

# The Road to “Thrive”

## Value, Strategy, Innovation

**N**ewton’s first law applies equally to physics and organizational dynamics: An object will remain at rest or in uniform motion unless compelled to change by the action of an external force. Due to contrarian forces that have buffeted our schools back and forth, most schools have stayed relatively “at rest” for decades. Now there are new sets of external forces acting on them. Exactly what that new motion will look like, however, is not predetermined for all schools. Schools are people-centric, and people, unlike billiard balls, make choices.

The choice of where you want your school to be in the future starts with understanding your community of users, setting goals, and then willfully, sustainably creating the conditions that move your organization closer to those goals.

If you were operating in a vacuum, if your actions were not impacted by, or had impact on, other people or organizations, that might be enough. But you and your schools are not alone. Your success is a function of two big dynamics beyond the choices you make.

The first is that your school exists to serve others. They also can make choices, and both the number of choices they have and their willingness to make nontraditional choices have exploded in the last two decades.

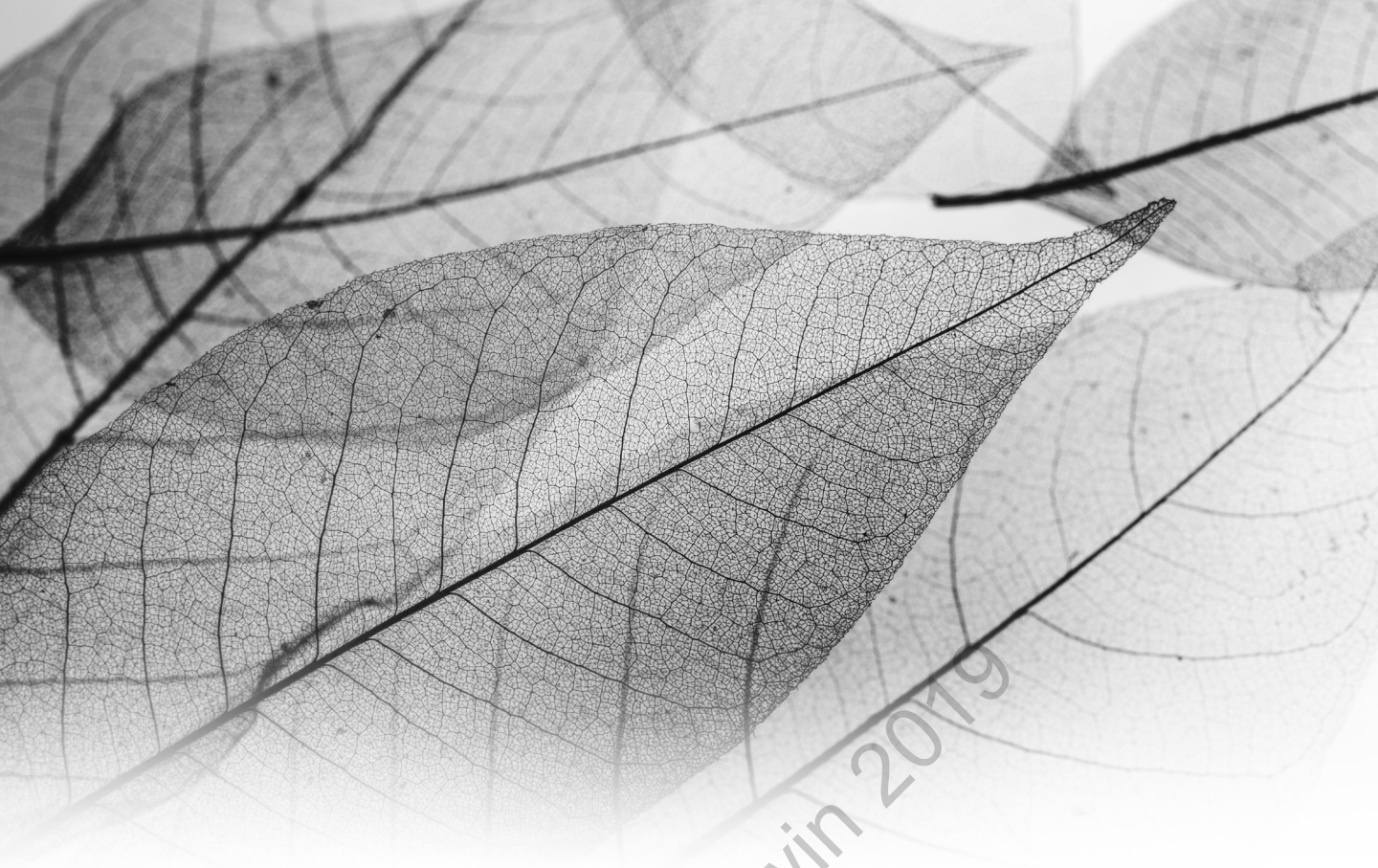
The second is that the world itself is not standing still. The way students learn, the external impacts on student lives, and the social–economic–technological fabric of student and adult lives are all shifting more quickly than at any other time in human history.

It is the interaction of these three elements—choice, customers, and a rapidly changing world—that demands that effective organizations respond with three powerful instruments of their own: *value*, *strategy*, and *innovation*. These are what we will gather and unify in the next five chapters.

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*Schools and communities are not all the same, but we are all living under some shared circumstances. These conditions frame a set of very broadly spaced guide rails for most schools. As you go through this book, don't forget the guide rails in this chapter; they are the context in which we will then develop the key, symbiotic relationship of value, strategy, and innovation.*

Before about 2007, most educators had a relatively casual relationship with the changes occurring in the world around us. For most educators, the prevailing attitude was something like, “Yeah, the world is changing, but our mission has not, so please, let me get back to my work.”

That started to shift rapidly around 2008 and 2009, for two big reasons. The worldwide Great Recession brought home economic and political realities that most Americans, and many in other countries, had tried to ignore. And emerging, mutually reinforcing technologies allowed an explosion of access to new, competing learning options that challenged the dominance of neighborhood schools. In the last decade, many educators have become increasingly aware that our mission is changing and that they are competing with a lot of other schools for the right to serve students.

The world is becoming increasingly *volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous* (VUCA). I find it nearly impossible to argue with this basic premise. Do a web search on the acronym VUCA, and you will find that there is a growing universe of ideas around the term, its meaning, and what we are supposed to do about it. Yet when I visit schools, I find that very few people in the room have ever heard the term *VUCA world*. (More on VUCA world at the end of this chapter.) That needs to change. This is our reality and the reality for which we are preparing our students.

As we engage this evolving world where change is rapid and we struggle to predict the future, there are new, basic realities that educators face that have not been uppermost in our thinking in the past. These form the foundation of how schools will operate in the future, if indeed they hope to survive and thrive.

## Guide Rail #1: Four Framing Elements to Build Upon

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If the world had remained less volatile, and the future relatively predictable, education systems would not be under pressure to change. As you start to build and develop strong, sustainable value for your school or district in this less knowable future, there are four big factors about “change” to keep in mind. These are true for many organizations but are particularly relevant for schools:

1. **Change, in times of evolution, is inevitable.** While all schools will not feel the pace of evolution equally, few will be able to avoid it. You and your school can’t choose to live in a less VUCA world.

Every indication is that the magnitude of change is likely to be much greater, happen more quickly, and the results will be less predictable than anything that most of us have experienced in our own lifetimes.

2. **Effective change lies in the alignment of strategy, culture, and practice.** The legendary Peter Drucker famously said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” We will mention that quote again in the last chapter, but suffice to say that if strategy, the culture of your school, and the daily experience of your stakeholders are well aligned, it is a good bet that your school’s value to the community will rise with the opportunities that change provides and despite the obstacles it presents. If they are *not* aligned, change will likely result in a series of misfires, which will threaten your school’s future.
3. **Change requires both comfort and capacity.** For an organization to make significant changes, particularly at the speed that is now required for some schools to maintain or grow their value proposition, stakeholders need to know how to succeed in both their heads and their hearts. They need to *both* embrace the inevitable discomfort of change *and* acquire the skill set of how to ensure those changes create a better learning environment with better learning outcomes for their students. Providing and supporting this *both/and* foundation is the challenging job of leaders during times of change.
4. **Most schools are deficient in “innovation DNA.”** When Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christensen published *The Innovator’s DNA* in 2011, they identified five key attributes of people who are effective at leading innovative change: associating, questioning, observing, networking, and experimenting. These do not tend to be skills that are emphasized in schools of education credentialing programs, and they do not tend to be strengths around which many or most educators self-identify. We will go into a sixth characteristic later, risk-taking, that is even more rare within the genetic stew of most schools. This is the hand our schools have been dealt: *We are relatively deficient in innovation DNA*. If change is inevitable, then hiring and fostering educators who are eager and able to be effective innovators is a must. The good news is that many educators are very *willing*—in fact, *eager*—and *more than able* to learn how to become more effective innovators.

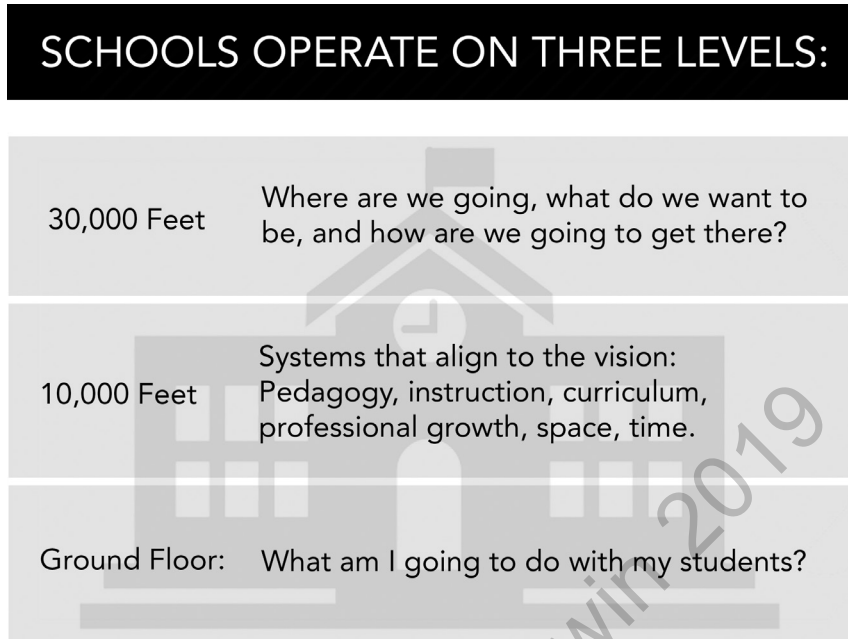
## Guide Rail #2: The Three Levels of School

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In a really macro sense, all schools operate on three levels (see Figure 1.1):

- The top level: “This is who we are and where we’re going.”
- The middle level: “These systems are in place to help the school to function well and achieve our vision.”
- The ground floor level: “This is what we are going to do for and with our students every day.”

**Figure 1.1** The Three Levels of School That Need to Be Aligned



Schools that work well, and particularly schools that *change* well, are those in which there is close, obvious, clear, frequent, and sustainable alignment across these three levels. As we delve into the tools of value, innovation, and strategy, it will become immediately clear that if many people in the school derive the benefits of this alignment, schools will attract more customers. If these three levels are misaligned, then students and families will not have the daily experiences that they have been promised, and they will look for other options.

In the many schools I have visited and worked with, there is no clearer indication of the thoughtfulness and effectiveness of school leadership than the alignment, or lack thereof, across these three levels. In schools lacking this alignment, the pitfalls are many.

### ***The Pitfalls of Not Aligning Vision to Practice***

- The official school vision statement contains promises that are not delivered to students.
- Teachers are unable to deliver on the vision because the school systems do not support their work.
- Classroom practices do not align to the vision.
- District leaders, site administrators, and teachers only see their role as working on one level rather than as part of a team that impacts all levels of the organization.

In well-aligned schools, teachers and administrators, who are the deliverers of the learning experience, **not only understand the vision and mission of their school, but they have had a hand in crafting it.** And boards or senior administrators who have traditionally been tasked with creating a long-term vision have intimate knowledge of what it takes to actually deliver on those promises.

## Guide Rail #3: Two Inescapable Ingredients of Innovative Change

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What did fifteenth-century Venetian coffeehouses have in common with Thomas Edison's Menlo Park lab, the World War II codebreakers at Bletchley Park, and happy hour bars in Silicon Valley? All were hubs of dramatic innovation at times when the world was experiencing the social, economic, technical, or political winds of rapid change. And all were filled with the two throughgoing threads that infect organizations that successfully evolve and adapt during such periods: *risk-taking* and *radical networked connectivity*.

### Risk-Taking

Making significant change is difficult, if not impossible, without the *willingness to take a risk*. In school terms, what do we mean by *significant change*? Change is relative for each school; I don't believe in one-size-fits-all recipes. But changing a textbook or a curriculum package is not significant. I would argue that a change is significant if it allows or requires the school to change one of the five basic parameters of what I have called the school "operating system."

### Examples of Significant Change

1. Changing how time is organized (day, week, month, year)
2. Changing how physical space is used: breaking the boundaries of traditional classrooms and/or static organization of learning space within those rooms
3. Changing how learners are organized (grouping by biological age, subject)
4. Changing the student-to-teacher ratio and relationship; changing the static "one teacher per *X* number of students" for every class period
5. Changing the ownership of learning, from teacher owned to co-owned and student owned.

School communities that accept the challenge of becoming irresistible to their customers/families are willing to take the risk of making changes to one or more of these five elements of the traditional school operating system. First attempts might fail. Successful schools learn from those failures, iterate, and try again because the downside of *not* changing is greater than the risk of shying away from change.



We ask our students to step outside of their comfort zones, to grow as learners every day. We ask them, in other words, to take risks. They watch us; we are their role models. If we are not willing to visibly take risks, why should they? As I discussed in my 2014 book *#EdJourney*, schools have a special and difficult relationship with risk-taking, but *risk-taking is unavoidable as part of the process of change*.

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The most successful adult risk-takers in schools are willing to expose their own vulnerability, to ask for help as they launch a new unit or practice with an unknown outcome. For teachers, it sounds something like this:

*“Students, I really need your help. I think we need to try something new. I don’t know how it is going to turn out; it might even fail. But together, we will learn more from taking a risk than from avoiding it. We will succeed or fail and learn together. Are you willing to help me?”*

For administrators, just replace the word *students* with *colleagues*.

Risk-taking is infectious. As you will see in Appendix I, there are many ways we can support appropriate risk-taking by just talking about it! What is our understanding of the word *risk*? What level of faith do we have that risk-taking is expected, required, or supported? What pilots are we running or planning for the next week, month, or year? Becoming comfortable with risk-taking in schools is vastly more about the “comfort” than it is about the real risks involved.

## Networked Connectivity

The second required pillar of innovative change is *networked connectivity*. As we will see in Chapter 16, having dense, frequent, informative, and diverse connections with people from beyond one’s own frame of experience is a key element of change. Hubs of innovation were historically significant because people with different backgrounds and perspectives had a place and time to interact to solve problems of common interest.

One of the biggest mistakes educators make is to visit, watch, and benchmark against other schools that look most like their own. Yes, we can learn from others who are walking a similar path to our own, but historically, innovation has occurred at *the overlap of the known and the less known*, at the margins of our experiences.

In schools, this means getting the heck out of the silos in which most of us spend much of our time. At Design 39 Campus in Poway, the principal really does not have an office; he wants to be present around the school almost all the time. At Mt. Vernon Presbyterian School in Atlanta, and many others, teachers participate in instructional rounds and visit classrooms at a variety of grade levels. Forward-leaning educators visit schools that *don’t* look a lot like their own; they participate in Twitter chats and EdCamps to meet colleagues from varied backgrounds; they visit the offices of Google or

a local incubator/accelerator in their city. They write blogs and read those of others, and they join book-reading groups about and with not just other educators but thought leaders from across industries so they hear and see about new ideas and trends that will impact their own practice.

Risk-taking and networked connectivity start at the “top” of an organization (I put “top” in quotes because one of the keys to innovative change is distributed leadership structures, and I believe that all educators are leaders. But some have a title that places them “higher” in the school hierarchy). If titular leaders don’t set these examples, no one, down to the students, will be as likely to do it on his or her own. Titular leaders absolutely need to figure out how to make connections with “others” fun, expected, required, supported, visible, and celebrated. They are the fuel that drives the engines of innovative change. For some, they are uncomfortable. Great! One of our best measures of innovative change is embracing discomfort.

## Guide Rail #4: Living in VUCA World

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Throughout human history, the future tended to look a lot like the past. If your parents were farmers, it was a pretty darn good chance that you were going to live your life on a farm, and the methods of successful farming did not change much from generation to generation. A cow was going to still be a cow. Technologies changed at rates that were slow, relative to human life spans. Communication from one part of the world to another took months or years. What we learn about in history—the rise and fall of leaders, empires, and nation states—often had little impact at the local level, except for the endless suffering caused by those ebbs and flows.

This is no longer the case. The speed of change has accelerated to the point that, as Eric Teller of Google X points out, it has exceeded our abilities as human individuals and institutions to adapt to those changes (in Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late*, 2016). Our primary directive as educators is to prepare young people for the future, and that future is less knowable than ever—and becoming *more less knowable* all the time. This is the nature of VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous). We don’t like it; it can be incredibly uncomfortable, perhaps even frightening, but it is the real world in which we live.

The term *VUCA* arose in the late 1980s within the US military to describe new multilateral global conditions emerging at the end of the Cold War. Now there is an entire industry dedicated to helping businesses, organizations, and people navigate this new normal. VUCA world is different. There is no indication that the curve of change will slow down; in fact, it is accelerating all the time. And there is no “one thing” that educators need to do differently in order to improve. The big problem for educators with VUCA world is that we can’t confirm that the solutions we are seeking will actually give us the best results. VUCA by its nature does not allow us to wait for the results of a 20-year longitudinal study. As retired general Stanley McChrystal states in his book *Team of Teams*, “Adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency” (McChrystal, 2015).

Very few educators, I would argue, woke up one day when they were 22 or 25 years old, smacked their forehead and shouted, “I REALLY love volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity; I think I’ll become a teacher!!” Educators generally thrive on predictability and stability; your jobs are hard enough without VUCA in the mix. For decades, the general attitude among educators when faced with change has been “Don’t worry; the pendulum will swing back the other way; just wait it out”—and they were usually right.

So what do we do? The best answer is this: In the past, educators have been told, “Stop doing what you have been doing and start doing it differently. We know a better way.” In essence, educators for decades have been told to “unfreeze” from their practices of the past and then “move” and “refreeze” as the pendulum of ideas, theories, political leverage, shifting leadership, state and national policies, and sheer hope swung back and forth in the search of improved learning outcomes, whatever we choose that to mean.

In a VUCA world, “unfreeze–move–refreeze” is patently ridiculous because we specifically *don’t* know a better way that will *always* be right in a future that is less knowable. The only answer is to become better at, and accustomed to, working in what Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini (2014) eloquently describe as a state of “permanent slush.” If you are looking for a great topic for a day of professional learning, start with a community discussion of what “permanent slush” might entail and allow stakeholders to design ways to convert fear of permanent slush into opportunities for dynamic, effective, *fun* growth where the guide rails are less frozen in place.

As we accept that there is a new set of realities, of conditions in the world that we are educating our students to enter, we can now start to build and understand the tool kit we need to help our schools succeed in the future. The remainder of this section is about those tools: *the real definitions, intersections, and power of value, strategy, and innovation.*

## BIG QUESTIONS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

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1. How do we actively, frequently, and publicly support risk-takers?
2. How are we connected with “others” in ways that directly help us to evolve as an organization?
3. How are we adapting as individuals and as an organization to the realities of VUCA world?
4. What is our school’s appetite for risk, and how do we know this?
5. What is one big risk that our school has taken in the last five years?