



Transcript

**Creating Thinking Systems Part 4:
A conversation with Wes Hahn from
Trillium Lakelands District School Board**



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Usha James 00:07

Hello everyone. I'm Usha James, and welcome back to Re: thinking education, a podcast from The Critical Thinking Consortium.

Usha James 00:25

I'm so glad you've joined us for this next episode in our series, Creating Thinking Systems, which has been sponsored by OPSOA. We're so grateful to their support the Ontario Public Supervisory Officers Association. This is the fourth episode in our series. And I think today is going to be fun, and I'm so excited to get started.

Usha James 00:46

Today I'm going to be chatting with Wes Han, Director of Trillium Lakelands District School Board here in southern Ontario, and we're going to be talking about alignment.

Usha James 01:01

I think alignment absolutely can sound jargony - that it's a word that senior leaders use and administrators use to talk about something that's ideal, some sort of ideal state, but it's more personal than that. One of the things that I've noticed these days is we're being - we feel like we've been pulled in 100 different directions. But in my work life, I don't want to be pulled in a million different directions. I want somebody to help me understand what is the direction and how does everything I do connect to that?

Usha James 01:45

It means that no matter whom you're talking to, no matter where you're getting direction, it's clear that we are all moving in a similar direction - that I'm not out here on my own doing something that doesn't match with what you're intending. I think that helps me feel settled in my work and gives me agency to move forward, instead of wondering what direction should I be going in. And so I think when a system can do that, when a district can do that, it's a gift to all of the people that work in that work in that district.

Usha James 02:25

Our episode today is going to focus on alignment, but I can't promise that that's where it's going to stay, because Wes and I have been working together for a very long time, and I have a pretty good feeling that once we get started, it's going to go in a number of different directions. So I'm excited to see where this goes and to have the conversation. So let's get started.

Usha James 02:51

Wes, welcome! I'm so happy to be chatting with you today. This is super exciting. Thank you for coming.

Wes Hahn 02:58

Oh, Usha. I'm super excited too. This is a great experience for me to be here talking with you today, so it's fabulous.

Usha James 03:06

We've been talking about doing a podcast for a long time, so I hope this lives up to the hype, but I think it's great that we finally got down to it.

Wes Hahn 03:15

Well, there's so much history, so much of our working time together over the years, and you as a great mentor leader - you know all of the things I could keep saying and saying about how you've influenced my leadership. I'm very privileged to be here with you and talking about great things around education.

Usha James 03:34

Thank, Wes. So, we know each other well, but, and you know lots of educational leaders in Ontario, but people are listening from all over. So why don't you do a little bio? Where did you start your journey as an educational leader? Just take us on a bit of a tour of the road that brought you here today.

Wes Hahn 03:55

Sure, I'd love to it. It started back in the '90s, and that might seem like a long time ago, but it's gone by fast. I'm from Hamilton originally, and I got accepted into the two year program at the University of Toronto, and it was called the TAP program. It doesn't exist anymore. It only existed for about five years, but I had a great experience in that program because I got paid as part of it, and my placements were in Toronto, at Jane and Finch, and I have to tell you, it was some of the greatest experience - met some of the great leaders there who kind of mentored me in the early days, and I really learned how to start my teaching career in the right way.

Wes Hahn 04:42

But obviously, the full time job took me back into Hamilton, and I went back and started my teaching career there. But I had two great years, almost three, in North York at the time, which became the Toronto District School Board. Taught for a number of years across different grades. You know, obviously primary, junior, intermediate, a lot of grades seven and eight. I was a learning resource teacher. Then I was a consultant, Math and Assessment Consultant in Hamilton. Then moved into the vice principalship, then became principal, and the typical path that you would go through.

Wes Hahn 05:19

Had a really great experience as district principal under John Malloy. He was our director in Hamilton at the time, and was the organizational leadership district principal, and had a great experience there.

Wes Hahn 05:31

I was in the superintendent pool in Hamilton, and there just wasn't any movement. No one was retiring at the time, Usha. So a job came available in the District School Board of Niagara under Warren Hoshizaki, and I just decided to have a change. I thought maybe this is the right thing to do. And it was a great, great experience. Making another change, experiencing some other different system, and

learning from people that maybe haven't, you know, you haven't kind of had the same thinking as you've grown up in a system. And I think that I've often encouraged people along the way, as I've moved through the different phases, get a different experience. You know, get out and think differently than the system that you're in and that provided a great foundation for me, and I was superintendent in there for almost nine years, different portfolios,

Wes Hahn 06:24

And then obviously applied for the directorship in Trillium Lakelands. And here I am moving into my sixth year, and I can't believe how fast that went. Time flies. And so that's a little bit of a history about where I started and the great experiences I had along the way.

Usha James 06:44

Yeah, thanks for that. I didn't know you were in Toronto. We were probably in Toronto at the same time.

Wes Hahn 06:49

Probably were. Yeah, that's exactly right. We probably were. It's funny how your paths might have crossed, but you never ended up meeting someone at the time. But yeah, I really enjoyed that experience. I think it was a good awakening for me as to what you had to commit to be a good teacher. And passion is one thing, but preparation and planning was the pieces I learned, I think, early on, which served me well.

Usha James 07:16

Today, I wanted to talk about this word that I hear lots of senior leaders say, and that word is alignment. And it's sort of like this elusive holy grail that everyone knows it's going to be powerful, but they're still looking for it. And in all the years you and I have worked together, I think it's a word that's always felt really central to your approach and your leadership and your intention, I think. And so I wanted to ask you about that. I wanted to ask about when you think about cohesion and alignment, what does it mean to you, and what does it look like and sound like when a system has achieved it? What are you looking for to know if you're achieving it?

Wes Hahn 08:09

Oh, I think the, this is a great series of questions you just asked. I think early on in my teaching and learning to become a teacher and really learning the effective strategies that you require to be a good teacher, I came across, I would say, a couple of principles that influenced me greatly, around how to make sure if you're going to stick to something and make it work, you can't do 50 things all at once. And so early days in my career, I kind of got that feeling that if you do a few things right, you're going to be better for it down the road, and you keep adding things as you, as you start to accomplish, instead of starting with 50.

Wes Hahn 08:53

I kept that into my principalship, and I have to tell you, it served me very well as I moved through a couple schools as principal, I kept things simple from a, you know, a numbers point of view, knowing that they're very complex issues to solve or to improve upon. And I found people really grappled and

were able to kind of dig into those things when they were manageable. So again, I got reinforced that this is the right thing to do.

Wes Hahn 09:21

Then I became a superintendent, and I'll never forget, we were involved with Ken Leithwood at the time in effective districts. We were one of the boards that he was looking at and working with our director, Warren Hoshizaki. And when he finished that research, it was really, really, I think, a key moment for me in understanding that if you're going to move systems, there has to be coherence across the system. You can't have people doing all different things across departments, and that alignment from the district office down into the schools has to be there.

Wes Hahn 09:56

And those were some of the critical characteristics that you know, really set districts aside, was keeping that alignment and that coherence. So it fit perfectly with my belief system, because I'd always believed that you had to keep these things tight moving forward, help people understand the things you're trying to achieve. You know, coherence across the school, coherence across the department as a superintendent and now as a director, I think it's critical that that coherence and that messaging stay crystal clear and not jump around. I think, you know, too many times people getting caught into the you know that we got to change, or we got to do this every year, or add something new, and when you start doing that, systems get unbalanced. They lose their direction, in my mind, and I think that's what's kind of served me around this aligned coherence piece. But Ken's work really, I think, set a really strong foundation with me for system leadership, for sure.

Usha James 10:53

Okay,

Usha James 10:54

Okay, so I'm going to ask you a question, scale of zero to 10. Where do you think you are now in Trillium Lakelands, on that scale of alignment and cohesion, and I don't want to jinx it, but be frank, where do you think you're at? How did you get there, and what were your key moves?

Wes Hahn 11:18

Yeah, this is a good one. I might over exaggerate it a bit, but I do believe we're probably at about a seven or an eight. And if I had to really land on one, let me say seven, but I think we're closer to eight.

Wes Hahn 11:33

I think, you know, coming into a system, you know, that had a good reputation for lots of things that were going on within the board, one of the things that I think I did notice was there wasn't a strong instructional coherence, or, you know, inclusion across the system. And you know, for that to happen, or to start to move in that direction, you have to understand first, why there isn't that cohesion, why there isn't that kind of connection?

Wes Hahn 12:02

And so I did spend a great deal of time listening and talking to people, like all directors do when they come into a system, but I really put my ear down to listen hard. And the thing that I think stood out for me was there was, you know, sort of a ... there was no direction around the instructional practice. And it wasn't because the people prior were weren't doing great job. They were. I think it's just new people come in and see things differently. And I saw it as an opportunity to kind of create some coherence across the instructional lens.

Wes Hahn 12:35

And so that's what we began to work on. What was the system needing? And how did we how would we create that coherence? Data was the, I think, the critical point for us. Not much data in the system at that point in time to make decisions, so we started to make sure we built the data system and the data literacy with people so that they could understand the data, not for the Board's purpose, but for their own purpose. And as we started building that data, that really became important for people understanding what they needed to do.

Wes Hahn 13:08

We started to create a very, very clear, and I would say, manageable instructional framework as to how we were going to approach improving the system from K to 12, and as we were doing that, you know, you stepped in with supporting us with our strategic plan. So all of these things were starting to come together, and it was perfect timing to now start that strategic plan. And once we got rolling with that, I think that really, you know, from the pieces of understanding data, making that instructional plan, and then incorporating into our strategic plan, those pieces set us on the right path to improving student achievement.

Usha James 13:52

It's so interesting that you, you know, pointed towards the strategic plan, because I think for a lot of people, the strategic plan is, can be a very, I don't know, "make work project". That's not the right thing. It's a compliance piece. And I think you approached it differently. And then when I think about other things that are connected, that might have that same feel, you know, work with the trustees, and what does governance look like? That can feel like a separate piece of the puzzle.

Usha James 14:23

You just talked about the way you were listening and thinking about voice and understanding that as data. When I think about all of these different pieces, they can seem like discrete elements of a director's work or senior leader's work, but I feel like you're talking about how those dots connected. Could you connect the dots a little bit around those?

Wes Hahn 14:45

Yeah, I think that, to me, seemed to be the important piece. Everybody's got a strategic plan story. And you know, sometimes, for the most part, they're not always good stories with good outcomes, because a lot of those plans end up on a bookshelf or in a drawer somewhere, and you and I had this conversation, and trustees had it with me. We did not want a plan that ended up in a drawer.

Wes Hahn 15:09

And so they were very influential, and I think very keen on keeping it simple. A 40-page plan wasn't going to happen with us. Our strategic plan, as you know, came out to be two or three pages, four pages with two main goals. And I think the reason why it works so well is because with your support, we crafted it with the trustees and community involvement.

Wes Hahn 15:35

So people had a say in it, like they always do with a strategic plan, but especially the trustees - their start on the governance path, and really, you know, being part of this plan started early on with the development of the strategic plan, and when it was done, and we took a look at those two goals that we came up with, they were thrilled. And so I thought the motivation for them just to keep governing and keep that oversight over that plan was very, very strong.

Wes Hahn 16:05

And it's no surprise, most plans do include student achievement, and ours did, and it was very, very strong in the plan. And of course, well-being, inclusion and equity was our second goal, which, you know, again, everyone in the system could see. So I think from a standpoint of keeping it simple, but the work complex and involving trustees in that building and how they were going to later govern that plan was critical.

Wes Hahn 16:33

It just seemed to be seamless at the point in time, and to this point in time, it still is very seamless that everyone knows what our goals are. Everyone knows we're unwaveringly committed to those goals, and we're not coming off them. And so I think those are some of the dots that kind of brought us to a point where it was very clear what we were trying to achieve. And I think even to this day, it's still very clear.

Usha James 16:56

How do you think you've done that? How have you kept it alive? How did it not end up in a drawer?

Wes Hahn 17:03

I would say, every chance I get, and I think this is another you know story to my development as a leader. I believe there's times when a director should be speaking, and then there's times when you should be listening. And I thought this was an opportunity for me to speak about this plan every chance I got. Whether it be at my director's update at board meetings, whether it's in administrator meetings or summer conferences or consultant coach meetings or at a parent council meeting, I took every opportunity to talk about our plan and how good we were doing along this path. It became part of everything I started with.

Wes Hahn 17:46

I started with those two goals. I started with data. And every chance I had, I was showing the system and our communities, you know, the data that we were making our decisions with, and the results that we were having along the way. So I think it just became part of, and at times, I'm sure the trustees have heard enough about the strategic plan and my director's update, but in all fairness, I don't come off it.

They know we are committed. Of course, we will make adjustments with data if it tells us any different. But I always say we're not coming off this plan, and they're not coming off the plan.

Wes Hahn 18:24

So I think that's the other piece that's really critical in this story, is if you start wavering and coming off the goals that you set, the strategic plan becomes a file folder. It becomes a drawer or a holder, because people don't see it as important anymore. This plan is our guide. It is our guidance system, and we're not moving off it. And so far, it has proved to be successful.

Wes Hahn 18:49

There's 100 things we could do, but we chose these two very complex areas to tackle, and we're having results with that.

Usha James 18:57

I mean, these are really strong moves, I think, and you're seeing the results of them but I also know that the path is not always a smooth one. So I want to ask you about that. What are the bumps along the way, and where were things sticky? Like, there's got to be some points where you looked at what was happening and you thought, I need to revisit my thinking. Tell us about that.

Wes Hahn 19:26

Yeah, I think for me, the stickiness part was, you know, we didn't have great results in the past, and I didn't feel the urgency in the system. And that, to me, is a feeling like you can't you can't gauge it, you can't do an assessment or a test for it. You just have to feel whether people feel the urgency and see the faces of kids that can't read or are not achieving or not getting their eight of eight or 16 of 16 credits in grade nine and 10.

Wes Hahn 20:03

And so I really tried to bring the faces to that data. And I would often talk about, to administrators in our sessions, about kids in your school that can't read. We can't allow this to happen any longer and encourage them to bring faces. And many of them did. They would bring it to staff meetings, put the faces up on the screen of kids that could not read yet moving out of primary. Those kind of urgency moves create a passion on the staff and really create an urgency in the system

Wes Hahn 20:38

Where the stickiness for me was, I've done that a lot, and I do it because I believe it, but it can create stress in the system. You have to be careful that not every minute of every day is urgency, and I've learned to kind of monitor that better. People can get tired. People can wear down - senior team, trustees, people in classrooms and staff working really hard to support kids in school. So I think, you know, I've probably pushed and pressured and supported at the same time, because you can't just pressure people without support. I've probably pressured the system as far as we can, and I do see people owning it, Usha, I think this is the critical thing. If it's just the director or the board of the trustees who own it, that's not good enough.

Wes Hahn 21:36

People have to feel it. They have to own it. And when they own it, they'll do it for the right reasons. And I'm seeing that now. The data is theirs. It's not the board's. They're doing it and they're feeling the pressure. No one has to be on top of them. The senior team doesn't need me breathing down their neck anymore. Not that I was, but certainly they were feeling the pressure. They now have internalized that they know what they need to do. And I think the system in general has really taken that and run with it and made it their own.

Usha James 22:08

It's really a dance, you know, that pressure and support, and I think you know the way that you've described it there, that you know, how do you understand how to push the urgency, and then when it's starting to get internalized, and when do you ... you're not taking your foot off the gas, maybe, but understand it's a gradual release of responsibility. That they are owning it themselves.

Wes Hahn 22:37

I would agree with that, and I felt this fall for the first time, and maybe I could have let off a little bit earlier, but for the first time, it's not like we're doing less work, or you're not working as hard, but I felt the first time that I could just move back and let the senior team and everyone else move into their spot and really take over. And I think there was some critical moves to that, I think.

Wes Hahn 23:05

There's a great story that I learned from my previous board with Warren Hoshizaki. He really believed in changing portfolios as senior staff, and at the time, you know, it doesn't always feel comfortable when you get settled into something and then you're moving into something new. I kind of embraced that though. I thought it was great experience to learn and it refreshed you and kept you moving. Well I've done that a couple times in in Trillium Lakelands with the senior team. And sure, there's that change and that uncomfortableness, but I think what it's done is it's, you know, just as people are settling in and maybe, you know, they're starting to not, I wouldn't say, get bored, because no one's getting bored. They're working too hard.

Wes Hahn 23:52

I can sense a change needed to happen, and I made a rather large change last year to portfolios, and I haven't seen more energy and more enthusiasm in five years than I have in this previous, last two months. Really, really. And they're a good senior team, they're experienced, and they've embraced new roles and new things. And I have to tell you, the ideas and the collaboration that are coming from this team are second to none. So there's different ways of trying to revitalize without over-pressuring overdoing things. And I think those are some of the strategies that I've taken from the previous board I was at and kind of influenced into the Trillium way, I guess,

Usha James 24:35

Interestingly, it's a bit of a continuation from our last podcast, because Vicki Houston was talking about, you know, as a brand new director, thinking about taking some of those bold moves as well. So you talked about key moves being the way you worked with the trustees and the strategic plan, and how you keep bringing it back to administrators. Were there other structural pieces that you put in place that you think were really central to that cohesion and alignment? And you know, you talked about,

sometimes a director has to speak, and sometimes a director has to listen. And so, you know, what were you hearing, and how did that influence the structures that you put in place, or vice versa? What, what did you put in place, and what did the system start telling you about that?

Wes Hahn 25:27

Yeah, I think, great question. Usha. I think, you know, there was some things as I mentioned already, that I did early on, and like every director does, and every good leader does, that comes into a system, is you listen, as you mentioned. And I, I did spend a great deal of time talking with different staffing groups, parents, and part of that came out later in a strategy I used. I kept hearing early days that the board - everyone's at the Board Office, all these people sitting at the Board Office and I just kept thinking, they aren't going to be sitting at the Board Office. My strategy and coming from, where I, you know, mentored as a superintendent was coaches, consultants, superintendents and the director are in schools.

Wes Hahn 26:13

And so superintendents are in schools, mentoring and coaching their principals and vice principals, two to three days a week. That is really critical. They need to see the schools. They need to feel the schools. They need to understand what's happening in their communities. And if they're not there, how do you impact them? You can't impact people by bringing them to a meeting once a month. You have to be in their environment. You have to be right in the classroom. That's where the work happens. That's where the improvement happens. And for a principal, it's in their school. This whole idea of coaches and consultants sitting at the Board Office, you could walk into our board ... there's no one sitting in the Board Office. They are all in schools. And so are the mental health counselors, and so are the IT people, coaches and consultants in schools, co-planning, co-teaching, with teaching staff. Spec Ed consultants in schools, doing in-school team services meetings, meeting with teachers, meeting with principals.

Wes Hahn 27:09

Yes, we pull them out for meetings. We do large scale meetings because we need time with them together as a whole. But I believe the real work happens in the school, which is why I only heard once last year the board, you know, the board is doing this, and we don't hear that more because everybody's in the school. I hope they'll say, well, the schools now, and they do. I hear great things about what our staff are doing in schools, and very appreciative of the support that people are getting. So key strategy, move it into the schools where it needs to be.

Wes Hahn 27:42

The same goes for the director. I'm out in schools, and I'm out with superintendents in what we call focus schools, because they - you can't, you can't make every school a priority. Every school matters. But having two or three or four schools that you can put a lot of time and resources and energy in, that are on that brinks of really breaking through and moving, is critical, and we call them focus schools. And had some great success as a superintendent with that strategy. And I put it into place here. It gives me a great opportunity to be with superintendents and coach and mentor them while I'm in schools with them. They also are now right beside their principals and vice principals weekly, talking about the moods, talking about PLCs, what? What's the data telling them - all of those things.

Wes Hahn 28:32

And the work of Meredith Honig really stands out for us - the University of Washington. We had a chance to work with Meredith last year with our school board, and I have to tell you, that work that we did with her, and that research that she's done is critical. And really the bottom line is the director and the superintendents have to be neck-deep in instruction. You have to be instructional leaders if you're going to move a system. And so we take that seriously, and they're responsible for all their schools, but certainly for the details around their focus schools.

Usha James 29:10

I think that's just - I really want to highlight that Wes because, you know, I'm so lucky I get to work with so many different districts, and superintendents across Ontario, Manitoba, etc. And I think that - two things. I'm going to address both the thing.

Usha James 29:29

One is, when you talk about focus schools, that's something you've been working on for such a long time. And I think that people that I'm speaking with now are seeing that the power of superintendents being in schools, but then trying to spread themselves across the entire district - they can't get in enough. And so this strategy, you know, what I think it does is it makes us walk the talk of differentiating our instruction. I often think that what we are asking teachers to do in classrooms, and making the distinction between what is universal design, what is it that we do with whole group instruction, and what is it that we do with smaller groups or one to one coaching? Why wouldn't we at the leadership level have that same lens when we're thinking about school visits or coaching administrators. So I just, I think that that is such a powerful strategy, and you've seen it played out.

Wes Hahn 30:31

Yeah, and I would say another strategy that was really critical in helping us move forward was director forums. And what I what I felt again, part of that whole listening piece was I meet with principal advisory groups three times a year, eight or nine or 10 principals at a time. I meet with teacher groups. I've met two years in a row with different teacher groups from across our district, and I've met with EA groups, educational assistant groups, that you know, hearing them right at a table with me, being able to voice their concerns and tell me what they think of our system has been critical.

Wes Hahn 31:10

But I think the most important thing was I brought together two years in a row, student voice and kids from grade seven to 10 from across our system, about 140 students every year, to talk to them about their experiences in school. And their input has been just incredibly impactful. And I'll never forget the first group I brought together, we were doing a mental health activity, and they were being asked how they feel about their school experience. And there was a large chart paper on one of the walls, and the kids were asked to put post-its up on this, you know, how do you feel about, you know, being in school? And probably one of the most heartbreaking moments of my leadership career, the post-its were kind of devastating. You know, I feel invisible. I don't feel anybody cares about me. I don't want to come to school. I feel worthless. Like these were the comments that were coming from kids in our system.

Wes Hahn 32:11

And so where that led to was obviously lots of reflection on our system and how we were going about our mental health model. But we did revise our mental health model and really focused in on tier one supports. We weren't really getting to the kids, and we weren't getting to parents to help them understand how we were going to support mental health. So that stands out clearly as one of the biggest turning points in my in my leadership career, because it came right from them. They were right in front of me, and we had talks about how they were thinking and what needed to change in the system to make them feel that they were welcomed.

Wes Hahn 32:53

And to this day, we've tracked the school climate surveys every year, and we were going to bring them back for another student forum in the spring, and I'm glad, I'm happy to say that we've, we've definitely improved in that area, and parents have also commented about improvements in knowing where to get mental health support. So these forums are ways of listening, but they're also ways of listening and then creating new strategies for your system to show people that you're listening, and that was one of them that I believe really helped and is still in place today.

Usha James 33:26

Such an important component.

Usha James 33:28

We're going to do a bit of a throwback here to early days when we were working together. But, yeah, I wanted to talk a little bit about when I started working with the District School Board of Niagara, and, you know, I had been working with John Dixon, who was an SO there for at the time, and I was working with central team, and I think it was probably, I don't know, 2012 when you and I - I was looking at it the other day, yeah, 13 years ago, when you and I started working together, and we were working with administrators in a different type of network grouping where we were really trying to get them to adopt an inquiry stance towards their leadership. And that's been such a core theme of our work together, we've presented internationally on our work with administrators, and we've, we've thought about that together for a long time and thinking about the impact of it. And I remember this moment as we were working with administrators. I don't know if you remember, but we were disagreeing quite vehemently. And I remember the room we were in. Do you remember?

Wes Hahn 34:53

I think I know what you're going to say, so I'm getting ready to answer what I think you're going to ask. So. This is good.

Usha James 35:02

At the heart of this, was this debate where I was really advocating a critical inquiry approach, and you were talking about informed prescription, which is what you had called it at the time. And I think this ongoing debate between the two of us has shifted, probably both of us, in the time. But tell me what you remember about that and what it meant.

Wes Hahn 35:28

Yeah, I think it was Oakwood Public School, to be exact. I almost remember exactly where we were and we were in the IT room. I can picture exactly where it was, so I know exactly this conversation. Yeah, it was certainly, I think there's two sides to this interesting discussion Usha, because what I learned from the critical thinking stance was, especially working with administrators, was there are active thinkers who think out loud and have an inquiry stance, and they think it out and love to orally, think it out loud. And through the work with you, I also realized there are very private thinkers - very private critical thinkers who reflect and think and take a little bit longer. So, you know, there's certainly that piece, to me, really stood out in our work that I started to approach my work, coaching, mentoring, with administrators much differently than I had prior to that.

Wes Hahn 36:28

The informed prescription, though, came out of these discussions that you and I were having with people, because, you know, my work prior to that, had really been about, when is it right to just, you know, this is a good thing to do. Let's just do it. Let's be clear about it. Let's be, you know, let's just make sure everyone's doing the same thing until we get good at it, and then we'll expand out and think about it. And I know the research says that that's a good strategy for novice thinkers or beginners, or people that require a little bit more direction, or complex issues that maybe need more thinking. So I had had some success with that, with principals in my area that I were working with, with adopting early instructional strategies, and so that kind of strategy work, however, I did realize through my working with you in this topic is, you can't do that forever. You can't inform prescribe, you know, all the way to the end, and hope you get results just because you prescribe something. No one wants to work in that kind of environment. Nobody wants to work under that.

Wes Hahn 37:35

However, what I did experience through that is, there, you know, in early stages, people developing new strategies. They're novice at what they're doing, or beginners at what they're doing. It's a complex issue. This prescription creates alignment or coherence, which we were just talking about. Everyone's on the same page. Everyone's moving together. There may be people in there don't really like this path, necessarily, but we're moving together. But you can't do it forever. As people develop, you have to recognize that you have to create a bigger sandbox, let people move off that, let them start thinking, you know, adding their own twists to things.

Wes Hahn 38:11

And I think as I've been moving forward in my leadership, I've kind of recognized when it's time to back off that, and when to let people take off and fly the plane themselves. So I think those are kind of the learnings, you know, that came from those deep discussions that you and I would have about mentoring and coaching and thinking. And they have not left me. They're with me to this day. And I, I really appreciate those discussions. They stick with me. And I remember the room.

Usha James 38:43

I mean, honestly, it's very much influenced my thinking too. There was that metaphor you're using about the edges of the sandbox. I think - there's this great study. I'll have to pull it up somewhere - that looked at children when they played in a playground. And it was a bit counterintuitive, because the study looked at playgrounds that had a fence around them and playgrounds that didn't have a fence

around them. And it noticed that kids who were in a playground without a fence stayed really close to the center, and kids who stayed were in a playground that had clear boundaries played right to the edges.

Wes Hahn 39:22

Interesting. Yeah, makes complete sense. I can see it.

Usha James 39:25

And so I think it's a really lovely metaphor, and I think it - I learned a lot through that whole, you know, ongoing inquiry that we had, as well as that. I think it's, it is a dance, is that, how do we be clear for the purposes of alignment and cohesion, and also, I think building people's background knowledge. Part of our framework at the consortium is you can't think about nothing. You have to have some experience, some background knowledge before you can critically assess whether that move or that practice or that instructional strategy is affecting your kids in positive ways, and how you might tweak it.

Usha James 40:10

So there is that first step of just do it, and then how do we really quickly come to a place where we say, okay, how did it feel? You know, which kids is it working for? Which kids is it not working for? And that's not going to mean that we're going to throw out the strategy. It means that we're going to tweak it. We're going to recognize our own ability in implementing it. We're going to refine our ability, but we're always going to come back and try it again, and then come back to the critical thinking about it.

Wes Hahn 40:44

That's perfectly said. I mean, while you were talking, I was thinking about the Ontario Human Rights Commission report on early reading. There's some very big, monumental shifts in how we teach reading. And this is a great example of, you know, there are obviously points that need prescription. This is a new way for many of teaching reading and screening for reading skills that we never had before. You just can't open that up and let lots of interpretation happen. There's a very, very particular way about going about how to teach reading, and people needed to experience it, build the knowledge background, you know, and then continue to, you know, to add their flair through the development of literacy. But that is a very prescribed kind of way of having to go about teaching reading.

Wes Hahn 41:34

And that informed prescription is a great component of that, because it makes sure that everyone is teaching it consistently, grade to grade, and that that's key for our coaches and consultants in Trillium right now. They're teaching it very prescribed and very consistent to make sure everyone gets the same strategies in place.

Wes Hahn 41:54

So yeah, there's a time for it, and then there's a time to create that sandbox and let people branch out and do the things that, you know, make them feel like they're good teachers or good leaders or, you know, and I think it's as a leader you have to recognize when those times are. I probably could have done that earlier. I would probably is a little bit tighter on letting go of that, but I think those are kind of the things I've learned through my leadership as a director in Trillium.

Usha James 42:23

I think the listening is something that lots of senior leaders are aspiring to, and they know the power of student voice. But what I'm noticing is that people aren't sure how to integrate it, and that's what I'm hearing you talk about, is that that counts as valuable data, and it has to inform our decision making. And so it's just something that's really struck me about Trillium Lakelands is how integrated voice is into decision making. So you talked about the directors' forums and how you are in it, listening to administrators, educators, EAs and students, especially. But I also watched as students actually gave the board a report card. This was something else. The students gave the board a report card on how well you were doing on your strategic plan.

Wes Hahn 43:31

They did. And they were honest. I mean, when you bring kids together, you can guarantee one thing - they're going to be really honest. And they were, and we crafted a great experience for them in the director forum around, you know, I don't want to say kid-friendly language, but we did bring up all of the areas of the strategic plan that related to them. And we formulated a way for them to give us feedback, and some of it was good and some of it was not so good.

Wes Hahn 43:59

And I did it with the teachers as well. We did the same exercise with teachers, and we, thanks to you, Usha, you were able to pull all of that information together for us in a very professional report and brought it to trustees in the public board. And so we're not afraid of showing areas that we need to improve on.

Wes Hahn 44:19

As matter of fact, the students told us, frankly, there, there were still some areas of safety and things that weren't all that great. But they were very, I would say I was very shocked at some of the areas they thought we were really doing good at. They were very keen. They believed instruction was the focus of the system. They said how important it was. So I think these things are really important to kind of highlight and make sure that they're not secret. We did it in a public board, and it got some media attention, and trustees got to hear it all, and that's great, and we continue to look at it, and we'll continue to improve, because we're on a journey where we'll get better as we go along.

Wes Hahn 44:59

That was a very, very powerful experience. And it again, connected the strategic plan to something that was meaningful and didn't, you know, not pulling it off the shelf. These were our students looking at it and digging into their areas of student voice. So, yeah, I thought it was a great experience.

Wes Hahn 45:18

And we're going to do another forum in the spring focused around equity and equitable experiences that kids are having or not having in our system. And we already know. We've already dug into our data, we've looked at our students census, compared it to our results, and we know there's disparities between student groups and diverse groups in our system. We've got to do better. We already know that, but we're going to bring kids together to tell us face-to-face, what's good and what's not so good

about our system. And that'll be great to hear from them again. And I'm sure we'll have another report for trustees around that as we pull that together. So appreciate that, because it has been very powerful. And again, you helped us kind of craft that and pull that together.

Usha James 46:06

Amazing, amazing. You know, we started talking about alignment, and I feel like all of these pieces contribute. It's many-tentacled or a many-branched tree, maybe that all of these things contribute. There's not going to be one thing that brings alignment, and just talking about it is not going to bring it. And I think, you know, I don't know if you again, I don't know if you remember, but many years ago, we were working with principal facilitators, like a lead principal, who they were doing network, leading networks. And I remember those facilitators asking me, because I had been leading those networks. And I remember those principals at the time asking me, as we were trying to mentor them to do that leadership. They said, well, Usha, what do you do? How do you do what you do? And I said, I have no idea. I don't know. Why don't you tell me what I do, and it was in that moment that it became clear that what my leadership moves had been and we were able to articulate them. And I hope that, you know, I feel like that, I'm doing the same thing to you and saying, okay, you've arrived at this seven out of 10 place around alignment. What did you do? And these are all of these different pieces that have emerged.

Wes Hahn 47:31

And I think the other part of it too, Usha, along our journey is, and you know, you're going to love it when I say this. Every time a leader has come out of our sessions, you know, with the level of thinking and the level of reflection that you have helped us do as leaders, we come out of there with a headache. And a good headache, you know, because when you when you push people to think that hard and they're that engaged and that focused for that period of time, there's bound to be learning. And I have to tell you, along that path there was always learning that came from the principal groups that we worked with, certainly the superintendents that you worked with, and I worked with, and now myself, I know you're working with many of the directors in the province, and myself, and I continue to, I call it the good headache, you know where you've really been pushed to think, to reflect on how you do things. And there's never a perfect way of how we do things, but you certainly get us to think along those lines, to help us think differently about topics, to think critically about things. And I've certainly benefited from your leadership around that over the years.

Usha James 48:41

Oh, thanks. Wes, well, this is definitely a mutual admiration society, but now that I think our listeners have learned lots about you professionally and a little bit about me, let's just shift a little bit and tell us something that they might find surprising about you, or that people might not know about you. Give us something good.

Wes Hahn 49:08

Well, yeah, I can do that. Not many people know I have tattoos.

Usha James 49:12

What?

Wes Hahn 49:13

Because I do hide them fairly well. I have a sleeve tattoo, and I have a few other tattoos, and one particularly meaningful tattoo that I think ... I have twin girls who are now 28 so, you know, they're young ladies and doing great things and one of them is in teachers college right now. So that's a good sign. But I did you know along the route of being an educator and, you know, and trying to be a good father, I asked them, what are the, you know, three things that you really think that I've had an impact on. Because, you know, I want to know that I'm there for you, and done all the things that a father should do. And so they came up with three things. And I did end up building a tattoo and putting a tattoo on my rib cage, of those three things.

Wes Hahn 50:05

And one was an anchor, because they believe that I've always been there for them. I've always been a strong foundational support. One was a compass, because I provide, you know, direction for them. And they really believe that, and I'm glad they said this, that I give them good advice most of the time. Sometimes they don't want to hear it, but most of the time, it's good advice. And the other piece was a timepiece, because we don't get as much time together as we did when I was coaching them in sports and traveling every weekend and every other weekend with them, but they value the time we have together. So I put that together in a tattoo, and it's on my rib cage, and it was the most painful experience I've ever had in my life.

Wes Hahn 50:58

Definitely a tattoo on the rib cage is not pleasant. That was painful. It was well worth it when it was done. But it was very painful while I was going through it, but very meaningful for to them.

Wes Hahn 51:11

And then I, I purchased them a compass ring, sent it to them and then show them the tattoo that I got. So, that was just a personal story, but I don't think many people - I try to - not that I cover them up on purpose, but that's just not something I a lot of people would know necessarily.

Usha James 51:32

Well, this is a critical challenge that I am going to put out to leaders everywhere, is if you do a good job of listening, maybe that's a great opening to a session. You know, give me three images that reflect my leadership, and if you do a really good job, give them the promise that they'll tattoo it on your rib cage. So here's an open invitation to listeners. If you do it, let us know, because we want to know what happened.

Wes Hahn 52:05

Put it on your forearm or your bicep or somewhere, but don't put it on your rib cage. That was terribly painful. Anyways, to each his own, though.

Usha James 52:15

I love it. Wes this has been great. I am so happy that we've had some time to chat together, and I know we're going to have more opportunities as well, and I'm very sure that people who have been listening have taken lots of things away from it, and you will likely be inundated with questions.

Wes Hahn 52:36

A great experience. Usha. Nice spending time with you. I love every minute when we're together and always come out learning something different and new. So appreciate the time.

Usha James 52:46

Thanks so much Wes.

Usha James 52:47

It is always a pleasure for me to chat with Wes, and I think this is just another example of that - that sparks your curiosity that makes you think about how to support people who are, you know, moving positions or getting into a different school board. But I just think having these conversations - and Wes is just a great colleague to have those conversations with - is what makes it fun and exciting. It's why I love my job.

Usha James 53:25

You know, I think it's really likely that, if you're listening, you're thinking about, how do I encourage in others the sense of agency? How do I feel that myself? How do I bring alignment into, whether it's my classroom practice or my school practice or across the district, that is internalized and not burdensome? You know that feeling that this is my work, no matter who I am in the system. The work of the system is my work. I am part of the system. It is me. It's not the board, like what Wes was saying. It's not something distant and hierarchical. I think you won't get alignment if people feel dejected or confused or hopeless or overwhelmed.

Usha James 54:30

Agency is the opposite of those feelings. It's the feeling that I not only value what is a priority for the whole system. I actually know how to enact that in my daily practice. And if I don't know how to enact it, because I'm not perfect and I'm learning, maybe I recognize there are all sorts of things I don't know, but I value it so dearly that I know who to go to. Because it's clear, because the system has aligned its resources, it's aligned all of the supports, it's put in place. So when I see a priority that I care about and that I feel responsibility for, and I recognize that I don't know what to do about it, I know where to go, and I know that the help is going to be there for me.

Usha James 55:24

And so I'm not sure we always think about alignment in that way. I think alignment often is about messaging and consistency, and that's important. But alignment comes in all directions. It comes from the top, but it really flourishes from the grassroots.

Usha James 55:50

And I think a really important piece of the puzzle is growing our community of thinkers. It's a central part of our framework - is that if we're going to nurture really quality thinking that inspires action at any level,

and that that action leads to collective flourishing, to creating a better present and a better future, we have to grow our community of thinkers. And I think that the students and the educators and the staff in schools are the ones that either buy into your alignment or don't. And so that's where I think those ideas of paying attention to what builds that sense of ownership or responsibility, and that sense of agency is critical.

Usha James 56:51

I'm so glad that you joined us today. This has been really fun to have you with us. And what's really been exciting for me as we've been through our first three episodes, and I hope the same will be true of this one, is we've been hearing from people that they're listening to the podcast, and hearing from directors and superintendents is sparking their thinking about their own leadership. We're hearing that it's creating conversation across leaders, where they're asking each other, did you hear that, and what did you think about that, and how did you manage to do that in your district? And can I follow up with you about what you said on the podcast?

Usha James 57:34

So I think that's the most exciting thing for me, that it's creating and growing a community of thinkers at the senior leadership level, and if we can just be a small part of that, that's such a privilege for me. So we're going to keep going and continue to line up wonderful guests who can share their experiences and hopefully continue creating thinking systems and help you in your leadership.

Usha James 58:05

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