TWO POINTS ON A LEARNING JOURNEY

"If you want to teach people a new way of thinking,
don't bother trying to teach them. …
Instead, give them a tool,
the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking."

Buckminster Fuller

I began to discover the truth of Fuller's "tool" concept early in my career. Now, at its present point, it's power was fully revealed to me when it served as the *different lens* through which over eight years I observed from the inside-out a large school district acting in ways that produced unexpected results that outside observers were terming "miracles."

At the beginning…. Tools to support thinking

As newborn babies, our brains are pre-wired to help us figure out the world. Initially, that figuring-out process involves what we see, touch, taste, smell and hear. But then, with the wonder of language we discover a single, effective shortcut – the question *why?* Research reveals that by the age of 3-4 we tend to ask it several hundred times a day. But typically that line of questioning gets turned off. Sometimes, adults at home or in school lack the time or the answers to respond. Often, the "what" and "how" *skills* needed to grow and survive are considered more important than the "why" *understandings* and, with limited time and resources, the "what" and "how" get priority.

My recognition of the importance of asking *WHY?* reappeared when I was leaving the supervision of authority figures after 16 years of formal education and then three years in the Navy where as an intelligence officer I had to continually *learn* from events I couldn't control, and then effectively *teach* what I thought I had learned to others. The story of my learning epiphany on the last day of my service is accessible elsewhere.[1] The part that is relevant here is that it eventually made it possible to develop a tool – a way-of-seeing the system before thinking about it, that like an organizational MRI – could serve as a "lens" enabling me to "see" inside a living organization to observe the real time creation and exchange of *information* needed simultaneously for both individual and organizational effectiveness.

It was this lens that has directly influenced the nature and quality of the body of MCPS information and knowledge that the Stupski Foundation currently wants to distill, learn from, and apply more broadly.

The product of that early learning experience was the development of a tool that seemed to focus on "simple" rules that could explain much of the complexity that seemed to be the given nature of schooling.

For me, I found that its different perspective could serve as the different "level-of-thinking" Einstein declared necessary to understand what was creating the problems we try to solve. It was based on "simple" *natural* rules that seem to drive human problem-solving and learning, and has shaped my thinking and work from that time on. Among its values:

•   It served me as a strategic plot board for understanding and integrating the *separate* theories-of-change we usually have for individuals and organizations, and then for figuring out ways to capitalize on their interdependence and simultaneous validity from their given points of view.

•   One of the *"why?"* answers it illuminated was how the "Map" was not the "Territory." That the pyramid-like mental "maps" we have come to accept as the paradigms for understanding organizational systems were not portraying the nature of that system at the level of the human "territory" it attempted to capture. We had been trying to understand the dynamics of a system (i.e., what drives and creates its connectedness in the workplace) without first understanding and integrating an understanding of what *naturally* drives each of its parts.

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[1] See http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/files_people/Rhodes_Lew.htm

•   It offered a capacity to see upstream to where the *knowledge gaps* were, and which ones – if they were bridged – had the highest potential for influencing *everything else.*

It soon became my mental model, or frame for understanding, that influenced what I was writing, producing in video and film formats, and developing as management tools and processes.   In one case, it was used to develop a non-*gotcha,* management information system for a federal program to which those in the field whose information had to feed it really <u>wanted</u> to contribute.[2]

•   It served as a different "paradigm" -- with the <u>process of learning</u> at its center -- that offered a view within which one could back map from individual to organizational learning, to understand their connected nature. That is,

-   To start from the individual brain's *core learning process* and back map to

-   the nature of the *support* it requires, then to

-   the *roles* in which that support has to be embedded.

-   and then to the *systemic processes* required to sustain those roles so that every child could experience effective *teaching.*

•   And for me it was serving as a *GUT* – a "Grand Unifying Theory" (sometimes referred to as a *Theory of Everything)* that could explain the principal processes that together <u>are</u> a school system.

Quantum physicists have developed one as a theoretical framework to explain why light can sometimes be explained as the behavior of elementary "particles" and at other times, the actions of a "wave.". For me, as a non-physicist, this offered something similar -- a way to explain an underlying "why" beneath all the "what's and "how's" school leaders were trying to juggle.

It made it possible to understand possible solutions to the "*Quantum Paradox"* that the thinking and actions of every superintendent and CEO has to deal with. This is the need to deal with *wholes <u>and</u> parts*, "particles <u>and</u> waves", "forests <u>and</u> trees" …*<u>at the same time.</u>* A core problem that, until now, was addressed largely through *either-or* strategies such as decentralization or centralization that fail to address the inherent *both-and* nature of the <u>system</u> for which they were uniquely accountable

This simple GUT displayed the *both/and* nature of an organization – both the "wave" of the system and the "particles" that are its people -- in a common framework that made visible the <u>information</u> they both *must have* in order to function effectively.

…the Journey continues: Theory into action: The *Methods/Mindset* Connection

Reflecting on the content of the 150 or so articles and publications I've developed over the years, I find that this way-of-seeing and thinking had become my sense-making paradigm -- my frame for understanding. And for years I was perceived as a *big picture* person who could add value to the thinking of those who had the <u>time</u> to think and re-think before they acted.

But because I worked for practitioner associations or foundations that were trying to change practice, I increasingly noted that I wasn't always helping those on-the-line practitioners to whom we entrust our children every day whose responses usually were *"…but what do we do on Monday?"*

It wasn't until I had the opportunity to be an embedded observer in the reality of *Mondays* in Montgomery County over the past 8 years that I could fully use this way of making sense to "see" and understand the continual interaction of *theory* <u>and</u> *action,* of *method* <u>and</u> *mindset*, and of *will* <u>and</u> *way* that most influence what happens to children every day.   From that perspective I began to track actual changes in the ways people *think* about schools and the work of schooling, their *roles* in it, and their beliefs in their own *capacities to make a difference.* Most importantly, I could observe and track the key role of the system's leader in that process.

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[2]   Described in Peter Senge's Education Fieldbook website. <u>From Mental Models to Monday Morning: Building infrastructures for school change from the bottom up</u> http://www.fieldbook.com/schools/rhodes.html

Relying on this information, I began to serve as a *thinking partner* to a variety of individuals in leadership roles in the MCPS and Montgomery County. These have included the superintendent, several of his deputies and associates, presidents of the employee unions, some Board members and business leaders. In that role, I offered a different way-of-thinking about the issue(s) they currently were facing. This was communicated through *"20,000 ft. Memos"* that put events is a bigger picture, and suggested implications. Also through ongoing dialogues, often outside of their working hours.

Of most value to them. I believe, wasn't just having a bigger picture, but rather that it was a "coherent picture" that seemed to *connect-the-dots* so they could see the "whole" that gave meaning to the "part" they had hold of.

And of most value to me was what I learned from them that began to challenge my own ways-of-thinking.

A prime example, the Sufi *Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant* had always been my favorite metaphor. In fact, after leaving AASA I took its message -

> *"…and so these men of Indostan disputed loud and long. Each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong. But though each was partly in the right, they all were in the wrong!"*

-- and tied it to the old film character *Sabu,* the elephant boy whose effectiveness was a product of being able to see the "whole elephant, as a way to organizationally characterize the nature of my work (*Sabu, Inc*.).

And as a consequence of accepting this metaphor, much of my work over the years has tried to deal with "system blindness" as <u>the problem</u>. I tired to "help the blind see" for the first time through systems thinking, systems dynamics, systems approaches, etc. And I don't think I saw the pushback from busy people as an indication that maybe I wasn't understanding the problem through their "eyes."

Today, however, what's become clearer to me as I've watched how system leadership deals with that *natural* pushback is that we are not dealing with "Blind Men," but "*Blindered* Men." Their limited perceptions are not due to blindness. They couldn't be effective with the "part" of the whole elephant they had hold of, and were held accountable for, if they really were blind.

Instead, they had mental "blinders" that kept their thinking focused on actions of the part their hands could most directly affect.   What they needed were ways to understand and think about their "part's" fit as a component of the "elephant's" daily work. And apparently the Sufi of old had another saying that goes to the nature of the "blindness" of those who can only see tangible "parts.":

> *You think you understand one.*
> *You think you understand two, because one and one make two.*
> *But, you must also understand "and".*

And I could see how this tool was adding new understanding to the actual ***Both/And*** nature of a school system that the blinders of our ways-of-thinking forced us to deal with as **Either/Or**.