

## Preparing for the Unpredictable with a Negative Imagination

Ken Mitchell, EdD

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On Friday April 5<sup>th</sup>, I was meeting with a group of superintendents that included a few who were in their first year. Before the meeting began, I asked the neophytes how things were going with their upcoming school budget and board elections.

A couple responded, “Things are great;” “No problems. It is very quiet.” A seasoned superintendent overhearing them, raised an eyebrow, smiled, and warned, “Today and in this moment. Never relax. There’s always something around the corner.” Approximately an hour into the meeting, our building began to shake. Within seconds the phones of the 30 superintendents in the room began buzzing.

The meeting abruptly ended as all headed back to their districts. A 4.8 magnitude earthquake had just rattled the northeast corner of New York State.

With all their experience and state-of-the-art equipment, seismologists are still unable to predict when an earthquake will occur. They know the causes. They have data on seismic gaps and patterns. They monitor shifting of

tectonic plates in vulnerable regions, but the science of prediction, especially in the short-term, remains immature.

Unless one is a fortune teller, making accurate predictions, whatever the context, is a delicate science of balancing data, experience, and imagination. With all of these at their disposal, even the best experts fail to accurately and consistently predict such events as pandemics, stock market crashes, or terrorist acts.

Yet, there is an expectation that leaders should have known. Crisis is often followed by criticism that a system’s leaders failed to anticipate the event, no matter the level of probability. In response, leaders often react with studies and plans to mitigate, even low probability events, especially those with high impact consequences.

Most school districts have safety plans for a variety of potential and improbable events, including earthquakes. Yet given the array of possibilities, it is unrealistic to presume that leadership can predict when such

plans will be needed or even know if the plans are still relevant to current conditions.

However, beyond the low probability crisis, successful and adaptive school leaders are unceasing in their efforts to predict. For some leaders, prediction as craft art and science is intentionally built into the organization's ethos. It is not only used to anticipate crisis for the whole but crisis for the individuals within the system.

Most of us do not see things as they are; we see things as *we are* on this day, at this time, and in this place. However, proactive leaders and their teams systematically gather, analyze, and apply multiple, varied, and informative sources of data to their predictive-oriented decision-making. These leaders look for root causes, patterns, and emerging trends that are not always visible. Their decision-making considers the perspectives of others, rather than relying solely on their own limited viewpoint.

### **Still, there will be surprises.**

To mitigate the unanticipated, leaders need to be artful by employing a negative imagination, an anticipation of the unanticipated worst-case scenario. For many this is challenging. T. S. Eliot wrote, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality (1980, p.118)."

Yet leaders are responsible for recognizing the complex realities and inherently human conditions in their organizations. Part of this work includes anticipating the unpredictable through imaginative dialogue—internally and with others.

Such an approach requires a synthesis of skills and creativity that come from

experience, scholarship, and reflection. For some the use of the negative imagination may not appear to be the most definitive predictive approach or is perhaps paradoxical for those trying to lead with an optimistic vision. Yet, experience tells the leader that there is a tension in every moment about what might be. It becomes the responsibility of leadership to hold such tension with equanimity, especially when the ground begins to rumble.

In the Summer 2024 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, researchers examine and share ways to anticipate and prevent problems that are below the surface and unless addressed have consequences for both the individual and the broader society.

In "Lip Service to Action Planning: Why Education Leaders Should Conduct Equity Audits," researchers Farrow, Manning, and Coaxum III, at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey, describe how equity audit experiences can be offered by education leadership programs to effectively support their students in these politically tense times: "The equity audit experience serves as a modality of action research where students research, develop, and enact cycles of measurable action plans to address school problems."

In "Montana—Under the Hood: Montana Early Warning System," Dr. Robin Clausen, the Research Liaison for the Montana Office of Public Instruction, shares a case study of Montana's efforts via an early Warning System (EWS) to predict and mitigate student dropouts. Clausen describes the program, how it has been effective, and why it has been less so in some places. For example, he shows how early adopting schools that engaged in system wide and prolonged reforms had greater success.

The researchers contend that by teaching their aspiring leaders to apply action

research to equity problems that have meaningful consequences, they will be better prepared to contend with not just the process of gathering such data but dealing with the meaning in the current political context.

Finally, our frequent contributor and book reviewer, Art Stellar, provides a concise review of Rajiv Shah's recent book, *Big Bets: How Large-Scale Change Really Happens*. President of the Rockefeller Foundation, Shah proposes a shift from tackling micro-level improvements to initiating large-scale

innovation that he suggests will have more transformational and enduring benefits. His work with the U.S. Agency for International Development has included the construction of electrical grids for over a billion Africans, a testing and vaccination program, and even a response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

This issue's researchers' ideas reflect a proactive and predictive approach that imagines the worst while finding the potential remedies to benefit one and all. We hope you take something from their work.

### **References**

Eliot, T.S. (1980). "Four quartets: Burnt Norton" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 118.