

The only coherence that counts is not what is on paper or what top management can articulate, but what is in the minds and hearts of members of the organisation.- Michael Fullan, Leading in a Culture of Change

CUTTING OUT THE CUTTER

I have taken excerpts from two books to prompt thought about how to ensure that what we are doing at a school level and a classroom level are the things that really matter; and what we need to consider if we want to cut out the clutter.

Please read this document before our meeting and:

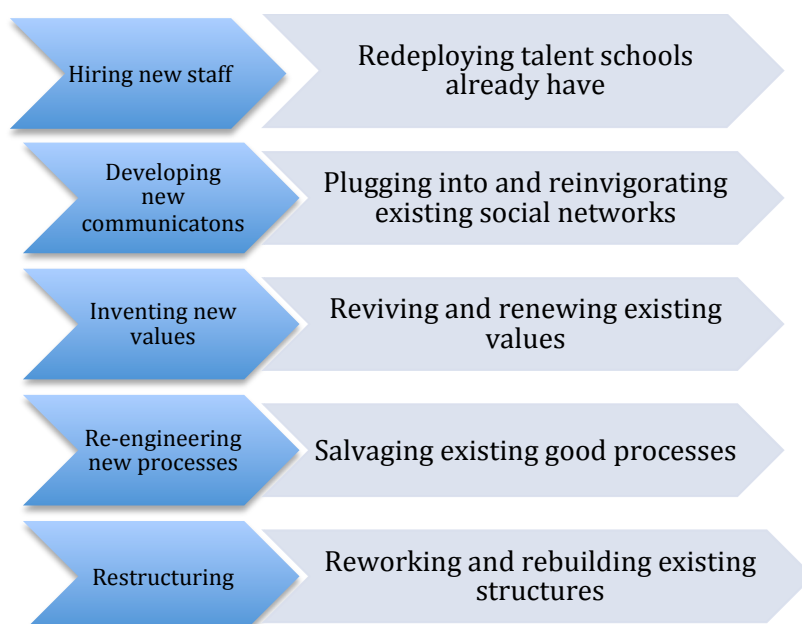
- Write three ideas or concepts that you think are most relevant for your school
- Three questions that the readings raise for you.

Excerpts 1: from Chapter 7: Conservation, Sustainable Leadership, Hargreaves and Fink

When change has only a present or future tense, it becomes the antithesis of sustainability. Sustainable development respects, protects, preserves and renews all that is valuable from the past and learns from it in order to build a better future. Change theorists must learn to see resistance and nostalgia among more mature members of the profession not just as obstacles to change but as sources of wisdom and learning that can inform it. They must work hard to build proposals for change upon legacies of the past instead of trying to ignore or obliterate them. Whenever change is being considered, sustainable leadership should look to the past for precedents that can be reinvented and refined, and for evidence of what has succeeded or failed before.

Creative Recombination

*Eric Abrahamson, the critic of the repetitive change syndrome urges us to find an alternative to the need to obliterate the past through **creative recombination**. Creative recombination recombines the best parts of the past in creative, craftsmanlike way that is resourceful yet also renewing, because the combination creates something new from what is already available. Instead of funding new structures, new technology, and new people, leaders of change without pain set about finding, re-using, redeploying and recombining the mismatched parts of the organisation already has lying around in its corporate basement.*



Forgetting the Past

There are many reasons why organisations need to remember. There are also times when they need to forget. Smart organisations not only know the distinction, but understand when they have to make it.

De Holan and Phillips identified four kinds of organisational forgetting.

	New Knowledge	Established Knowledge
Accidental	Failure to consolidate Dissipation	Failure to maintain Degradation
Purposeful	Abandoned innovation Suspension	Managed unlearning Purging

Suspension

The purpose of organized abandonment is to free up resources that are committed to maintaining things that are no longer producing results. With organized abandonment, the change leader puts everything “on trial for its life” on a regular basis. Organized abandonment is called for when practices are tailing off in effectiveness or when they impede or crowd out the introduction of ones that are superior.

If abandonment is just a vague intention, it will never happen. It's too hard to let go of things spontaneously. Instead, organizations need to have regular abandonment meetings to make tough and focused decisions about what to leave behind so that there is space for the innovation ahead.

In education, Brian Caldwell argues that abandonment should take place to protect the fulfilment of cherished educational values such as equality of outcomes. Caldwell proposes organised abandonment of:

- Curriculum that is outdated
- Pedagogies that no longer work
- Professionalism that has no regard for evidence or research
- Teaching and management tasks that can be handled by someone else.

Hargreaves says: It's easy and attractive to abandon tasks and practices that you never wanted to do in the first place.... But none of our schools and teachers were able to abandon practices they liked and found comfortable. For this to occur a more organised, focussed, systematic process is required.

A common school development technique for addressing organisational abandonment is an exercise known as “Stop, Start, Continue” to which we have added a fourth category “ignore/Subvert”.

The first step is to identify what is valued and effective in the school and also what is practiced frequently (or not). The groups decide to: Stop, Start, Continue or Ignore/Subvert.

STOP	START
Activities that are practiced frequently but have little or less value compared with others (organized abandonment)	Highly valued initiatives that are currently practiced infrequently or not at all (including through inventing, creative recombining etc)
CONTINUE	IGNORE/ SUBVERT
Highly valued activities that are already practiced frequently (this helps preserve organisational memory)	Activities with little value or likelihood of effectiveness that have not been practiced so far but that external agencies have started to mandate (which makes resistance to change a constructive and thoughtful process of values preservation rather than a negative process of self-protection)

PURGING

Unlearning old practices in which we feel effective and exchanging them with new ones in which our initial competence is low is neither comfortable nor pleasant. People's temptation to cling to the past is both normal and understandable. All change involves loss, and when what is to be lost is comfort and competence, the loss will always be mourned and resisted.

Whether what is to be unlearned or purged are ways of teaching literacy, attitudes towards assessment, procedures for communicating with parents, or approaches to running a school, two issues are crucial to address.

1. *First, have the areas for unlearning been diagnosed correctly, and is this unlearning desirable or just politically expedient.*
2. *Is the process of knowledge conversion, replacing unlearning with new learning, managed in a supportive or traumatic manner?*

Schools need to forget the right things in the right way. If the diagnosis or developmental process of organisational forgetting are wrong, the schools and their leaders will quickly find themselves facing the formidable obstacle of teacher nostalgia.

Excepts 2: From INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS: City, Elmore, Fiarman & Tietel

What determines what students know and are able to do is not what the curriculum says they are supposed to do, or even what the teacher thinks he or she is asking students to do. What predicts performance is what students are actually doing. So for example, memorization tasks produce fluency in memorization, critical thinking tasks produce critical thinking. City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, Instructional Rounds

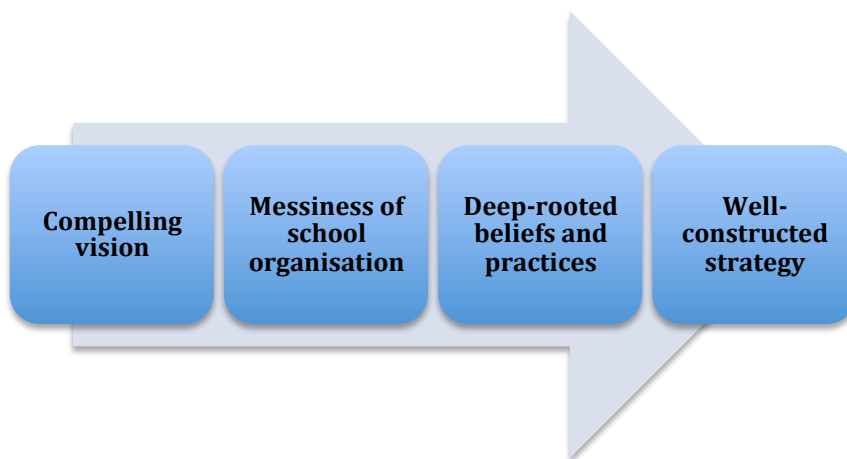
Schools are not blank slates waiting to be written on by leaders. They are composites and collections of previous, often long-forgotten "solutions" to problems that other people felt were compelling at one time or other. The organisations embody beliefs and practices that are deeply rooted in people's identities and that can't be erased without a compelling alternate vision.

Organisations resist "vision" not because of some perverse instinct on the part of people to resist change, but because the existing structures and practices provide a story line that people understand, and that vision often fails to provide an alternative theory that they find equally persuasive and understandable.

A theory of action can be thought of as the story line that makes a vision and strategy concrete. It gives the leader a line of narrative that leads people through the daily complexity and distractions that compete with the main core of the instructional core. It provides the map that carries the vision through the organisation. And it provides a way of testing the assumptions and suppositions of the vision against the unfolding realities of the work in an actual organisation.

Most organisations don't grow by design; they grow through opportunistic responses to their environment. And in most school systems, initiatives sprout like kudzu. Most projects have a deep history in the organisation – a great idea that seems to make sense at the time, a funding opportunity too good to pass up, a special project of a staff member, a particularly powerful and well-connected executive or teacher that has managed to stake out a position in the organisational chart, or the occasional project that time forgot. The job of a good theory of action is to find a clear path through this organisational thicket.

The essential principle of a theory of action is that it provides a through-line to the instructional core – what are the vital activities that need to happen to improve teaching and learning? A good theory of action connects an important part of the overall strategy to the actions and relationships critical to good performance.



When they try to array initiatives against their theory of action, people usually have a difficult time figuring out where some of these initiatives belong, including a number of “orphans” that don't fit very well. In fact, the better the theory of action, the more orphans it is likely to produce. Much of the clutter of programs, projects and initiatives that constitute the typical organisation chart of a school doesn't lie on the through chart that connects the organisation's vision and strategy to the instructional core.

In our practice, we begin at the individual level of constructing a theory of action, because if individual leaders can't clearly describe what they are trying to accomplish, it is highly unlikely that their organisations will behave coherently.

Finally, the central issues of school improvement are cultural – that is, they involve getting people in the organisation to examine the work of the organisation with fresh eyes and to clear away much of the accumulated clutter from previous reforms to focus on the work of the moment. Theories of action can be important cultural artifacts in the sense that they make explicit the connections between the individual and the organisation – connections that are necessary to reach and improve the quality of instruction in the classroom.