

Governance Tools referenced in
Governance Handbook for Friends Schools, 2nd edition

The Rule of Six

Adapted from A Leader's Guide to Reflective Practice, Judy Brown, 2006, Trafford Publishing, Victoria, BC, Canada, www.judysorumbrown.com

When we are trying to figure out something perplexing (for which we often use the term “a problem”), or when we are facing into uncertainty (for which we use the term “change”), it seems natural to our western way of thinking to quickly try to find the right answer to questions like this: “Exactly what is the cause of this? What’s going on here? How are things going to unfold? What is likely to happen? What should be our plan?”

Many of the most heated arguments, whether within our own heads, or among colleagues or with family members, are about who has the one answer to the question before us.

The “rule of six,” a Native American thinking process or discipline, requires that instead of coming up with one single answer to the question (which comes, of course, from the story we tell ourselves about what is going on), we instead come up with at least six possible, or good, stories about what is going on. And then having done that, we hold all six stories in our head, and do not choose among them.

This is very hard for the western mind. Even when we think of two possibilities, it is for the implicit purpose of having those two possibilities fight it out, until one wins. Thinking about more than one cause of an event or more than one possibility of an outcome is, in our mind, simply an invitation for us to quickly choose the right one. In fact, we move so quickly from what we observe, to the story that we tell ourselves about that observation, to a conclusion, that we hardly realize that there is a space between what we see and the story we tell ourselves about it. We go from perception to story to conclusion in a nanosecond. We collapse awareness into action as if they were a single thing.

The Native tradition by contrast holds that there is a generous and open space after we notice something. And that is the space within which to hold many possible interpretations, or causes, or developments.

The ability to hold six possibilities in our mind accomplishes several things. It keeps our perceptions open to a wider range of data; it allows us to be “systems thinkers” seeking multiple roots of causality in multiple dimensions of a situation; it keeps folks from having a fight with each other about who is right at a time when they should be listening with curiosity to why each other sees things differently. And since we are not forcing ourselves to invest our ego in a single “best” idea, we naturally become more flexible in our thinking, and if our “favorite” of the possibilities doesn’t turn out to be born out by the unfolding of data, we can more easily shift our emotional commitment to another idea which in the course of time has proved stronger; and we can make that shift earlier and more easily. So in a sense, the rule of six allows us to make necessary decisions, yet remain aware and realistic, more flexible in our thinking, present to the world and to the thoughts and perceptions of others, and perhaps even more compassionate with ourselves when we are “of two minds” or more, about something.