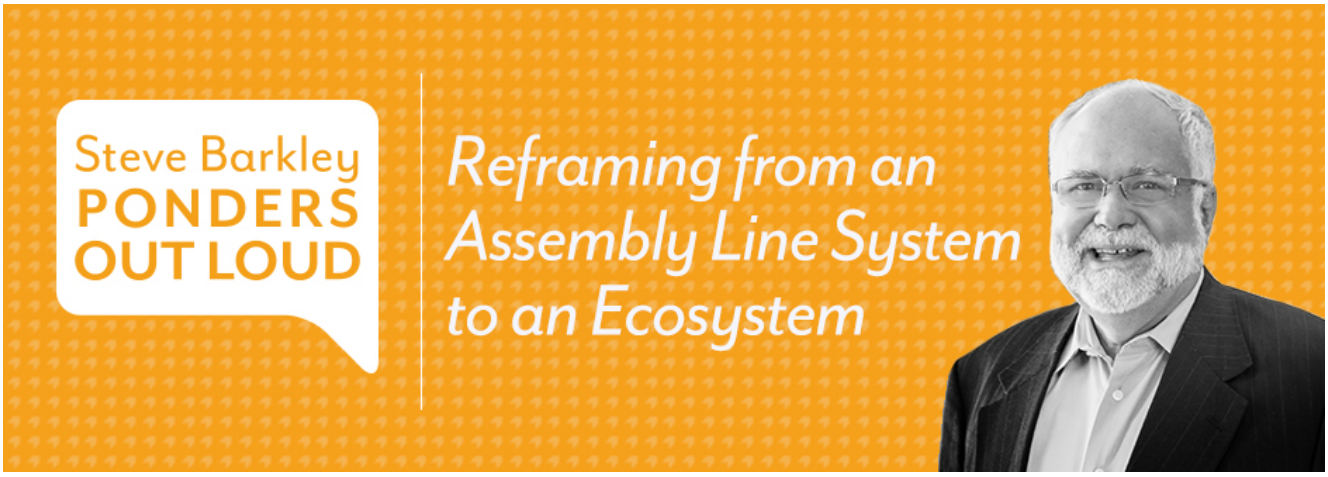
Podcast: Reframing from an Assembly Line System to an Ecosystem



This is the second podcast in a series on reframing our mindsets and reframing problems. Many of our processes in schools are more mechanical than emergent. This frequently doesn't fit with learning which is often messy, irregular, non-linear, spontaneous and complex. Margaret Wheatley describes us as thinkers who play and tinker as we adapt and seek meaning. How do we design schools to more closely support these activities?

Read Sam Chaltain's "Rules for New Schools" here.
Ready Margaret Wheatley's article on unplanned organization here.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTSteve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important

aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.
Steve: 00:28 Framing from an assembly line system to an ecosystem. This is the second in a podcast series where I'm looking at reframing a problem or reframing our mindset, or both. Reframing allows us to look at a situation through a different lens. In the earlier podcast, I focused on reframing from a focus on fear to a focus on love. In this podcast, I'll focus on reframing from an assembly line system approach to an ecosystem approach for teaching and learning. In a recent blog titled, "New Rules for New Schools," Sam Chaltain states, "there is no return to normal because normal was the problem in the first place." I'll put a link to his blog in the lead into this podcast. Chaltain reminds us that because of the historic "sacred cows" in education, we have stayed trapped in our own boxes. He gives examples like seeing school as a place rather than as a mindset or our thinking that work has to be graded in order to be meaningful.

Steve: 01:59 And another, that students are best served by sorting them by age. He proposes that we need to stop designing education as an assembly line and start consciously designing schools as ecosystems. I experienced the assembly line process when I worked at a cardboard factory to earn my college money each summer after high school. My job title was catcher. I worked on a machine about three blocks long. At one end of the machine, giant rolls of paper were fed into the machine where the middle layer was corrugated and glued to the other two. At the far end three blocks away, cut piles of cardboard came out of the machine. My job was to catch a pile and stack it until the got as high as I could reach, then push it and start a new stack. I frequently worked a 12 hour shift, sharing the day with another catcher.

Steve: 03:10 When the new catcher would arrive, they would tap me on the shoulder and I would step out of my position and they would step in. The corrugator and the operator made no adjustment to our change in who was catching. One day while

catching, I saw a piece of cardboard jam underneath the belt. My thought was that it might knock the belt off so I ran over and hit a red button that shut down the entire three-block-long machine. Shortly, a supervisor came running out, wanting to know what happened. And I explained to him that I thought – that's as far as I got, I thought, and he quickly responded, "catchers don't think, they catch. Don't touch that button again, unless someone's got a body part stuck in the belt." It was sometime later that I found out that my supervisor, I sir received a bonus for runtime.

Steve: 04:16 In other words, the longer the corrugated ran without a shutdown, the better bonus was paid to the supervisor. The quality of what we produced wasn't an issue issue for his bonus. The runtime was the issue. An assembly line process. On another day, I was moved to be a catcher on the line that actually printed and produced a finished box. As I began catching and stacking, it struck me that the box was printing upside down. Remembering my earliest experience with the supervisor, knowing that catchers don't think, I just kept catching. After the supervisor discovered the mistake, thousands of boxes later, I was asked if I could work overtime that day to place the misprinted boxes into the scrapper. You see the assembly line was great for runtime, but it lacked a lot in quality outcomes. Years later, when the quality movement was in place, Saturn ran a TV commercial that showed a gentleman shutting down the assembly line because he saw a place that quality wasn't being measured up. I had to laugh when I saw the commercial thinking that I had been scolded for a behavior that he was on TV, being featured. He looked into the camera and said, "Quality – that's my job."

Steve: 06:07 When the assembly line system runs into a problem or disequilibrium, it doesn't have a way to respond. In comparison, when an
ecosystem is disturbed, unlike the assembly line, it uses disequilibrium to self-organize a new order, generally an

improvement. We're at the spot right now where the pandemic brought a lot of disequilibrium and coming out of that process, if we can take an ecosystem approach, we will likely lead to improve movements in teaching and learning. If we reframe to consider school structures as an ecosystem designed less mechanically and more emergently, what in our approaches might we change? I'm wondering if it's our thinking in an assembly line system that causes us now to be focusing on learning loss and the need to catch up. Do we have a belief that a fifth grade teacher has to have the right students showing up in order to place the fifth grade curriculum onto the students, rather than building the best possible learning opportunities to maximize learning outcomes for the students who are enrolled in the teacher's class?

Steve: 07:49 Do we need to be counting days and seat time and collecting Carnegie units in order to measure a student's real success and readiness for the next stage of their future? Margaret Wheatly is one of my favorite authors when I think about working as an ecosystem. I'll put a link to some of her writing in the lead-in to this podcast. But listen to this statement that she makes: "when we say that organizations or people are living systems, we're saying that unlike machines, people have intelligence. Again, this is not a profound thought, except we've strayed so far from it. People are capable of change whereas machines have no capacity to change apart from their programs or designs devised by some smart engineer. Machines have no intelligence. They're created for specific tolerances. It is stultifying to think about life this way.

Steve: 08:59 And yet this way of thinking is so deeply embedded in our culture, that it's going to take a while for us to think otherwise." Wheatley wasn't specifically describing schools in her writing, but it jumps out at me how often decisions and policies and rules are in place that trump the thinking of the educator to take the right action for

students. As I thought about this concept of ecosystem versus assembly line thinking, I've been pondering how our use of calendar in our schoolwork generates and promotes the stop and start process of an assembly line. One example I've dealt with most recently is working with schools' professional growth plans for teachers. Rather than progressing organically with redesigns and successes and spontaneous breakthroughs on new insights or the discovery of new problems, most schools construct a formation of the professional growth plan in may or August with ending dates at the end of the following school year.

Steve: 10:25 The plan is made to fit the calendar instead of fitting the teacher's learning, learning that can be messy or regular nonlinear, spontaneous and complex. Shouldn't learning be driving the start and stop of a growth plan rather than the calendar? In a recent podcast interview, I was asked to respond to the fact that for most instructional coaches, they find that teachers aren't interested in coaching or in growth and learning for themselves during may and June. As I listened, I stated back to the interviewer, so you want them to be excited and engaged aged with the ending? Here's a new thought to ponder: what would it be be like if students began transitioning in April into new courses and content with new staff? What if we were engaged in learning and goal setting, as we broke for a summer vacation? Perhaps that engagement would lead to reading and thinking and researching during our break and students would return from the break ready to continue the learning process that they had been engaged in.

Steve: 11:54 What if learning increasingly was designed to progress and was documented organically rather than mechanically and structured into the calendar. Here's another statement from Margaret Wheatley: "We live in a world which is constantly exploring what's possible, finding new combinations, not struggling to survive, but playing tinkering to find what's possible. People are intelligent. We're

creative, we’re adaptive. We seek order. We seek meaning in our lives. When we really start to understand this, when we really start to change our perception of who people are, then it changes how we think about organizing. It’s a natural tendency of life to organize, to seek greater levels of complexity and diversity.” Teaching and learning should be driven by exploring complexity. That’s the great role for us to engage in with our instructional coaching practices. Consider how many places you are finding an assembly line process limiting teacher and student learning. What could we do to become more like an ecosystem? Thanks for listening.

Steve [Outro]: 13:36 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.