

September 2020

ONcall

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Getting ready for the next normal and the one after that

One day in March 2020, everything in your school district, school building or classroom was “normal,” and the next day it wasn’t. Something you couldn’t see, smell or taste had invaded your well-ordered world —COVID-19 — and your “normal” world would never be the same.

“What we’re experiencing now is a period of massive global transformation caused by a dramatic change in our environment,” said leadership coaches Karen Carnahan and Marsia Gunter of Continuous Breakthru in Portland, Oregon. (www.continuousbreakthru.com)

Carnahan and Gunter call this situation “punctuated equilibrium.” The term originated in evolutionary biology. It refers to how the evolution of a species (humans included) is generally static for long periods of time until a sudden change is introduced into the environment. Then, the evolution of that species begins to undergo rapid change and development. Think classroom instruction to online instruction in just a few short weeks.

While we humans haven’t physically evolved in the past five months, all our interactions with each other, how schools do business, how we do all the “normal” activities of daily living have changed completely.

Here’s how Carnahan and Gunter describe what is happening to us along with their advice for how to navigate the next “normal” and the ones after that:

Ups, downs, and temporary stability

After navigating three months of quarantine and digital learning, an upended summer, and now uncertainty about life in the new school year, you have likely “somewhat adapted to the next ‘normal’ while still craving the conditions of the past before the virus hit. We instinctively search for a stable state amidst uncertainty,” said Carnahan and Gunter.

“Whatever that ‘stable state’ might feel like, it probably will be short-lived. Our journey might be likened to being on a bucking horse. Any momentary feeling of stability will be upended by the next kick or jump. And then we are just trying to ‘stay on the horse,’ or just keep up with the changing circumstances.

In short, we are still on the bucking horse, and the ride isn’t over yet. Other big changes are likely on the horizon, even if we don’t know what they might be. You won’t be the same person when you get off the horse as when you get on,” they said.

Carnahan and Gunter visually represent punctuated equilibrium with the following graph. Those ups and downs? We are still somewhere in the middle of the middle, they say.

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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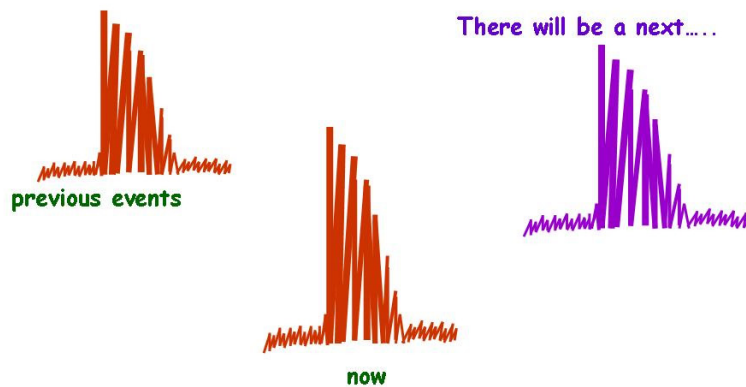


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Punctuated Equilibrium

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In fact, living in a punctuated equilibrium is a completely different experience than any of us have lived through before.

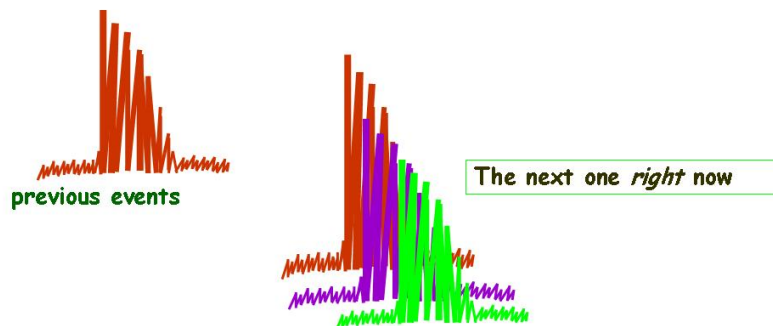
We can't say, this will be over by the time school starts...by the new year...surely next summer...as soon as there is a vaccine. We want certainty. We don't want a world where we just don't know. We don't want to accept there are no time limits anymore.

These times have morphed into multiple punctuated equilibria — all happening at the same time. In addition to all of the physical and mental consequences of living with a microbe, we must assimilate closed workplaces and virtual education, protests for racial justice, impacts of climate change, wearing masks, social distancing and washing our hands incessantly.

If we thought everyone would band together for the common good and have the stamina for self-sacrifice, we were mistaken. Loneliness, fear, concern, mistrust, suspicion, anger, resentment, confusion and exhaustion abound.

What Now?

Punctuated Equilibrium xx 2 or 3



What do we do? According to Carnahan and Gunter, a more useful question might be “How can we be?”

“The truth is none of us likes disruptive change. It upsets our sense of control and throws a monkey wrench into things we thought we had handled. Plans for the future, which may have seemed solid, now seem malleable, different or even completely obsolete.

“It is OK to feel sad, panicked, fearful, angry, anxious or stressed right now. These are all ‘normal’ reactions when you are trying to stay on the horse. Cultivating and practicing useful (in other words — practical) ways of being can help diminish a lot of our fears.”

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Helpful states of being during a punctuated equilibrium

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Carnahan and Gunter find the following states of being enormously helpful in these current crises, these punctuated equilibria:

Start with a sense of calm. Breathe and work to maintain a sense of stillness. Despite bad things happening, you can still cultivate a sense of control, starting with your breath.

Stay resilient. You also can help retain a sense of control by retaining optimism, even after unexpected or unfortunate things happen. Realize that you are more than just your circumstances. Stay on the bucking horse. Ride it out.

Stay awake. Keep tabs on your own emotions and actions so you can manage yourself without spinning out of control. Ask: What is my experience? Why do I care? How do I need to manage myself through this?

Stay connected. Connections with others will lift your morale. Find opportunities to help each other. A tangible thing you can do to help often alleviates anxiety. Sometimes just “showing up” (from a socially responsible distance with your mask on, of course) is a huge relief and a help to others.

Get creative. How can you come up with new and effective ways of dealing with emergent problems? Ask yourself, ‘what if?’

Here’s the big one: Remember, you are a leader — of your school district, your school building, your classroom. You can still have a vision for the future and work toward that vision despite these crises. You do not have to be elected, chosen or titled to be a leader. Great leaders take turns leading and following.

These are challenging times for everyone — especially for educators charged with educating the next generation. Just remember, the experiences you are having, these punctuated equilibria, offer the learning to help you build a bridge to the future beyond these current crises. Though some people think this kind of vision is reserved for the political realm, it really is a responsibility for all of us. All of us are empowered to find a way to make these difficult times mean something, however challenging it is to find that meaning.

Remember, too, as educational leaders, you are the ones who will determine what schools of the future will be like for students, for parents, your staff and your community. Your job now is to envision what the next “normal” for schools will be in six months, in 18 months, in the next normal and the one after that. Your willingness to live and thrive in whatever is next will make the difference.

There is no ‘normal’ to come back to because it’s we who will change. Our perspectives will have shifted. It’s OK not to know what is going to happen next, Carnahan and Gunter say. So, stay tuned...there is much more to come on building a future for education through equilibria.

Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, senior consultant, C&M Communications, Portland, Oregon, with permission to reprint from Continuous Breakthru. Carnahan Smith & Gunter, Portland, Oregon, 2020. Principals Karen Carnahan and Marsia Gunter are applied futurists who work with businesses and organizations to be resilient, vital, and successful.