# Opportunity for all

## How schools can ensure children thrive through uncertainty, turbulence and adversity

**Presented to the Whole Education Network**

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**June 2022**

# Foreword

*"We believe there will be no 'new normal'. There will only be a continuous series of not normal times." Collins and Hansen in 'Great by Choice'*

Our world is unstable, uncertain, and filled with unanswered what ifs. While we cannot predict the future, as educators, we can help the children we teach to prepare for it and create it. In schools, we need to draw on the research of Collins and Hansen in 'Great by Choice' as best we can in order to build resilience, confidence and individuals willing to take risks.

Initially, they started looking at over 20,000 companies but then identified seven which they called **"10x Companies".** These companies were not only able to survive in shifting conditions but some even thrived in them. "We set out to find companies that started from a position of vulnerability, rose to become great companies with spectacular performance, and did so in unstable environments characterized by big forces, out of their control, fast moving, uncertain, and potentially harmful". These companies included - **Amgen, Biomet, Intel, Microsoft, Progressive Insurance, Southwest Airlines, and Stryker –** and were selected as they beat their industry index by at least 10 times (despite the chaotic environments around them). It must be noted that these companies were not more innovative, bold or even open to taking greater risks, nor were they luckier or better at taking chances. In fact, success came from a mixture of discipline, evidence-based innovation and a fear of failure that bordered on paranoia.

Collins and Hansen's extensive research reveals **three core behaviours that set the 10x companies apart** from their comparison companies, which the three subsequent case studies explore before making links to how the learning can be implemented in schools.

## Tenacious Mindset (Fanatic Discipline)

### The 20 Mile March – Stryker

- When John Brown became CEO of Stryker in 1977, he deliberately set a performance benchmark to drive consistent progress. Stryker would achieve 20% net income growth every year. It was, in Brown's words, 'the law'. He ingrained 'the law' into the company's culture, making it a way of life.
- Brown created the 'Snorkel Award' given to those who lagged behind the benchmark. If you ended up below the watermark, you needed a snorkel. People worked hard to keep the mounted snorkel award off their walls. Those who achieved the 20 Mile March were rewarded with a breakfast with Brown. Those who didn't were sent to another breakfast – with good food but far less rewarding.
- If your division of the business fell behind for 2 years in a row, Brown would work closely with you to get back on track. But this was not supportive, instead you would get the distinct impression that you really didn't want to need John Brown's help. According to Investor's Business Daily, "John Brown doesn't want to hear excuses. Markets bad?...Doesn't matter."
- From the time John Brown became CEO until 1998, Stryker hits its 20 Mile March goal more than 90% of the time. Yet for all this self-imposed pressure, Stryker had an equally important self-imposed constraint: to never go too far, to never grow too much in a single year.
- Brown consciously chose to maintain the 20 Mile March, regardless of criticism urging him to grow Stryker at a faster pace in boom years. This FANATIC DISCIPLINE ensured their success.

# What this means:

- A company which is devoted to Fanatic Discipline has *incredible* consistency with core values, goals, performance standards, and methods. They are utterly relentless and unbending in their focus on their quests, and incredibly consistent no matter what the conditions. They have a consistent formula for success that they stick to no matter what. The company sets a set of Specific, Methodical and Consistent rules they follow and make decisions by. They will not react to events around them, but will consistently follow their plans and values no matter what.

## Trial and Error (Empirical Creativity)

### The success of Apple following Steve Jobs return

- One of the comparison companies to look at was Apple. In 1997, Steve Jobs returned to Apple; his first move to get them back on track was '…not the iPod, not iTunes, not the iPhone, not the iPad. At first, he increased discipline as without discipline there'd be no chance to do creative work. He brought in Tim Cook, a world-class supply chain expert, and together Jobs and Cook formed a perfect ying-yang team of creativity and discipline. They cut perks, stopped funding the corporate sabbatical program, improved operating efficiency, lowered overall cost structure, and got people focused on the intense 'work all day and all of the night' ethos that'd characterized Apple in its early years. Overhead costs fell. The cash-to-current-liabilities doubled, and then tripled. Long-term debt shrunk by two thirds and the ratio of total liabilities to shareholders' equity dropped by more than half from 1998 to 1999. But in fact, Apple did all this before the iPod, iTunes, or the iPhone. Anything that didn't help the company get back to creating great products that people loved would be tossed, cut, slashed, and ruthlessly eliminated." (p. 83).
- Following this, the idea they instilled was to fire small bullets (test new products, technologies, services, and processes) to see what worked and what didn't. Only after new ideas had been tested and proven did the organisation fire a cannonball. They fired a great number of bullets…many never hitting anything. They had no idea what would be successful. But as pockets of success appeared, they fired more bullets, validating their creativity, and eventually firing a cannonball.
- From 1997 to 2002, Apple outperformed the stock market by 127 percent and by 2010 became the most valuable technology company in the world. The TRIAL and ERROR approach meant that Apple created a long, empirical process of try, fail, try, fail, try succeed.

## What this means:

- A company, which creates a blend of creativity and discipline, veers away from the status quo based on continual experiments and observations. They constantly try new things and change course based on findings, mistakes, results and observations. They take risks to experiment, creating cultures of learning from mistakes.

## Expect the Unexpected (Productive Paranoia)

### Southwest Airlines

- Herb Kelleher explained why Southwest Airlines maintained an extremely conservative balance sheet: "As long as we never forget the strengths that enable us to endure and grow in the midst of economic catastrophe; as long as we remember that such economic catastrophes recur with regularity; and as long as we never foolishly dissipate our basic strengths through short-sightedness, selfishness, or pettiness, we will continue to endure; we will continue to grow; and we will continue to prosper."
- 10 years after he wrote these words, the world witnessed the horror or September 11, 2001. While the other major airlines cut operations, Southwest did not. As a result, Southwest turned a profit in 2001 and was the only major airline to turn a profit in 2002. They opened in new cities, gained the market share and utterly astonishingly they saw its stock price rise at a time when most people were afraid to fly.
- As mentioned, they achieved all of this despite the devastating blow of September 11th because in its own words "our philosophy of managing in good times so as to do well in bad times proved a marvellous prophylactic."
- Southwest employees came together to get the planes in the air as soon as the skies opened; they were unified in a communal act of defiance. The belief among all employees was '…you attack us, but you cannot beat us; you can try to destroy our freedom, but you'll only make us stronger; you can inflict horror, but you cannot make us terrified. We will fly!'
- The practices within the company were applied with rigor all the time – good times and bad, stable and unstable – thus creating an enterprise that pulled ahead of others when turbulent times hit. The PRODUCTIVE PARANOIA of the company produced a hyper-vigilant state about potentially bad events that could hit the company and then turning the fear around this into preparation and clearheaded action.

## What this means:

- A company thrives when they recognise that there is always potential for mistakes and difficulties to happen, but instead of struggling, they turn negative potential into a positive outcome. These companies navigate turbulence in order to prevent decline, they assume that conditions can unexpectedly change (at any time), thus they excessively ask 'What if?' By doing so and always expecting the unexpected, they are preparing for the unknown and when a disruption occurs they work from a position of strength and flexibility.

# Why this matters - how to implement in schools:

**How do you measure success in schools? Some may list things such as; pupil wellbeing, pupil aspirations, results, student feedback, parent feedback, community feel etc. In reality, it's probably a combination. Recent years have seen many examples of turbulent times: pandemic, cost of living crisis, systemic racism, discrimination. So how have the most effective schools pushed through? Our guess would be that they are following the three strategies above.**

Questions to consider when thinking about implementing the three strategies into your school:

- When a mistake is made, how often do we hear, "whose fault is this?"
- Are our "innovative ideas" really just enhancements of the existing process?
- How much of our innovation is really copying best practices of another school or teacher?
- How often do we witness leadership encouraging risk taking and the concept of fail fast and fail forward?
- How often do our team members hear, "just do it like last year"?
- In the last 12 months, what is the biggest leap in innovation your school enacted?
- Does your school have a consistent set of values, goals, standards, and methods?
- Does your school follow a set of specific, methodical, and consistent rules?

Tips for schools:

1. Be disciplined. Ensure children make steady progress by having clear steps of progression.
2. As a school, have steady targets to reach working towards your vision. Progress needs to be consistent and unwavering.
3. Understand the needs of every child – show consistency in support.
4. Research and analyse how great schools have thrived in turbulent times.
5. Innovate and experiment using the bullet-bullet-cannonball approach. Try out lots of ideas starting on a small scale and keep gathering evidence. Which ones are working? Test and assess before fully rolling out.
6. Create an environment where staff and children use a growth mindset each day. Create displays around the school to promote this.
7. Planning and adapting opportunities for outside the box learning.
8. Encourage staff and pupils to embrace mistakes and then make calculated changes accordingly. Instil this in the culture of the school.
9. Be prepared for all risks that may arise.
   a. What if there is another pandemic?
   b. What if there is a staffing crisis?
   c. How are families going to cope with the cost of living crisis?
   d. How are children coping with discriminatory behaviours?
   e. How can we keep our children engaged and loving education?
10. Prepare now and be proactive not reactive.

*So, as you reflect, think about what is essential behaviour for children and young minds to be able to independently navigate chaotic and uncertainty. Consider the biggest challenges and opportunities facing our children- how much time before facing the next unprecedented time in their lives and are they well prepared for it?*