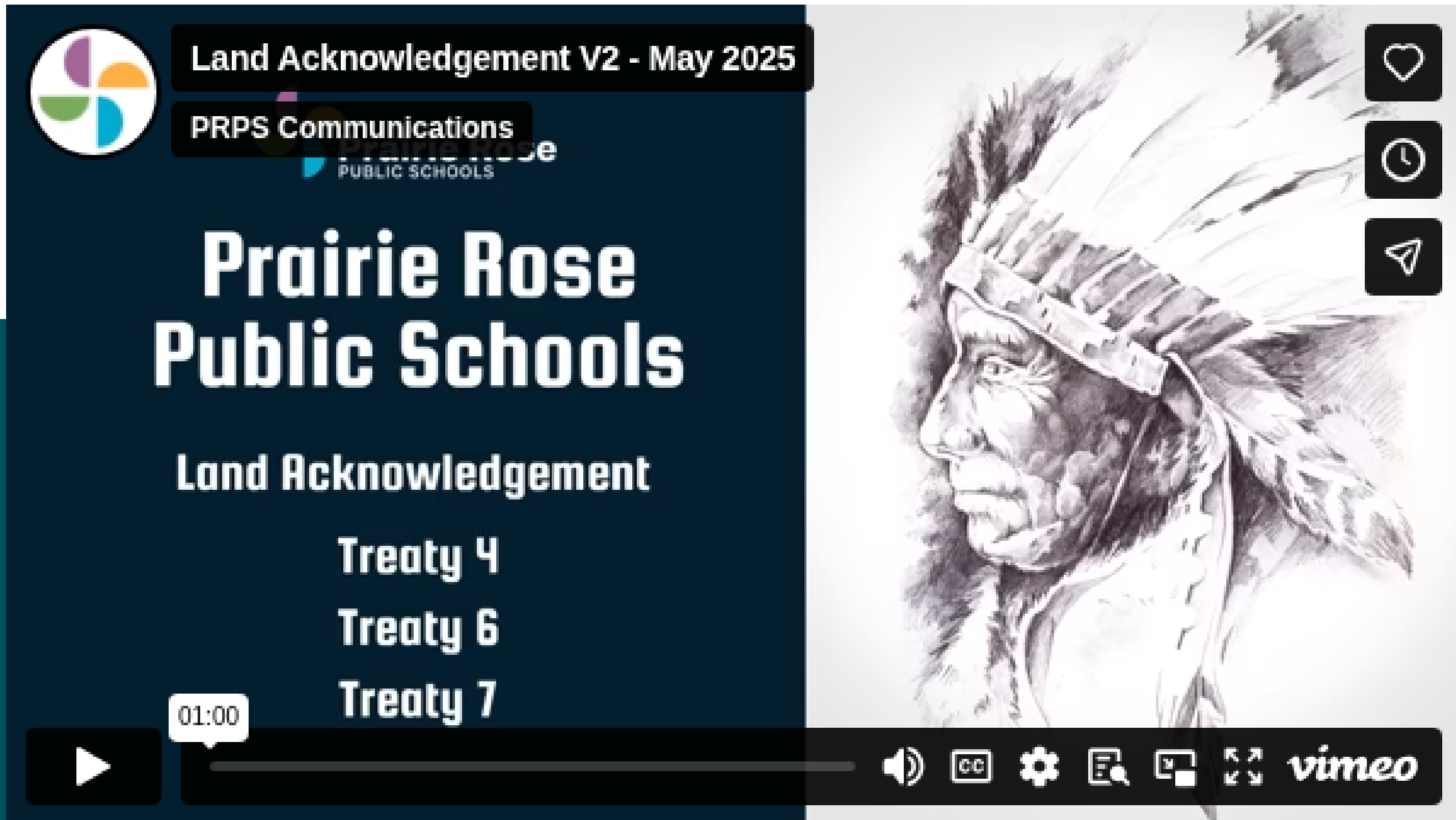


EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

“It’s Where the Future Lives”

Lisa Lindsay
&
Corey Steeves

Land Acknowledgement



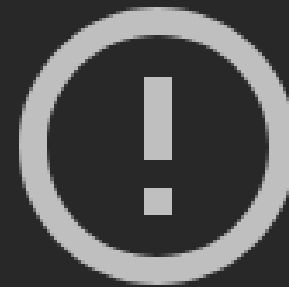
BE CURIOUS

BE ENGAGED

AVOID EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

BE SOLUTION-FOCUSED

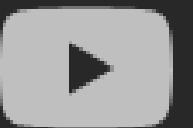
Norms for the Afternoon



[Watch video on YouTube](#)

Error 153

Video player configuration error



What IF?

“What if the challenges that frustrate us most are actually the raw material for our greatest innovation?”

Problem of Practice:

As a system, we often respond to complex challenges with technical solutions, not because we don't care, but because our structures and habits are built for control, predictability, and efficiency.

Theoretical Underpinning:

Complexity Leadership Theory reminds us that in complex environments, leadership isn't just about managing, it's about creating the conditions for learning, adaptation, and innovation. In today's VUCA world, we're seeing a pattern where discomfort with uncertainty can lead to stagnation. Addressing complexity (ie - system change and transformation) often sits on the back burner because it doesn't fit into a tidy plan or timeline. When we avoid complexity, we also avoid the breakthroughs that come with it.

“LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS IS LESS ABOUT DIRECTING AND MORE ABOUT ENABLING ADAPTIVE PROCESSES.”
– UHL-BIEN ET AL. (2007)

Learning Intentions

Learning Intention: To empower system leaders to embrace complexity as a catalyst for innovation by applying adaptive leadership frameworks, leveraging professional networks, reframing persistent challenges, and implementing actionable tools that cultivate agile, future-ready cultures.

Success Criteria:

1. Recognize difference between complicated & complex challenges within system leadership.
2. Apply adaptive leadership principles to navigate uncertainty and change.
3. Leverage professional networks to broaden perspectives and collective capacity.
4. Reframe persistent or “stuck” problems as opportunities for transformation.
5. Identify concrete strategies and tools that can be scaled across school authorities.



Adapted from the Harvard Case Study Method
Ignite Minds: “Strategy 2: Use case study method to examine & drive instructional practice”
The Harvard case study method uses real classroom conundrums to help school staff solve academic achievement problems. Colleagues discuss problems of practice in subject matter groups to design exceptional learning environments for students.

The Prairie Rose Context:

Our Problem of Practice: **DECLINING ENROLLMENT**



As a rural school division in Southeastern Alberta, we faced declining numbers in our schools as students & their families gravitated to areas with more robust programming.

2025

The number of students residing within our boundaries choosing to attend other division in-person schools was reduced from 868 students to 431, or by approximately 50%. This means we are keeping more of our own students.

Embracing Complexity

Reframing

*Turning Problems to Fix
Into Challenges to Explore*

SHIFTING “DECREASING ENROLLMENT” TO



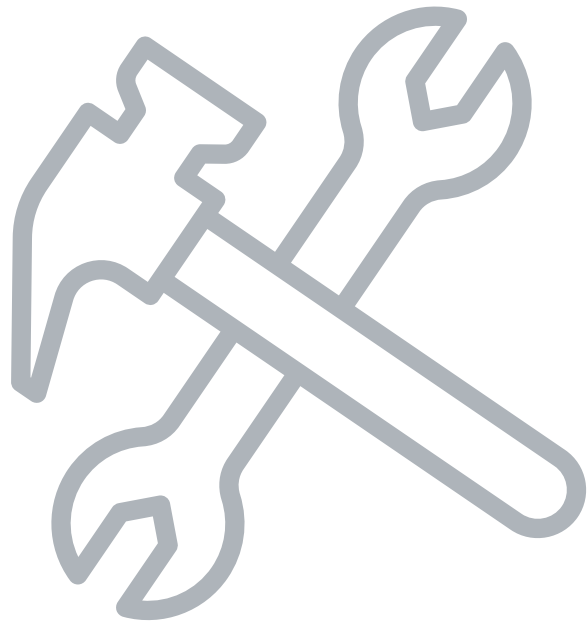
**AN “OPPORTUNITY TO REDESIGN LEARNING
EXPERIENCES”**

Embracing Complexity

**What does the
research say?**



**...and what tools are
applicable?**



MICHAEL FULLAN

MOTION

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

MORE SKINNY
on Becoming
Change Savvy



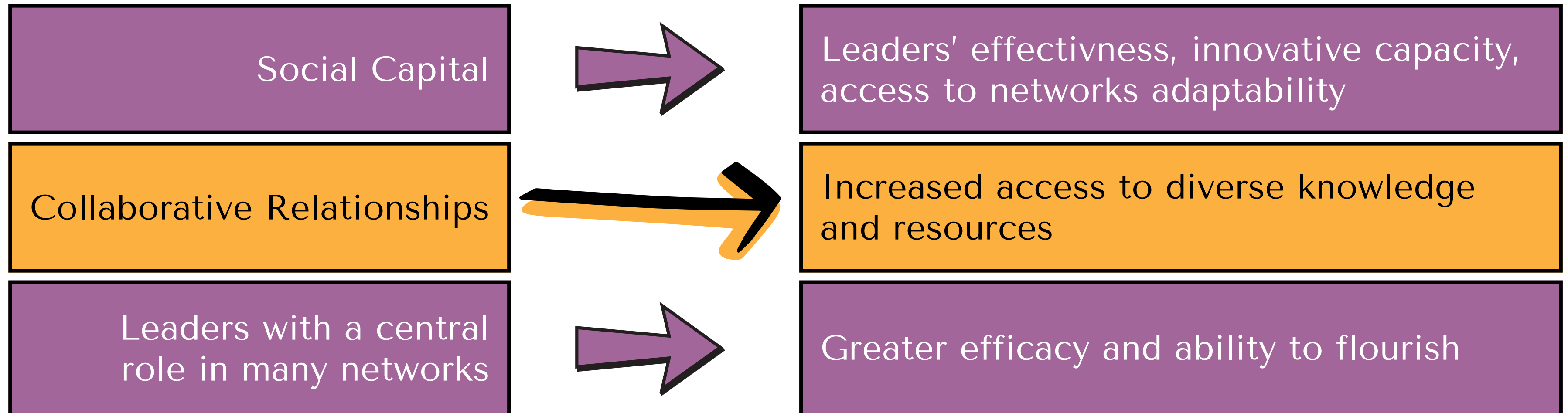
Fullan (2013): *Motion Leadership in Action*

- Creating & leading movement in the right direction and at the right time.
- Implementing a “ready-fire-aim” mindset.
- Emphasizing the importance of collaboration
- Forging relationships while handling resistance.
- Establishing your change stance in order to get better results.

PR
PS



NETWORKS AS CAPACITY BUILDERS: **Collaboration in Action**



N. Yang and Li (2024); R. Bourke, 2023; Bridwell-Mitchell & Cook, 2016; C. Brown et al., 2024; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hung et al., 2016; Moolenaar and Sleegers's (2015); Stoll, 2009)

Tools for Addressing Complexity Learning Intent:

Identify concrete strategies & tools that can be scaled across school authorities.

INTENT

To explore **three ideas** that can help, rather than hinder, your innovation and change efforts. These ideas are not counter-intuitive, just counter-cultural.



IDEAS



- Complex issues require adaptive responses
- Adaptive responses require complexity-based evaluation
- Outer transformation requires inner transformation & reflective practice

Complexity Issues Require Adaptive Responses

Learning Intent: Recognize the difference between *complicated* and *complex* changes within leadership.

WHAT? is the difference between.....

Baking a Cake

Simple

Right “recipe” essential
Gives same results every time



Example:
Baking a cake

Rocket to the Moon

Complicated

“Formulas” needed
Experience built over time and
can be repeated with *success*



Example:
Sending a rocket to the moon

Raising a Child

Complex

No “right” recipes or protocols
Outside factors influence
Experience helps, but doesn't
guarantee success

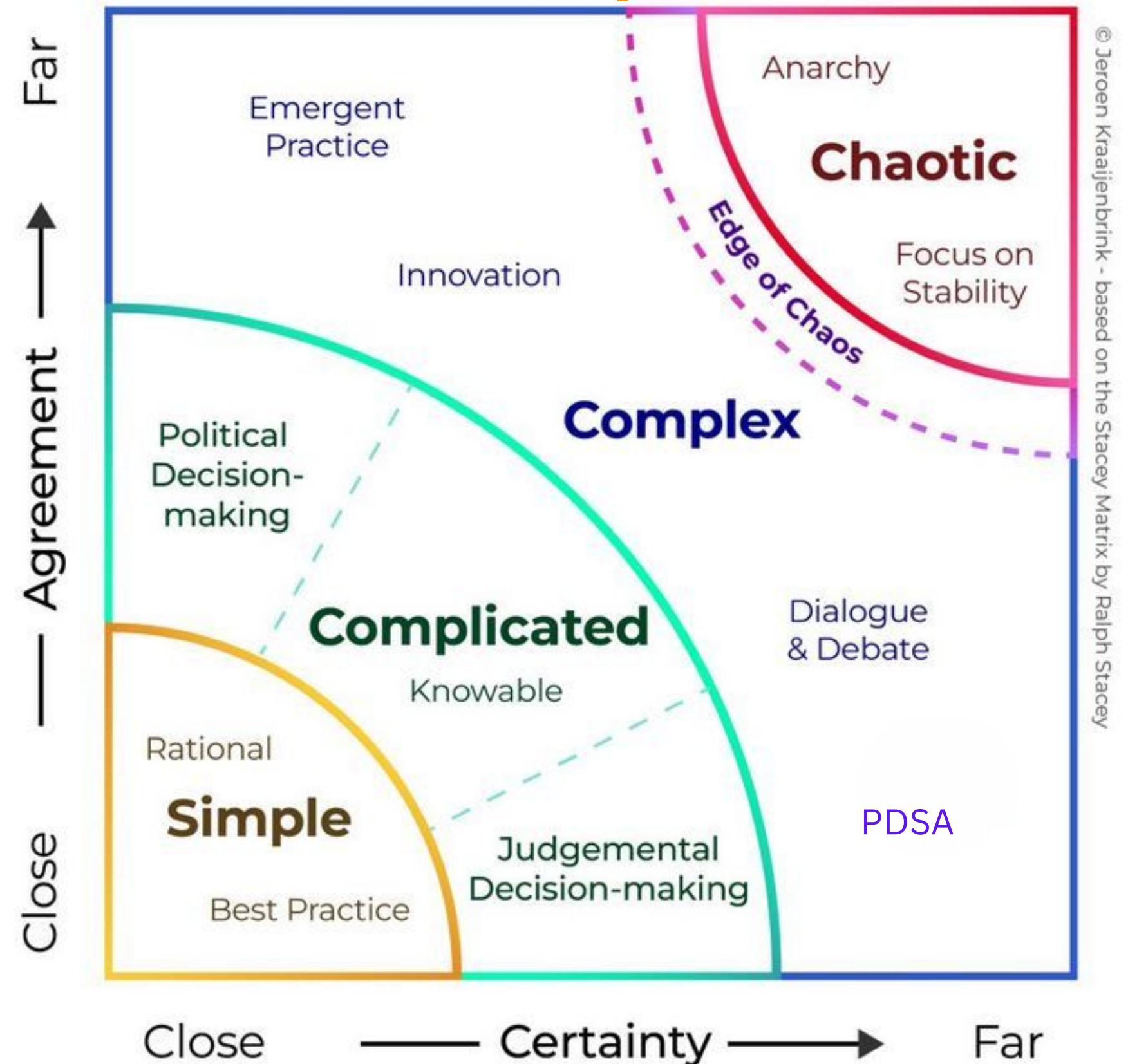


Example:
Raising a child

Adaptive Responses Require Complexity-Based Evaluation

Strategy in the Face of Complexity

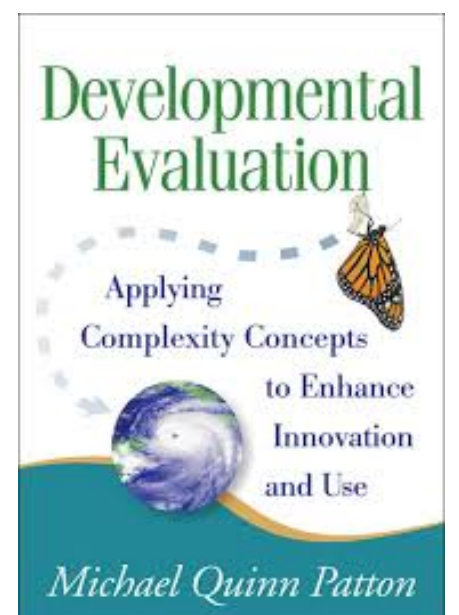
The Stacey Matrix



Developmental Evaluation

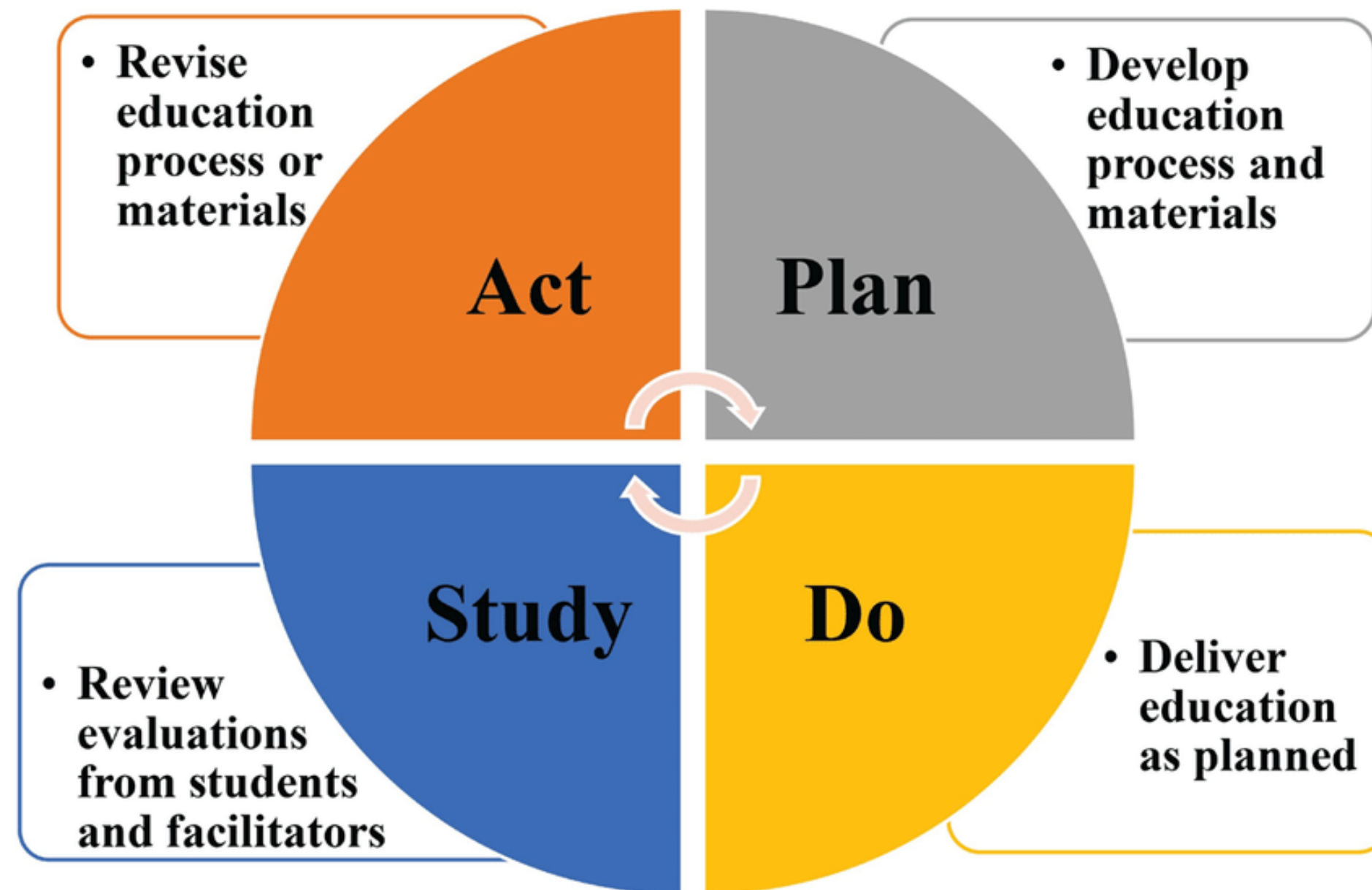
Learning Intent: *Apply adaptive leadership principles to embrace complexity*

TRADITIONAL EVALUATIONS	COMPLEXITY-AWARE, DEVELOPMENT EVALUATIONS
Judges success or failure	Guides learning in real time
Measures against fixed, predetermined goals	Allows goals to evolve as the work evolves
Evaluator stands outside the work	Evaluator works with the team
Uses linear, cause-and-effect logic	Looks at patterns, relationships, and system dynamics
Produces general findings	Produces context-specific insights
Creates pressure and fear of being wrong	Builds curiosity and continuous improvement



Outer Transformation Requires Inner Transformation (and reflective practice)

Learning Intent: *Reframe persistent or “stuck” problems as opportunities for transformation*



THE COMPLEXITY GAME!

How it works:

Learning Intention:

Reframe complexity
as an opportunity for
collaborative leadership,
rather than a barrier.

What does it mean to be a
“Solutionary?”

- Each table group will receive **one Case Study**.
- You will collaborate to draft an initial solution.
- When you are confident in your solution, **you will receive One Nuance Card** to introduce added complexity.
- Groups will present their evolving solutions and reflect on how complexity shaped their thinking.

Responding to Alberta's Rising Classroom Complexity

Across Alberta, school authorities report escalating levels of student dysregulation, mental health challenges, and learning gaps.

- According to recent provincial data, the top factors contributing to classroom complexity are behavioural concerns, mental health needs, socio-economic pressures, and increasing number of students with complex diagnoses or trauma backgrounds.
- Navigating inclusion, behaviour, and system capacity in a No-Vacancy province, Alberta's classrooms are experiencing unprecedented levels of complexity; driven by increased behavioural, social-emotional, and mental health needs, staffing pressures, and community change.
- System leaders must move beyond reactive interventions to create adaptive, sustainable, and trust-centered systems that can thrive in complexity.

Core Challenge: CASSCON is entering the 2025–2026 school year facing record numbers of behaviour referrals and staff fatigue.

KEY REALITIES:

- **Inclusion strain:** Over 90% of classrooms have multiple coded students, and principals report that teachers “are spending more time de-escalating than teaching.”
- **Staffing gaps:** Educational assistant absences have risen by 25%, with few substitutes available.
- **Community pressure:** Parents are demanding “safer learning environments,” while advocacy groups push back against exclusionary practices.
- **Leader tension:** Principals feel caught between inclusion ideals and the operational need to maintain safety and learning continuity.
- **System data:** 68% of teachers report “moderate to high levels of burnout,” and 1 in 3 classrooms experience daily dysregulated incidents requiring intervention.

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLSQS) Alignment

Visionary Leadership: Leading culture change toward regulation, not reaction.

Fostering Relationships: Protecting trust with staff, parents, and partners while under new accountability demands.

Leading Learning: Building staff capacity in trauma-informed & inclusive practice.

Ensuring Accountability: Balancing public transparency with responsible, ethical data use.

Community Based Programming

Pathways in a Changing Alberta

- Designing place-based, experiential learning and workforce pathways amid rapid demographic shifts.
- Alberta's population is growing and urbanizing, with increasing diversity concentrated in large centres while many rural areas face stagnant or slower growth.
- System leaders must build place-based, experiential programming and local pathways that keep learning rooted in community—without leaving rural learners behind.

Core Challenge: **CASSCON** - a mixed rural/small-urban authority - must launch a school authority-wide Community-Based Programming strategy by January.

KEY REALITIES:

- Alberta is projected to continue growing through 2051, with growth concentrated in metropolitan corridors; more Canadians now live in CMAs, driven largely by international migration.
- Diversity is rising: about 23% of Albertans were immigrants in 2021, with strong concentrations in Calgary and Edmonton; Indigenous peoples comprise ~6.8% of Alberta's population, with many communities outside major centres.
- K-12 demand is growing unevenly (e.g., sharp enrolment increases in Calgary and Edmonton), while rural jurisdictions report pressure to sustain options with fewer local services.

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLSQS) Alignment

Visionary Leadership: Setting a multi-community pathways vision that adapts to shifting demographics.

Fostering Relationships: Building municipal/industry/Indigenous/post-secondary coalitions.

Leading Learning: Embedding experiential, land-based, and WIL approaches with clear credits.

Ensuring Accountability: Equity metrics, transparent site selection, public reporting on access/outcomes.

Staff Recruitment and Retention

Navigating Growth, Sustainability, and Culture in Alberta's Education Workforce

- Building Capacity Without Breaking Culture
- System leaders face the paradox of opportunity and overload as Alberta's education system receives a historic staffing investment to address class size, burnout, and inclusion pressures.

Core Challenge: **CASSCON**, a mixed rural/small-urban authority, must launch a division-wide Community-Based Programming strategy by January.

KEY REALITIES:

The announcement has created what one system education leader called “a good problem wrapped in a wicked one.”

The school authority now faces:

- **Recruitment bottlenecks:** Competing with other jurisdictions for the same limited pool of qualified candidates.
- **Equity and allocation tension:** Urban schools expect proportional additions, while rural schools argue for need-based distribution.
- **Workforce culture risks:** A sudden wave of new staff may dilute established professional communities and stretch mentorship structures.
- **Unclear sustainability:** The funding is confirmed for two years, with renewal dependent on fiscal outcomes.
- **Operational stress:** Space, supervision, and onboarding systems are not yet scaled for this magnitude of growth.

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLSQS) Alignment

Visionary Leadership: Leading culture change toward regulation, not reaction.

Fostering Relationships: Protecting trust with staff, parents, and partners while under new accountability demands.

Leading Learning: Building staff capacity in trauma-informed & inclusive practice.

Ensuring Accountability: Balancing public transparency with responsible, ethical data use.

What 'aha's - if any - did you have from this session?

What new questions - if any - emerge for you?

What's one thing that you think you might do differently in your work?



The Future Lives in Complexity

“Complexity isn’t the enemy — it’s the environment of growth.”

*All models are wrong
but some are useful*



George E.P. Box

THANK YOU!

Lisa Lindsay lisalindsay@prrd8.ca

Corey Steeves coreysteeves@prrd8.ca