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Success and System Readiness: Lester B. Pearson School Board and Its Commitment to Educational Excellence, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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What's been interesting about future search is that many initiatives like it have gone by the way but this one has not. People still see the power of sitting down together in the same room. It's a way that we can start working towards our vision and moving together; yet we are also able to continue to follow our own interests.

—Pat Deans, director of community services

INTRODUCTION

In 18 months, starting with a three-day future search conference in March 2002, the Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB) was able to form a central students' committee, develop and launch an interactive community database, implement a "Peaceful Schools" program, pilot a work study mentorship program, collaboratively develop a board strategic plan, and draft the board's mission statement based upon the LBPSB vision and future search outcomes.

Not all future searches create such visible outcomes. What can readers learn from this case about creating, encouraging, and ensuring similar constructive changes in such a short time?

THE CONTEXT

Québec is one of 13 provinces in Canada. French is the first language for more than 80 percent of Quebecers. In schools, French is the teaching language except for certain pupils eligible for instruction in English. Quebec amended its Education Act in 1997 to eliminate denominational (religious) school boards, replacing its 156 denominational boards with 60 French- and 9 English-language boards. On the Island of Montréal, reform caused significant changes in student and staff populations. New linguistic school boards often were created from several denominational boards, each with separate policies on integration, French immersion, transportation, and so on. Many schools now operate under new, unfamiliar structures.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT AND ITS FUTURE SEARCH

One of these newly created boards, the Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB), serves over 30,000 students (primary, secondary, adult, and vocational) in 60 schools and centers. In its first few years LBPSB consolidated six school boards, closing or amalgamating schools, selling buildings, and transferring educators and students. There was no time for long-term planning, and the board faced significant challenges in integrating diverse corporate cultures.

In December 2001, four years after its founding, LBPSB adopted a resolution to create “a long-term student-centred plan focusing on providing students with the skills needed to be successful in a changing world.” As a catalyst to help bring the plan to fruition, the board’s council of commissioners chose future search to create and implement a plan focused on “A Commitment to Educational Excellence.”

The future search involved 65 diverse stakeholders from within the board and its partners from social services, business firms, and community groups. Participants envisioned changes 12 years into the future, from the time students enter kindergarten through their graduating high school. The board also held a follow-up conference two-and-a-half months later in May 2002.

THE SYSTEM ONE-AND-A-HALF YEARS LATER

I am thrilled that we [students] have become a full educational partner and that the school board has been so supportive.

—A grade 11 student at Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School
and future search student stakeholder representative

Seven action groups were formed during the future search. Six continued meeting regularly afterward, focusing on such key areas as fund-raising, community links, flexibility in high schools, school safety, a central students' committee, and work study. These six groups shared a common philosophy: "Creating the best for our future best."

Here is a synopsis of board initiatives up to November 2003, indicating the diversity of community involvement, the depth of creativity, and the comprehensive nature of the action plans.

Community Links

A major consequence of future search came about in the fall of 2002. LBPSB joined with three government agencies to create an interactive community database enabling teachers to tap community resources to help them present exciting reality-based lessons and projects. Within six months, 86 companies had committed time and expertise to the 2,000 teachers and students, including guided tours, job shadowing, student interviews, guest speakers for classrooms, teacher training, workshops, contest and exhibition judges, equipment loans and donations, and participation in a career day.

Safety in Schools

The board has committed \$100,000 toward this group's proposed antibullying "Peaceful Schools" program. Training began in 11 schools and centers at the end of March 2003.

Work Study

This action group worked hard to establish a mentoring program for students aged 16 to 18 in the alternative programs that consist of a combina-

tion of academic and tech-vocational courses. Each week students spend three days on academic courses and two days on trades. LBPSB employees mentor students one-on-one in trades' areas. In the last two years, mentoring programs have expanded significantly in all employee areas with much positive feedback from students and employees.

Fund-raising

This action group joined with the Pearson Educational Foundation—a body that establishes partnerships with parents and business communities—to raise funds for school-based initiatives and to help individual students.

Central Students' Committee

Central student committees—still a rarity in the education world although most individual schools have student committees—are gaining in popularity as students are pushing to have more say in their education.

—Karen Siedman, reporter for the *Montreal Gazette*,
media stakeholder at the future search

In an unprecedented step, this action team created a central students' committee (CSC) that was granted official status by the LBPSB Council of Commissioners. The CSC then received funding to promote student issues and governance. Being an official consultative body entailed tremendous responsibility. The group's members provide input to the board on policies being developed. In addition, the Central Students Action Group developed its own logo and motto and went to work on a variety of important projects in the 2002–2003 school years to create flexible timetabling for the high school, to establish a link to the LBPSB website, to develop a constitution and code of conduct, and to organize a leadership conference.

The student group also met with Assistant Deputy Minister Mr. Noel Burke to discuss the students' vision for the future direction of education. They presented several ideas, including 1) involving students in determining what they learn and how they learn it (e.g., more course options, flexible timetables, etc.) and 2) providing more hands-on opportunities outside the classroom, (e.g., community work study opportunities for

course credit). These ideas met with strong support from other students and from the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ).

Flexibility in High Schools

This task force considered many innovative approaches to increase flexibility, including 1) four-day schooling with day 5 devoted to extracurricular tutoring, co-op, stages, sports, etc.; 2) year-round schooling; 3) a later morning start; and 4) additional options where students would develop their talents; leadership, sports skills, etc.

All high schools were included in the planning stage vis-à-vis flexibility. Bimonthly high school sector meetings including all high school administrators are presently discussing these issues. The action group addressed topics directly related to the Québec education plan and curriculum reform, a key ingredient in the district's strategic plan, school success plans, and each school's educational project.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership is about creating, day to day, a domain in which we and those around us continually deepen our understanding of reality and are able to participate in shaping the future. This, then, is the deeper territory of leadership—collectively “listening” to what is wanting to emerge in the world, and then having the courage to do what is required. (Jaworski, 1996, p. 182)

People within LBPSB have told us repeatedly that they recognize and value the diverse leadership within the various stakeholder groups—from students and community partners to teachers and staff, management, and school commissioners. There is also a shared respect for the leadership of Director General Leo La France. It is this leadership that is helping to sustain the change. “Leo is like the CEO of our board,” Marcus Tabachnick, school board commissioner, explains, “Don't be fooled by his laid-back demeanour, he's tough. But he's patient with special people skills. He's a terrific leader.” Peter Senge (1990) explains that:

leaders may start by pursuing their own vision, but as they learn to listen carefully to others' visions they begin to see that their own personal vision

is part of something larger. This does not diminish any leader's sense of responsibility—if anything it deepens it. (p. 352)

Leo has been described as a person who consults, collaborates, and encourages people to bring issues to the table. Many mentioned his open door policy and the way he welcomes everyone into his office. It is no surprise that despite his initial skepticism he came to use future search as a key milestone in strategic planning.

What impacted me the most at the future search conference and the May reunion was the range of diverse stakeholders working together and sharing. There was a sense of trust. Initially I was concerned that the future search planning was evolving too slowly. I did not know where it was going until the first day of the conference. The two-and-a-half days with 65 people in the room were a very emotional time for me. I was overcome that people could share things so openly with each other. All stakeholders were feeling a trust in the process and each other. That also meant something of a risk. If you want to know what people think, you have to be prepared to hear whatever they say.

—Leo La France, LBPSB director general

Peter Koestenbaum (2000), a philosopher and business consultant, speaks of leadership as having four facets: vision, reality, service (ethics), and courage. We are struck by how these facets reflect underlying future search principles (see the introduction). Using principle-based structures and techniques, Leo La France was able to enhance his existing leadership skills by mobilizing a systemwide vision (focus on the future), creating a shared reality (common ground dialogue), catalyzing mutual service (engaging whole persons, body and mind together) and supporting the courage to act among participants (self-management and personal and public responsibility).

BROAD COMMITMENT TO FOLLOW-UP

One striking aspect of future searches worldwide is the degree to which they engender sustained commitment to action. This widely documented phenomenon seems counterintuitive. How could LBPSB generate so much ongoing activity from a two-and-a-half day future search conference?

One explanation we found useful is physicist David Bohm's description of the emergence of collective intelligence. Bohm suggests that "we're all connected through and operate within living fields of thought and perception" (in Jaworski, 1996, p. 109). He describes how changes evolve:

At present, people create barriers between each other by their fragmentary thought. . . . Each one operates separately. When these barriers have dissolved, then there arises one mind, where. . . each person also retains his or her own individual awareness. That one mind will still exist when they separate, and when they come together, it will be as if they hadn't separated. . . . It's actually a single intelligence that works with people who are moving in relationship with one another. (Jaworski, 1996, p. 100)

How is this state nurtured so that people continue to meet following a future search? In some cases people continue to meet on their own regardless of support systems. Other initiatives need support. Inevitably some action teams fall by the wayside with or without coordinating structures. One thing we have noticed is that systems displaying the most visible changes tend to integrate both future search outcomes and principles into their day-to-day work. They tend to use simple structures and procedures for continued communication, networking, and shared learning. These include websites, newsletters, e-mail listservs, and periodic review meetings. Lester B. Pearson, in 2003, was using all of these methods to help people remain involved and effective.

Communication, Networking, and Shared Learning

In addition to structures and procedures, another effective follow-up factor is that of "community coordinator." Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe the role as follows:

Good community coordinators are knowledgeable and passionate about the community's topic. They are well respected by their peers as practitioners, but they are generally not leading experts in their field. Since a coordinator's primary role is to link people, not give answers, being a leading expert can be a handicap. Good coordinators also need good interpersonal skills [and] must have the strategic and political savvy to create a bridge between the community and the formal organization. (pp. 81–82)

In this regard, LBPSB was fortunate to acquire the services of Pat Deans, director of community services. Though not able to attend the future search, she took on as part of her portfolio the follow-up work, buttressed by her background in education and organizational development and her personal people-centered philosophy.

I am very interested in the linking of future search with other board initiatives. The alignment of who we are with where we want to go is critical. I feel people are important and do everything I can to bring people together. Everyone is a catalyst at one time or another. We need to recognize each other's talents and nurture leadership skills and opportunities. As people become involved and committed, we grow as an organization.

—Pat Deans, director of community services

Integration into the System

The most obvious work required to implement a future search portfolio is supporting the many action groups. LBPSB has institutionalized this support through regular action group meetings at the school board, and by collecting and sharing action group reports. They also have been convening meetings of action group chairs two to three times per year and preparing biyearly reports for the council of commissioners.

Even this straightforward approach to integrating future search outcomes into the system is not without its challenges. In the 18 months following the future search some action groups were working on their own, unconnected to the board's strategic direction. "We needed to make sure that everything discussed in action groups had a link and was aligned with board direction," the action group chairs replied when asked how things could be more streamlined.

The Board Mission Statement

LBPSB is also including the future search outcomes in its regular work. In January 2003, for example, less than one year after the conference, the management team met for two days to develop the board's mission statement and begin a strategic plan. Each future search action group's mission

statement and the board's current vision statement were used as the basis for a new LBPSB mission statement. The following draft document was distributed to stakeholders for input and approved by the council of commissioners in late spring:

The Lester B. Pearson School Board works with the community to provide a healthy, safe, respectful and inclusive learning environment in which there is the flexibility for all students to reach their full potential.

The Lester B. Pearson School Board prepares individuals to assume their roles as responsible, competent and successful citizens who are capable of working cooperatively within an ever-changing society.

The Lester B. Pearson School Board measures its actions and decisions against the core values stated in the Lester B. Pearson Vision Statement.

Developing the Strategic Plan

To cite another example, LBPSB by law has to implement a strategic plan. To begin this process, the timetable and basic concepts (based on Ministry of Education guidelines) were presented and discussed with all stakeholder groups during the winter of 2003. In March, the board again used future search principles to gather representative stakeholders and convene focus groups. These groups provided input concerning the board's openness to the community, the support offered to schools and centers, and satisfaction with services offered. The next stage included a meeting with representatives from each stakeholder group to analyze the priorities, based on data from many sources, including the future search initiatives already in place. In April an administration group/council of commissioners workshop was formed to review analysis results, set strategic directions, and draft objectives, strategies, and indicators. The management committee, which included all school and center administrators and managers, reviewed the draft before approval by the council of commissioners in May. By the fall of 2003 all stakeholder groups were commenting on the plan.

Boardwide Professional Development

Earlier, we quoted Leo La France on how future search has changed his practice. He mentioned as an example a boardwide professional develop-

ment activity for all LBPSB employees held at the Palais des Congrès in downtown Montréal. The council of commissioners had modified the school calendar to include this day. All schools, adult and vocational education centers, services, and offices were closed on February 18, 2003. For the first time, all board employees shared a common professional development activity, bringing the whole system into the room to generate a sense of connection and a further shift toward a shared sense of *we*.

After staff breakfasts at each facility, buses took employees to the Palais. Each staff wore its school colors, carried banners, and sang songs. They re-created the days when riding the school bus was a daily experience. At the event, the electricity in the room was contagious. People sensed that something important was happening. Prior to the event, some had complained about the extravagant use of time and money. Now, people cheered, waved their banners, and hugged colleagues they had not seen for a long time. Pictures of LBPSB teachers and students of all ages flashed on the three big screens, along with the statement *We are the Board*. Leo La France's speech was inspiring. The motivational speakers (one in each of Canada's official languages) delivered messages that could be applied to teaching, working, and life. The bus rides back to the schools were filled with laughter, singing, and clapping. It was an organizational milestone which, we predict, will be recalled many times in the coming years as the moment when people recognized together the reality of the slogan: "*We are the board.*"

PREPARING THE GROUND FOR MEANINGFUL COINCIDENCE

When we began working with this school board we were struck by the energy and commitment displayed by everyone we met. There was no doubt that all had a sense of pride in the parts they played in district education. What they missed was a shared purpose and trust among stakeholder groups.

With future search came a growing trust. In Canada, amalgamations and structural changes have put a strain on many boards and, in particular, the relationship between board management and teachers. This is not happening at LBPSB. The partnership and respect between these two stakeholder groups was evident in our conversations with system stakeholders. For the

Flexibility in High Schools Action Group to be still operational after 18 months is also a testimony to this partnership and to creating the best environment for kids. The changes being contemplated in this group could have significant impact on when and how teachers teach and would likely require adjustments to collective agreements. In other school districts even an exploration in this area would not be possible given the strained relationships.

The shared school district pride and persona was impossible to miss when we spoke with stakeholders 18 months after the conference. When we have returned to visit other systems where we have run a future search, we have found that when we ask members of one action group if they are aware of what is happening in other groups, they are not. But in this district people not only referred to the work that they were doing but were also aware of the work of others and spoke about it with a sense of pride and ownership. The magnitude and speed of this shift strikes us as among the most remarkable that we have seen.

Pearson's remarkable success stimulated us to look more deeply for contributing factors—structures, processes, leadership, and people—that might explain how the board achieved so much in such a short time. We made several surprising discoveries.

For example, where other organizations have been stymied by the appointment of a new executive leader during a future search process, LBPSB was able to take advantage of this change. Often a change in leadership means considerable anxiety. In this case we found an intriguing explanation for the explosion of creative energy in a new area of science pioneered by physicists to explain the nature of “self-organizing systems.” That work, often referred to as chaos theory and emergence, offers useful insights into what we've seen happen at LBPSB.

Steven Johnson (2001) uses understandings from complexity and chaos theory to explain constructive alternatives to top-down change. He illustrates how individuals and groups connecting in new ways may create something wholly new. In this school district several things happened during the future search planning that contributed to the emergence of a new spirit in the district.

Choosing Future Search

The board invited the director general of the Ottawa–Carleton School Board (see chapter 4) to give a supper talk at a planning retreat in June

2001. His story of how a future search helped to catalyze the merger of two large school boards, including community partners in the process, stimulated the LBPSB director general to learn more about future search. By the time we were invited to discuss how we might help the board's plans, the three school commissioners and four school board managers had pretty well sold themselves on the process. The success of the Ottawa–Carleton future search, the timing of the Ottawa DG's dinner talk, and the ensuing strategic planning discussions all coalesced to point toward future search as the board's obvious next step.

Choosing the New Director General

At the same time, the board recognized that school district mergers inevitably lead to strained relationships. Many people at first feel displaced, even excluded. The new board leaders believed in the centrality of an organizational vision, values, and beliefs early in the merger process. They also realized that forcing a new initiative when people remained committed to their previous organizations could inhibit the development of a shared vision. People needed to be involved in creating the new system right up front. The leaders decided not to wait for system stabilization before going ahead with a future search.

During the planning, however, the director general (DG), Catherine Prokosh, who was the leading proponent of the future search, needed to absent herself for a few months. An assistant DG, Leo La France, took on the task of leading the project in her absence. During the first meeting, Leo admitted that he had doubts about the initiative and said he'd keep an open mind about what would come, and he did. Shortly after, the director general resigned. Leo was appointed interim director general, with full responsibility for leading the future search planning. He proved to be a skilful leader, negotiating to include important stakeholders and encouraging diverse perspectives within the planning team. How fortuitous, then, that only a few weeks before the future search conference, Leo La France, who brought with him strong people-centered values, became the new director general. Had a person been appointed who was not involved in the planning process, the entire experience might have been jeopardized. As Kurt Lewin explained over 60 years ago, people are much more likely to support plans they have had a hand in making than those turned over to them by others (in Weisbord & Janoff, 1995, p. 89).

In this case the district's organizational values and those of the director general were well aligned. After four years of putting new systems into place, the board's next priority was increasing collaboration among its many members. We saw Leo's timely emergence as the new board leader as wonderfully synchronistic. Leo's appointment felt like a small miracle to us. He valued the process of dialogue leading to shared vision. He modeled the principles of self-management and finding common ground in the way he included his colleagues in key decisions. He believed in the power of "we." He was ready to learn from the future search outcomes. Had an outsider been named at this juncture we doubt whether the future search could have accomplished so much. Joseph Jaworski (1996) has a description for this:

We've all had those perfect moments, when things come together in an almost unbelievable way, when events that could never be predicted, let alone controlled; remarkably seem to guide us along our path. The closest I have come to finding a word for what happens in these moments is *synchronicity*. (p. ix)

Choosing Members for the Planning Committee

The third critical event occurred during our initial meeting with LBPSB staff. We began by brainstorming a stakeholder list of those folks who affect and are affected by the system. We wanted, in the same room, people with authority, resources, expertise, information, and need. We narrowed this list down to those essential groups and individuals who had the greatest influence on the system. One key stakeholder group was the teacher's union, with whom the board was then in contract negotiations. This meant that union members could assume no extra duties such as future search planning.

Yet going ahead without union assistance would violate the whole system principle upon which future search is based. Union representatives were presented with the future search principles and the timing dilemma. They decided to put the issue to a vote of their constituents. The decision was that two union representatives would participate in the future search initiative despite a negotiating policy to the contrary. We do not know what sparked union representatives to present this opportunity to their

constituents. We do know that the future search planning would have been significantly compromised without their participation. Many other stakeholders joined with equal enthusiasm.

Ann Svendsen and Myriam Laberge (2003), in their paper on stakeholder networks that foster learning and innovation, describe

a point where things have the power to bind. . . the point at which the parties involved can do things together that each party values, and recognize they could not achieve alone. . . . Such points of intersect provide the glue that binds the effort, and keeps it together. (p. 11)

Such a point of intersection is precisely what future search makes possible. Indeed, future search's key principles embody this understanding. The first one, "getting the whole system in room," recognizes that the right people have to be together for the task at hand. The second, "exploring the whole before fixing any part," acknowledges every person's contribution to a full understanding of the shared task. The third, "seeking common ground rather than reworking old problems and conflicts," leads to the discovery of creative intersections. Because consultants cannot do this for people, the fourth principle, "self-responsibility for action," becomes crucial. What consultants do provide are novel structures and unprecedented opportunities for people to do things they could not do before.

When we get a cross-section of system stakeholders into dialogue, change happens in the first planning meeting, often months or years before the two-and-a-half day future search conference. Possibilities emerge that people never imagined. The system starts to shift as the planning team seeks to apply future search principles. The challenge for us is continuing to practice what we preach, holding the line on getting the whole system, investing time for sustained action, and people accepting responsibility for their task and action commitments.

I am still inspired to do what we planned for our future. . . heck, I am planning on going in the front line, I think I might want to become a teacher, and I will teach the class of how our School Board used to be, and how it got this way! I've always kind of wanted to be a teacher, and if I do, I can really see if what we all worked on together is coming

through or not, and hopefully I will be a good example to those who want to learn. There's hope for the future yet, here I come!

—Student representative on the
planning committee for the future search

From complexity and chaos theory we also have become cognizant of how future search evokes a key phenomenon of effective systems called “strange attractors.” These are turning points that arise in a system when many apparently unrelated factors within an organization and its environment become visible; they materialize when what is already present takes on shape and substance, flourish at times of adaptive challenge, and foster breakthroughs and outcomes that are unforeseen and unimaginable (Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2000, p.75). Many future search techniques—time lines, mind maps, future scenarios—repeatedly evoke strange attractors.

Future search is a people project. It encourages participants to come to their own conclusions as to new directions,”

—Marcus Tabachnick, board chairman

LEARNINGS AND REFLECTIONS

We have shown how committed leaders can use future search to enable transformation within an educational system. We need to point out that those who do so pay attention to the whole process—beginning with the planning all the way through to supporting follow-up. They do not view the conference or its attractive techniques as a quick fix pill. Rather, they understand the ongoing requirement for energy and attention to sustain the work toward a shared vision. Future search is a great way to launch the boat. Follow-up processes and structures are required to sustain the voyage.

Nonetheless, we continue to be awed by the way synchronicity and fate played out so positively within this system. This is not to underplay the challenges that the system has faced but rather to acknowledge that the time for visible systemic transformation just seemed right. We cannot predict this alignment when we begin a future search. We do know, however, that a symbiotic relationship exists between future search and leadership.



Leaders will always play a key role in the success of a future search. In this case Leo La France fulfilled the requirement by fully supporting emerging changes and the structures needed to sustain them at the systems level, beyond that of individuals and groups. We know too that future search enables members of any system to emerge as leaders, often people that neither we nor they would have predicted had the interest or capacity until they found themselves acting in new ways.

This then is the challenge for those who would make the abstract notions of complexity and chaos theory practical in school systems. We believe that future search enables emergence, strange attractors, points of intersect, and synchronicity. We have learned from our review of events at the Lester B. Pearson School Board that these, under the right conditions, can enable educational transformations of the most constructive, long-lasting, and productive kind.



