

Paradigm Shifts Needed for School/Workplace Shootings – and Paradigm Paralysis Stopped

James W. Schreier, Ph.D.

After the latest tragedy in Nashville (3/27/23), amidst the constant live coverage, I was overwhelmed by sadness for the children, for the parents, for the teachers, for the first responders, for my own many friends in Nashville – and for all children. Within a week, we were confronted with a tragic incident of workplace violence in Louisville.

As futurist Joel Barker's student and colleague, I've lived and learned for over twenty years about the importance of understanding paradigms and the power of vision. I've learned and worked with hundreds exploring the positive and negative implications of innovations and events, hoping to avoid the undesirable and "unintended" consequences – praying for not another catastrophic event.

A Paradigms Perspective

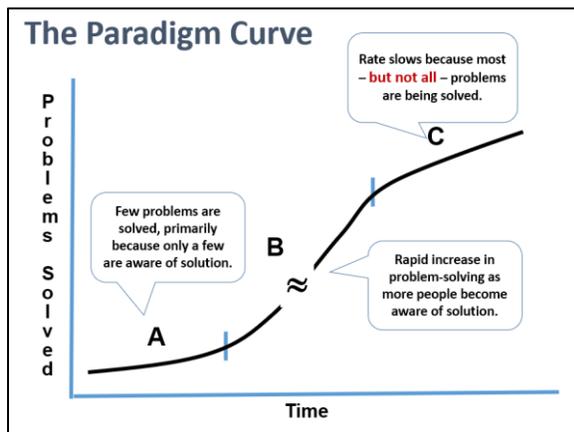
There are many aspects to these incidents for the victims and their families, the perpetrator, the incident response from first responders – and the immediate calls for actions that could have prevented a particular incident and what could – or should – be done to prevent these tragedies. It is this final element where some serious thinking about paradigms needs to occur.

Over the decades of exposure from Thomas Kuhn's introduction of "paradigms" to the scientific community, followed by Joel Barker's extension of Kuhn's work into the broader world of organizations, the definition of "paradigms" and "paradigm shifts" have expanded to apply to almost any kind of change. This is unfortunate because a deeper understanding of the definitions has the potential to lead people to a better understanding of a problems as complex as school and workplace violence – and a clearer call for discussions for new paradigms that could have a greater impact.

Here is a specific definition of a paradigm: a **"problem-solving mechanism."**

As problem-solving mechanisms, when a new paradigm emerges, it is initially adopted by a relatively small number of people (or organizations) because not everyone is aware of the solution – or can afford it. The "early adopters" of music delivery solutions over the years, or security solutions for schools are examples. Digital music players existed for early adopters before Apple's iPod (with iTunes) exploded into the market as the popular paradigm.

But eventually, while the paradigm solves a large number of problems, it does not solve all the problems and new paradigms emerge or are needed. The iPod was "shifted" by access to Apple Music and now steaming services, e.g., Spotify. This is an important concept offered as the "Paradigm Curve" shown in Figure 1.



Key Paradigm Concepts

Joel Barker offers six key paradigm concepts, some of which are critically relevant to this analysis of school/workplace violence.

1. Paradigms are common.
2. Paradigms are useful.
3. Sometimes your paradigm can become the paradigm.
4. Almost always, the new rules are written at the edge.
5. Paradigm pioneers must be courageous.
6. You can choose to change your paradigm.

“Sometimes your paradigm can become the paradigm” is the most important in this context. This results in “paradigm paralysis” and is too clearly illustrated in the post-Nashville discussions. Tragically, paradigm paralysis is “a terminal disease of certainty.”

An example of this was the initial reports that the Covenant School shooter entered the building through an open door, leading to extensive discussions among “experts” as to a) why schools need to be more secure with all doors locked and b) why the Covenant School, connected to a church, was vulnerable because of (interestingly a paradigm) churches always being “open”. The paradigm paralysis was busted later the same day when it was revealed (with video evidence) of the shooter firing through the locked glass doors to enter the building.

Then there were, at a minimum, the quickly emerging “paralysis” of:

- More gun control is the only solution.
- 2nd Amendment arguments protecting gun ownership.
- Existing gun laws aren’t enforced.
- It’s a mental health issue.
- It’s not a mental health issue.

Almost anyone arguing for one of these positions totally dismisses any opposing view – usually with clearly stated disdain for the opposing view and the person (or group) expressing it.

This “paradigm paralysis” does and will continue to prevent us from improving current solutions and developing new solutions to this critical issue.

In a historical note, President George Bush demonstrated a challenge to existing paradigms. After school shootings in Virginia, Colorado, and Wisconsin, President Bush called for a “Conference on School Safety.”

The conference was held in Washington on Tuesday, October 10, 2006, and was attended by over 300 educators, law enforcement officials, experts on school violence, and survivors of school violence incidents. *(Note: I was fortunate to be invited to participate in this conference.)*

There was a consensus among experts, including law enforcement, that while their efforts need to be state-of-the-art, particularly in areas of excellent, coordinated communication plus effective response, the real efforts toward prevention needed to be aimed at the importance of values and character in education. During the panel featuring the president, Mr. Bush made several observations. Two stood out:

1. *“It seems like to me that a lot of our focus ought to be on preventing. And no question, we ought to worry about recovering, but preventing... makes the recovery not necessary.”*
2. *“...at some point in time, that begins to affect a child’s vision of the future, and a grim vision of the future may be that which triggers a response that is negative.”*

The most powerful message of the entire program was delivered by a young college student, a survivor of the Columbine tragedy, who was called upon to lead, not by choice, and in his own words, “at a very high price,” who delivered a powerful message to the president and the attendees. Craig Scott, whose sister Rachael was the first to die at Columbine, said:

I challenge every teacher...and educator here today to take a look at teaching that doesn’t just teach the head but teaches the heart. The students today that I’ve met are looking for truth. You can help point them to what’s right and wrong.

There were at least three paradigms supported by the conference attendees: security, prevention, and a positive vision for the future (a mental health component).

Yet 17 years later, we’re still focused on arguing which paradigm is correct and why others are wrong!

A “Paradigm Shift” Does Not Exclude Other (“Old”) Paradigms

A new paradigm puts the old paradigm “back to zero,” e.g., the iPod obliterated the cassette/CD Player markets . CD Players still exist, and “Vinyl” has made a noticeable if not spectacular recovery.

For the discussion of school and workplace violence, all the problem-solving mechanisms, the existing paradigms, must be considered as part of the solution.

None of them have been completely successful in stopping these tragedies. None of them have completely failed.

As problem-solving mechanisms, “paradigms” can be improved. Not to minimize the critical importance of these violence incidents but we’re all familiar with the annual incremental improvements in our phones. So...

- Physical security of school (workplaces) can be improved – but should not be ignored, discounted, or dismissed.
- “Gun control” legislation and/or enforcement can be improved – but should not be ignored, discounted, or dismissed.
- Mental Health can be improved and expanded – but should not be ignored, discounted, or dismissed.

Paradigm Paralysis is preventing us from improving (and in some cases, implementing) existing solutions.

More importantly, it is preventing us from calling for, searching for, new paradigms, new solutions. And here’s where two final important points from understanding paradigms enter.

1. **You can choose to change your paradigms** – or accept that multiple paradigms are part of the solution to school/workplace violence.
2. Almost always, the new rules are written at the edge. **New paradigms often come from outside the existing paradigms.**

As work is done to improve the existing solutions, we must search for new solutions – that search must include a call for innovative ideas from a wide variety of sources.

Using another of Joel Barker’s concepts from his work, “The Power of Vision,” here’s a specific “vision” for addressing the need for new solutions to address school and workplace violence:

A Vision

School and Workplace Violence – Searching for Solutions

*In the summer of 2023, a five-day “highly facilitated” conference on “**School and Workplace Violence – Searching for Solutions**” was held in Nashville. The conference featured participation and support from a bi-partisan coalition of political parties, leadership, and corporations.*

*Among many themes, including “Listening – Respect – Learn,” a condition for participation was “Check your ‘**Paradigm Paralysis**’ at the Door!”*

The conference featured minimal “speeches” with a majority of sessions focused on structured, facilitated discussions. These sessions were facilitated by expert, “multiple approaches,” based on known concepts: e.g., Joel Barker’s Implications Wheel, Edward de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats, Thomas Crum’s Magic of Conflict, Appreciative Inquiry, America Speaks etc.

Keynote speakers included individuals with positive views on the issues, e.g., Marcus Buckingham (Strengths-Based Schools – “Love and Work”) and Craig Scott, with a few short presentations on some of the selected facilitation techniques.

Participation included representation from multiple (all) stakeholders (e.g., including youth), diversity, etc. All sessions were conducted following guidelines for respect, awareness/monitoring of biases.

Extreme transparency of discussions and results, including all reporting, designed to limit “selective editing,” etc.

Initial feedback from the overall conference evaluation showed:

- *67% reported that the discussions were “significantly different” from their other experiences with 21% reporting they were “dramatically different.”*
- *95% reported learning something from other participants.*
- *96% reported learning from different points of view.*

Within 30 days of the publication of the conference’s comprehensive final report, a second conference was announced to develop specific action plans based on the recommendations from the conference.

Joel Barker's often-cited quote on vision summarizes the need for new paradigm thinking on school and workplace violence.

Vision without action is merely a dream.

Action without vision just passes the time.

Vision with action can change the world.

James W. Schreier, Ph.D., SPHR has worked with futurist Joel Barker for 22+ years and serves as his Director of Training for Barker's Strategic Exploration Tools.

Jim.Schreier@strategicexploration.com