

CASSA Conversation Starters: Contextual Literacy

In March of 2020, our lives and our leadership changed in dramatic ways. Many of the structures, processes and activities that comprised our daily lives were disrupted. Not only were our ways of being altered, but the disruption continued in multiple ways over two years. In our schools, the context in which we led and learned, changed completely. The lessons learned from the pandemic shape how we view context and leadership unfolds in varying ways depending upon your own unique circumstances. What do we know about our own “contextual literacy” and how does that literacy impact our work?

Marshall Goldsmith’s book *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* (2007) talked about the behaviour of leaders as opposed to the technical skills and abilities. These leadership behaviours are shaped by, and, in turn, shape the context of organizations and the relationship with people. Goldsmith presented many ideas which included thinking about all the things that we ask leaders to do, rather than all the things that we should ask leaders to stop doing. In essence, one of the premises of the book, and in the title, is that success at one level, or in one context, does not mean you will be successful in a new context.

Many of us will have experienced or seen how Goldsmith’s title rings true. As we watch succession issues, we often see talented and capable school leaders who struggle to meet the same level of success at the district or division level. We see talented teachers who struggle as a principal. We also see talented leaders who are moved to the same level, even within one district, school, or division, and who do not achieve the same level of success as they previously had enjoyed. This dissonance can lead to discouragement and low morale as people try to figure out what is different. As they all know, what is different is the context. Strong leaders need to be able to read context, to absorb new values, beliefs, norms of an organization, and to adapt their own leadership style to those new norms. How often have we heard “that’s just the way we do it around here” without any real explanation of why?

Contextual literacy is about that ability to adapt and read the lay of the land. That adaptation takes time and patience. As you move into new positions, and new contexts, the language will change, the relationships between existing groups will be different, underlying assumptions and values may be different and you will have to learn to understand the structures and relationships that allow leadership to unfold. If you do not take the time to listen, ask questions and learn, you can fall victim to early leadership traps and pitfalls.

A framework for understanding contextual literacy can be informed by the world of coaching and Michael Bungay Stanier. His methodology is surrounded by patience and listening and can be summed up three ways, be lazy, be curious, and be often.

The “lazy” part is defined by his beliefs that when someone comes looking, your advice may not be nearly as good as you think it is. Bungay Stanier believes that, particularly for leaders, we are hard wired to give advice and to help out. We think we have solutions, when in fact, those solutions might not be



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helpful at that moment in that context. He talks of an “advice monster” that is rooted in our own desire to add value by offering solutions. His message is one of patience and finding time by not leaping to solutions and advice.

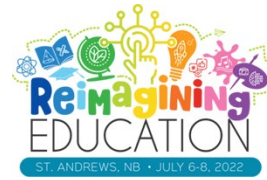
The “curious” part comes next and is about probing to learn more about the issue and the context. Through simple and patient questioning techniques you can ask people to simply “tell you more” about the issues and the challenges they face. How can we all, as leaders, come to learn more about the issues at hand, the relationships and supporting information behind an ask, and what other elements that you would need to consider before suggesting any direction? Curiosity is about patience and honouring the person(s) before you as you come to understand the issues at play.

Once you have considered the context, the actual issues at hand, and if you do provide support, suggestions or advice after all things are brought to bear, then the final piece is to “be often.” Bungay Stanier urges leaders to repeat these simple behaviours often with people. Follow up, see if your input helped, connect with people regularly to learn more about the context in which they (and you) work. Celebrate and share small wins together as a mechanism to build trust and confidence.

Michael Fullan talks about Contextual Literacy as de-skilling people. When you move into a new role, in a new context, the skills that you brought to bear in your previous leadership work have to be re-considered. Leaders need to “take the time to deeply engage with context so that we can become lead learners within our organizations.” The time that Fullan refers to can be informed by the careful listening, questioning and feedback that both Bungay Stanier and Goldsmith reference. Fullan, Goldsmith and Bungay Stanier all would agree that any leadership unfolds in context and taking the time to understand context and how it informs your leadership is critical for success.

Table Questions:

1. How have you witnessed, or experienced contextual literacy as de-skilling people?
2. Taking time, understanding language, networks and relationships – how important do you view those steps to be in the early days of a new role, or new context?
3. How do you, as an individual or organization, work to provide professional learning opportunities to others as a way to build and strengthen their contextual literacy?



Further Resources:

- Blinkist. *Simplify* (2017-2021). Michael Bungay Stanier: Be Lazy, Be Curious, Be Often. [Audio Podcast] <https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/michael-bungay-stanier-be-lazy-be-curious-be-often/id1255922966?i=1000395449831>
- Clear, J. *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* by Marshall Goldsmith. James Clear. <https://jamesclear.com/book-summaries/what-got-you-here-wont-get-you-there>
- Getting Smart. Michael Fullan on Leading in a Culture of Change. (Sept. 2, 2020). [Audio Podcast] <https://www.gettingsmart.com/podcast/michael-fullan-on-leading-in-a-culture-of-change/#:~:text=Leaders%20have%20to%20be%20contextually,lead%20learners%20within%20our%20organizations.%E2%80%9D>
- Goldsmith, M. (2007). *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful!* (1st Ed.). Hyperion.