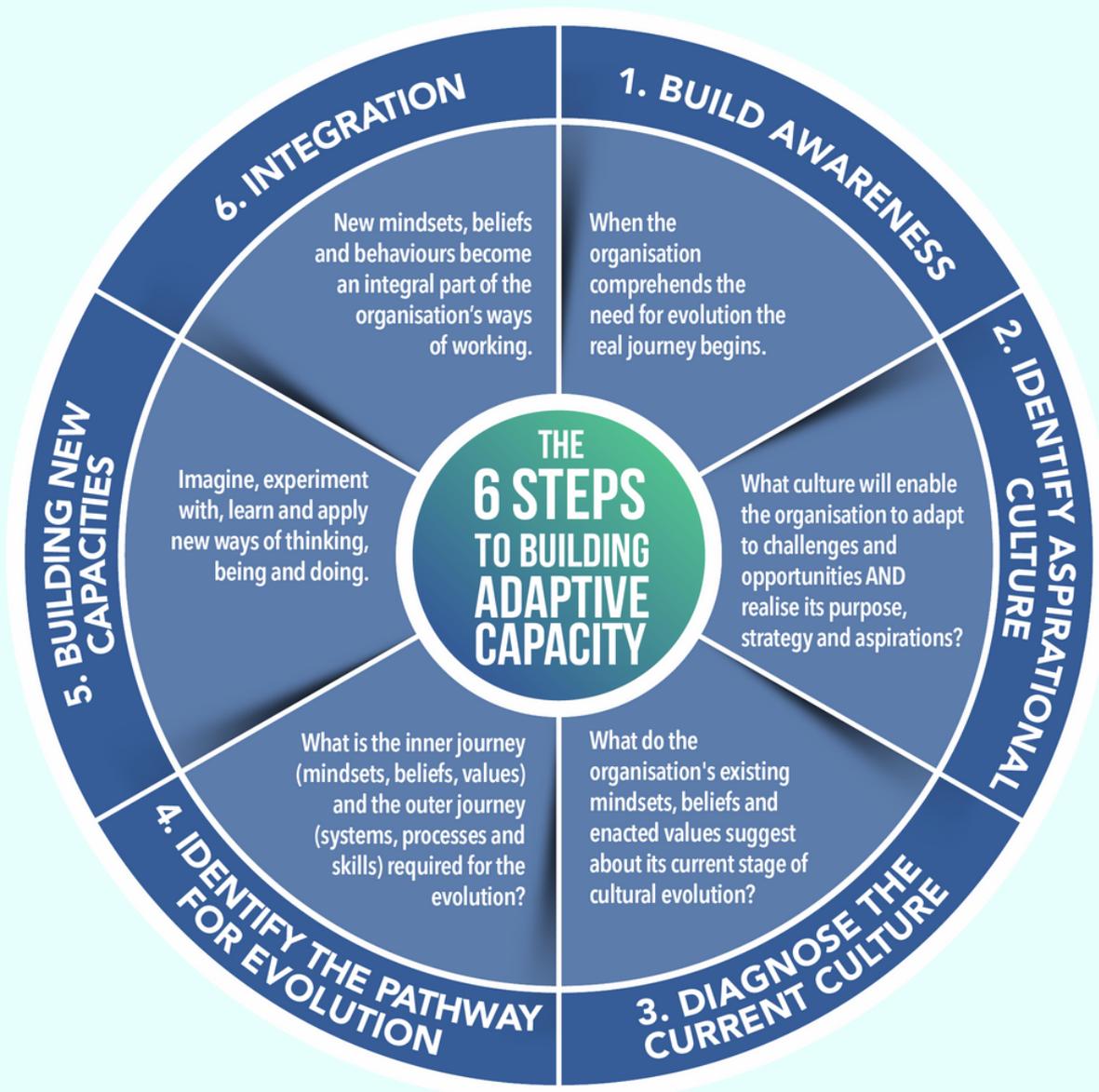
The Six Steps to Building Adaptive Capacity

Diagram 5: The Six Steps to Building Adaptive Capacity

How the six steps have been applied in the school's context

- The six steps have provided a useful pathway but have not been seen as a linear progression.

- There is an appreciation of the messiness of building adaptive capacity and as such an openness to fluidly moving between the different steps as and when new insights emerge.

- This adaptability is foundational to the change story at this school and intervention by intervention, adaptive capacity is being integrated into the culture of the school.

- The growth of such capacity is enabling the current change initiatives and setting the school up with the resilience to deal with the inevitable shifts it will face from the external environment and the change capability required to forge its internal aspirations.

Holding the mantra that every interaction across a school is a cultural intervention, the journey of change has been supported by the following deliberate actions. Part of a dynamic suite of micro and macro interventions, the following ten actions have been pivotal in the transformation journey to date.

Ten Cultural Interventions that have Shaped the Change Journey

1. Building the case for change

Foundational to the transformation journey was a deliberate intent to create exposure to what is possible - the future potential. At the start of this cultural journey, a decision was taken to invest in a series of off-site visits, the aim being to broaden the perspectives of staff about what schooling could be. A group of educators from the school went to the U.S.A and around Australia in search of examples of innovative educational practice and as a result of this and other experiences, they began to form a vision of what future focused schooling could look like in their context.

2. Targeted strategic partnerships

The executive team made a series of targeted strategic partnership decisions, all of which sought to advance the aspiration of becoming a more adaptable and innovative school that best caters for the changing needs of the community it serves. The support and guidance that came from these engagements ensured ongoing momentum, provided professional advice and created confidence in the direction the school was taking.

3. Strategic direction documentation

In collaboration with one of the school's strategic partners, a strategic direction document was developed. Built from a series of workshops exploring future possibilities, the directions document articulates the purpose, aspiration and strategic intent of the school. This document provided a framing for the implementation of new and emerging initiatives that supported the school's plan to become a 'global exemplar in future focused schooling'.

4. Stakeholder engagement

With a new direction now set, the most senior leaders then held discussions, seminars and think tanks with varying stakeholder groups including students, parents, staff, and the broader community. Such engagements considered the changes being experienced across society, and the skills, capabilities, and dispositions being called for, such as adaptability, collaboration and problem solving. The school community was invited to understand the reason for the new strategic direction and the benefits of the changes being proposed.

5. Building the implementation team

A team of guides was established to support the implementation of cultural change. This group of advocates was trained and developed in the methodologies being used to guide the work of the school. A diverse group, this team was able to hold the aspiration of the school and shine a light on success and growth during the transformation process. The focus of the guiding advocates was on the evolution of the school's culture. This collective influence was invaluable during the transformation of the school.

6. A focus on Cultural Evolution

The senior leaders at the school identified cultural evolution and development as a primary driver in becoming a more future focused school. An understanding that change initiatives succeed more often when leaders invest in culture and that organisation alignment is the key driver to landing strategic plans, the team developed a laser focus on the relationships between the individual, social and structural elements of the school, three domains that in relationship forge culture.

It was quickly recognised that the aspirational future state would require a greater level of empowerment, agency and ownership, therefore a decision was made to invite people into the shared responsibility, collaboration and stewardship of the school. The culture is shifting toward being highly developmental and focused on capacity building, both at an individual and social level.

7. Staff Professional Learning

The intentionality of staff professional development has been fundamental to the evolution of the school. Underpinned and supported by a generous budget, professional development has been primarily attached to the strategic intent of the school, most regularly done in-house and in a manner that matches the pedagogical approach of the school. Delivered in line with three cornerstones of the strategic plan; culture, leadership and design thinking, the learning has been targeted and deliberate. The outcome of this has been greater personal awareness, team alignment and organisational adaptability.

Ten Cultural Interventions Continued...

8. Restructuring and organisational design

A leadership review was undertaken with submissions from a cross section of stakeholders throughout the school. These reports, and a deep analysis of the school's future leadership and organisational needs, led to a restructure being initiated, the broad outcome of which was greater distribution of leadership and increased shared responsibility for the guidance of the school. This new leadership structure called for upskilling in a more flexible and agile way of leading; the approach taken was that of 'Adaptive Leadership'.

9. Amplifying the green shoots

Fundamental to maintaining the energy during the transformation has been a deliberate focus on identifying and amplifying the green shoots, those things that have been initiated and are in line with the future aspiration of the school.

A green shoots board was developed so that these stories could be shared across the organisation, the effect of which was to direct attention towards creating more reinforcing interventions. A prototyping and experimentation mindset proved very important and embedded a practice of testing and trying new ways of operating.

Amplifying the green shoots led to a greater impetus on people initiating cultural interventions across the school, thus stepping into their agency and advancing the focus of the strategic intent.

10. Commitment Imperative

The willingness for leaders of the school to provide clear direction during the change process has been fundamental to the success of the journey to date.

Never closed off to emerging insights and responsive to opportunities, the capacity to hold a commitment to cultural evolution has meant that all stakeholders in the school have clarity about the strategic direction.

This clarity, alongside focused leadership, has ensured that there is enough energy in the teams to maintain momentum. Moreover, the commitment imperative has provided safety, surety and an invitation to step into the change work at hand.

Case Study Conclusion

The focus on cultural evolution of the school has been underpinned by a focus on the inner journey (mindsets, beliefs, values) of individuals and the outer journey (systems, processes, skills) required for evolution, to bring to life the aspirational culture. Small pilots, tests, and iterations throughout the school have supported the building of new capacities that reflect the culture that the community is seeking to iterate across the school. This focus on design and prototyping has been central to the shift seen at the school.

As this learning community continues to iterate and evolve its culture, it becomes more adaptive and is better able to respond to its complex environment and consistent challenges. What is clear is that new mindsets, beliefs and behaviours are beginning to integrate into the emergent culture, a culture that is more collaborative, focused on capacity building and attentive to the development of individuals, teams and the school holistically.

This shift can be further explained through changes in the following areas of the school:

	From	**To**
Leadership	Hierarchical, compliant, fixer, expert, authorative	Adaptive, distributed, capacity building, relational
Organisational Design	Isolation, silos, separation	Open, collaborative, flowing, integrated
Mindset	Fixed, competitive, expert	Adaptive, agile, learner, growth-mindset
Pedagogy	Teacher centred, one size fits all, passive	Learner centred, personalised, differentiated, active
Roles	Linear, fixed, technical	Flexible, cross-functional, shared responsibility, relational

Table 1

Taking Practical Action - Insights on Implementation

"Energy follows attention. Wherever you place your attention, that is where the energy of the system will go" - Otto Scharmer

Practical actions are a way to safely test new ways of working. When they are effective, they enable deeper learning and help to amplify the impact of a change initiative or transformation.

Every activity or interaction is a cultural intervention.

Eight Practical Activities that Enable Progress

One of the core principles of transforming complex systems is that action is possible! The following are examples of what can meaningfully be done within any school that can enable progress. These activities have been chosen because they:

- Require little or no financial commitment.
- Enable prototyping / experimenting - set up to learn and progress.
- Don't require permission and encourage personal agency.
- Are aligned to the aspirational education system - by instituting these practices, the culture of the system, teacher by teacher, student by student, school by school, evolves towards the aspirational culture.

1. Building Trust

Trust the positive intention of students.Reframing particular behaviours from 'bad' or 'needs to be punished' to any behaviour is an expression of an unmet need. Ask the student what the positive intention is of their behaviour.

By trusting intent, we start to understand the student more deeply, inquire into what needs are unmet and to identify what potential could be liberated with more trust.

2. Default to Yes

Answer 'yes' to any student request AND explain the conditions that need to be met for the student to be able to progress (yes AND you will need to ensure that x is covered before proceeding). Track the student's response and progress.

By defaulting to yes, the immediate request is being acknowledged, by including AND, the conditions for which the student is responsible for are identified.

3. Personal Agency

Identify one project where the learner is required to pursue an interest or passion, a new idea or an opportunity to build new or unique capabilities outside of the standard curriculum. Support the student in pursuing this, without removing responsibility. When students feel a sense of ownership for their learning journey, they are much more likely to engage deeply with it and develop a greater sense of personal agency.

4. Want to and have to…. Analysis of

Invite students or educators to list all the things they 'have to' do and all of the things they 'want to' do. Share a story or an example that demonstrates that many of the things we say we have to do, we actually have choices over. Invite them to explore choice.

Example - Student perspective:
- *What do you have to do? (Go to school, do homework, agree with the teachers).What would happen if you didn't do these things? (Get poor grades, drop out, have poor relationships). So what? What do you really want?*

Example - Educator perspective:
- *What do you have to do? – (discipline students, teacher-parent interviews, assessments). What would happen if you didn't do these things? (Get poorer educational outcomes, lose control, not support the students). So what? What do you really want?*

When we begin to see that in many of the things we assume we 'have to' do, that we actually 'have choices', we bring a new level of personal agency into a system.

5. Test the Assumptions that sit inside the System

Explore a common complaint about what can't be done, about a 'limiting constraint'. Imagine that constraint wasn't true. What would people be doing differently? Identify an area to test this (safely).

To deepen appreciation of the system you need to appreciate other people's roles in the system. What are the qualities of the relationships that are holding the system in place? What are the worldviews and beliefs that sit underneath those relationships? What would need to happen to shift these? Perceptions of power imbalance in a system can lead to a feeling of not being as powerful as others, which can inhibit personal agency. Where do people get their power from within the system? What sources of power could be liberated?

continue...

6. De-institutionalising the Environment

Identify a 'new space' for learning which may include re-designing an existing space. With students and teachers together (and other stakeholders as appropriate), co-design the new learning spaces. What did you notice about how this space is different? What is the space saying? Who owns the environment? Does it look like a young person lives/exists here?

Identifying and dismantling institutionalising symbols: language of control or authority or lack of choice, school bells, signage (such as 'no students allowed') reframes the education setting from an institution to a place of belonging, with students as partners.

7. Explore the 'what ifs' about what could be possible in Education

What might an education system look like that is moving towards collaboration and growth? Use the 'Adaptive Cultures' framework to explore a particular part of the system, such as the relationship between students and teachers. Construct a pilot of working in this new way. Treat it as an experiment. At the end of the experiment, conduct a review – what was learned about what is possible?

Teach students and teachers alike the power of pilots as a learning methodology and explore the system readiness for the new ways of working.

8. Breaking down Identities

Run an experiment where teachers are invited to reframe their 'identity' from being 'a maths teacher' (controller of young people) or a 'transferer of knowledge' to an educational facilitator that builds spaces where learning occurs. Have student-led classes, with teachers as observers/supporters, with an emphasis on not being the expert, but sharing what they learned from the student as well as providing guidance (from a learner mindset, not from a knower mindset).

One interesting way to build empathy and better understand other people's experiences is to role swap. Have educators take on the role of student for a day, attending classes, lining up at the café, taking part in co-curricular activities. Mirroring the experience of a young person in the school has shown to create greater awareness of lived experience.

As new images and behaviours are created that shift the student and teacher identity, this also shifts personal agency and a sense of self-determination.

What if?

If these eight things were able to become part of regular activities within an education system, what potential areas of the aspirational cultures could they progress? When we consider how these simple activities can progress a complex system, we can begin to see that small interactions consistently applied by a group of willing people can change the world!

The following table (Table 2) explores how these activities could build the aspirational qualities of our education system.

	Courageously Adaptive	Coherence	Community integration	Liberating potential	Learning & Development	Co-constructed learning	Core Capabilities	Equity & Inclusion
Building Trust				*	*			*
Default to yes	*		*	*	*		*	*
Self-authoring			*	*		*	*	*
Want to Have to				*	*			
Testing assumptions		*		*	*			
Deinstitutionalise environment	*		*	*			*	
What-ifs	*			*	*			*
Break down old identities	*	*	*	*	*	*		

Table 2

Building Capacity to Sustain Transformation

Many great initiatives have delivered meaningful, tangible actions, but failed to create lasting, sustainable progress. We have noticed that often in education, transformation is built around a 'hero leader' or a coalition of the few. We have also observed that when that leader leaves, the system often reverts.

How do we make transformation stick?
How do we make it as difficult as possible to revert?

For transformation to be sustainable, new beliefs and worldviews need to be held by a sufficiently large number of people across a whole system. For the education system, as a system at the centre of society, it requires significant 'holding spaces' for a transformation to be sustainable.

By holding spaces, we mean rhythms, rituals and processes that ensure ongoing attention is paid to the transformation and that the transformation activities are adequately prioritised, worked on and progressed.

Over time, these become part of the DNA of the organisation, the new practices, processes, worldviews and ways of working form a new future. The following are examples of ways to enable this:

- Building the movement – engaging people who are passionate and influential.
- Rhythms to keep the work going – consistent check-ins and reflective practices.
- Make it taboo in the environment to not progress, iterate and test.
- Post implementation reviews (what did we learn and what can we apply elsewhere?)

SOCIAL
Ways of Working
Relationships
Organisational Stories
Beliefs
Events
Stakeholders

Levers for Building Adaptive Capacity

INDIVIDUAL
Leadership
Mindsets
Competencies
Behaviours
Decisions
Actions

STRUCTURAL
Organisational
Infrastrucutre
Strategies
Structures
Processes

- Self-directed learning portals that provide guidance and ideas for progress.
- Knowledge sharing and capacity building sessions.
- Workshops that explore and uncover individual worldviews and beliefs.
- Ritualised stretch experiences tied directly to building desired qualities of the future system.

- Policy, resources, aspirational measures.
- Strategy and purpose documents.
- Board reporting and sponsorship.
- Measures, ritualised learnings, safe environment to not be perfect.

Diagram 6: Levers for Building Adaptive Capacity

Final Reflections

The education system has so much to offer. It is central to the progression of society. It needs to evolve more rapidly to meet the needs of our changing world. We believe that this journey is about evolution rather than revolution, as we must bring along the great wisdom and practices that have enabled education to be so central to who we are. We must also continue to liberate the extraordinary potential of learners that is often not fully realised in the current system. We must do so in response to the call of our changing world.

This paper has set out a series of frameworks, qualities, principles and activities that provide a crucial toolkit on the pathway to transformation. One of the key principles is that to evolve a complex system requires all of us implicated in that system to evolve. Too often we have looked at frameworks solely for the pathways forward, without looking into our own journeys of growth and discovery, which are fundamental to how we apply these frameworks in a way that enables genuine, sustainable progress.

We hope this paper has provided you, as the reader, with an invitation to step into transforming activities within your sphere of influence, which includes yourself. The place to start is here. The time to start is now. We all have a part to play.

Together we can enable transformation in the education system for the betterment of all who have a stake in this incredibly important enabler of society.

Understanding Stages of Evolution – An Education System

This table sets out critical aspects of each stage
of evolution including mindsets, beliefs, and enacted values.

	Impulse Oriented	Compliant Dependent Culture	Achievement Culture	Collaborative Growth Culture	Co-Creation Culture
Leadership	Highly reactive or command and control	Hierarchical - higher authority policy with short term and narrow results focus	Longer term results focus, emphasis on agency of educators, students and learning institutions	Collaborative and developmental – emphasis on a holistic approach for broader life needs	Creative, empowering and disruptive
Environment	Impulsive and reactionary	Procedure driven and traditional	Competitive, empowering and fast paced	Inclusive and growth oriented	Highly adaptive and future oriented
Expectations of educators	React quickly, put out fires and focus on quick wins	Loyal, compliant and diplomatic	Pragmatic, accountable and empowering	Stewards of student holistic growth Collaborators across system to share insights and progress the system	Futuristic thinking to enable continuous evolution
Expectations of students	Little or none	Obedient, don't question authority, learn what is expected by the system	Take responsibility for identifying own learning needs and mechanisms (educators, online modules etc.)	Contribute to the learning of other students and be part of progressing the system	Catalysts for evolution – challenge the boundaries of what is possible
What is important?	Survival and immediate action	Short term, academic measures, stability and expertise	Professionalism, outcomes and agency	Harnessing collective insights and purpose, holistic growth for all stakeholders	Co-creating a better future for humanity through building adaptive capacity
What is rewarded and celebrated?	Acting on opportunities, taking charge and winning against others	Expertise, excellence, compliance and loyalty	Initiative, growth and results	Developing self and others, broad thinking and sustainable growth	Enlightened insight, evolutionary milestones and superior agility
What is not safe?	Waiting, procrastinating or taking time to reflect	Challenging authority, challenging the status quo or non-compliance	Under-achievement or complacency	Narrow or short-term thinking or emphasis just on core capability development	Not considering multiple consequences of actions

Bibliography

Brown, A and Cameron, A. Developing Adaptive Organisations through Leadership & Culture. Retrieved October,2018, from https://adaptivecultures.co/whitepaper/

Cook-Greuter, S. (2010). Post autonomous ego development: A study of its nature and measurement. Harvard University: Integral Publishers Edition.

Fullan, M. (2004). Leading in a culture of change: Personal action guide and workbook. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Garmston, R. J. & Wellman, B. M. (2016). The Adaptive School: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

Garvey Berger, J. (2012). Changing on the job: Developing leaders for a complex world. Stanford University Press.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2017). Leadership on the Line. Boston: Harvard Business press.

Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. (2009). Immunity to change. Boston: Harvard Business press.

Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. (2001). How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven Languages for Transformation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Kegan, R. and Lahey, L (2016). An everyone culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organisation. Boston: Harvard Business Press Laloux, F. (2014). Reinventing organizations. Brussels: Nelson Parker.

Lucas, B., Claxton, G. & Spencer, E. (2013). Expansive Education: Teaching learners for the real world. United Kingdom: Open University Press.

McKinsey & Company. (2008). McKinsey global survey results: Creating organizational transformations. McKinsey Quarterly survey on organizational transformation July 2008. Retrieved December 16, 2015, from http://gsme.sharif.edu/~change/McKinsey%20 Global%20Survey%20Results.pdf

McGowan, H. E. & Shipley, C. (2020). The Adaptation Advantage. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Pink, D. H. (2005). A whole new mind. New York: Penguin Group.

Robinson, K. (2013). Finding your Element. London: Penguin Books.

Sahlberg, P. & Walker, T. D. (2021). In Teachers We Trust: The Finnish way to world-class Schools. New York: Norton & Company

Scharmer, O. and Kaufer, K. (2013). Leading from the emerging future: From ego-system to eco-system economies. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Schein, E. (2004). Organizational culture and leadership (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.

Senge, P., Hamilton, H., & Kania J. (2015). The dawn of system leadership. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2015.

Snowden, D. (2010). The origins of cynefin. Cognitive Edge. Retrieved December 16, 2015, from cognitive-edge.com/article/ summary-article-on-cynefin-origins/

Stacey, R. (Ed.). (2005). Experiencing emergence in organizations: Local interaction and the emergence of global pattern. London: Routledge.

Torbert, B. & Associates. (2004). Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Wagner, T., Kegan, R. et. Al. (2006). Change Leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools. San Franscico: Jossey-Bass.

Waller, L. and Wels, I. (2014). From grit to pearl: Enhancing the role and influence of the Learning and Development professional. Ashridge Business School. Retrieved December 16, 2015, from www.ashridge.org.uk/getmedia/964a866a-6f37-41a6-a0e7-ff7f86719e95/LandD-Influence-Report_web. pdf

Zhao, Y., Tavangar, H., McCarren, E., Rshaid, G. F. & Tucker, K. (2016). World class Learners: How to make personalization and student autonomy happen. California: Corwin.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Andrew Brown
Director & Co-Founder of Adaptive Cultures

Andrew has been recognised at senior executive and Board level as 'turning around' cultures, leadership behaviours and results, helping leaders to make changes with a substantial positive impact on the wider organisation and community.

Andrew's passion is to support people to bring their innate compassion and wisdom into creating humane and impactful places to work. Andrew has been drawn to the work of building adaptive capacity, as he believes it is essential for our organisations, industries and communities to grow and thrive.

Connect with Andrew
E) andrew@adaptivecultures.co
W) https://www.adaptivecultures.co/

Dave Runge
Director & Co-Founder of Future Schools

With a passion for reimagining education, Dave works with educational organisations across Australia and internationally to build new systems and create innovative solutions. As a Co-Founder and Director of Future Schools, Dave collaborates closely with executive leadership teams, boards, associations, and educational organisations, providing invaluable guidance supporting educators to discover, design and implement innovative solutions.

Recognising the importance of systemic change, Dave focuses his efforts on change leadership. His expertise in change leadership, culture, and innovation has been instrumental in implementing successful change initiatives in diverse educational settings throughout Australia. With a deep understanding of the education landscape and by fostering collaboration and facilitating the exchange of ideas, Dave empowers schools and educational leaders to evolve their practices, transform their learning environments, and create meaningful change within their settings.

Connect with Dave
E) david.runge@futureschools.education
W) https://futureschools.education/

How to Build an Adaptive Education System