

Leadership and Sustainability

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Leadership is to this decade what standards based reform was to the 1990s. We are at a critical juncture in large scale reform where we need to maintain and extend the gains in literacy and numeracy, and at the same time go deeper into more fundamental reform in the educational system as a whole.

To go further we need to develop a new kind of leadership — what I call ‘system thinkers in action’ or ‘the new theoreticians’. These are leaders who work intensely in their own schools or LEAs or other levels, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organisations and systems will require leaders who get experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics. In this sense the main mark of a school head, for example, is not the impact he or she has on the bottom line of student achievement at the end of their tenure but rather how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further. The question, then, is how can we practically develop system thinkers in action. Some do exist but how do we get them in numbers — a critical mass needed for system breakthrough.

I do not think we have made any progress in actually promoting systems thinking in practice since Peter Senge (1990) first raised the matter. As Senge laid out the argument:

... human endeavors are also systems. They ... are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of the lacework work ourselves, it is doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively. [Senge, 1990, p. 7, my emphasis]

We will come back to the italics later, but most of us will recall that systems thinking is the fifth discipline which integrates the other four disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning.

Philosophically, Senge is on the right track but it doesn't seem to be very helpful in practice:

[Systems thinking] is the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. It keeps them from being separate gimmicks or the latest organisation fads. Without a systemic orientation, there is no motivation to look at how the disciplines interrelate ...

At the heart of a learning organisation is a shift of mind — from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something “out there” to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organisation is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it. [pp. 12, 13, my emphasis]

As valid as the argument may be, I know of no program of development that has actually developed leaders to become greater, practical systems thinkers. Until we do this we cannot expect the organisation or system to become transformed. The key to doing this is the to link systems thinking with sustainability. I define sustainability as the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose. The question in this article is whether organisations can provide training and experiences for their leaders that will actually increase their ability to identify and take into account system context. If this can be done it would make it more likely that systems, not just individuals could be changed.

Heifetz (2003) makes a distinction between technical problems (for which we know the answer) and adaptive challenge (for which solutions lie outside our current repertoire). Developing system thinkers is an adaptive challenge. The key to moving forward is to enable leaders to experience and become more effective at leading organisations toward sustainability. In Fullan (2004) I defined eight elements of sustainability:

1. Public service with a moral purpose;
2. Commitment to changing context at all levels;

3. Lateral capacity-building through networks;
4. New vertical relationships that are co-dependent encompassing both capacity-building and accountability;
5. Deep learning;
6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results
7. Cyclical energizing;
8. The long lever of leadership..

1. Public service with a moral purpose

In examining moral purpose (Fullan, 2003b) I talked about how it must transcend the individual to become an organisation and system quality in which collectivities were committed to pursuing moral purpose in all of their core activities. I define moral purpose in three ways with respect to schools: (i) commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement; (ii) treating people with respect which is not to say low expectations; and (iii) orientation to improving the environment including other schools in the district. Corporate organisations as well as public institutions must embrace moral purpose if they wish to succeed over the long run.

2. Commitment to changing context at all levels

David Hargreaves (2003) reminds use of Donald Schon's observation over thirty years ago:

We must ... become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invest and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation [in Hargreaves, p. 74].

It is not Schon's fault that 30 years later this advice remains 100% accurate and 100% useless. How do you enter the chicken and egg equation of starting down the path of

generating learning systems in practice, especially in an era of transparent accountability? This article is about providing practical response to this question; and there is now more powerful evidence that ‘changing the system’ is an essential component of producing learning organisations.

Changing whole systems means changing the entire context within which people work. Researchers are fond of observing that ‘context is everything’ usually in reference to why a particular innovation succeeded in one situation but not another. Well, if context is everything, we must directly focus on how it can be changed for the better. Not as impossible as it sounds although it will take time and cumulative effort. The good news is that once it is underway it has self-generating powers to go further.

Contexts are the structure and cultures within which one works. In the case of educators, the tri-level contexts are school/community, LEAs, and system. The question is can we identify strategies that will indeed change in a desirable direction the contexts that affect us? (Currently these contexts have a neutral or adverse impact on what we do.)

On a small scale, Gladwell (2000) has already identified context as a key Tipping Point: “the power of context says that what really matters is the little things” (p. 150). And if you want to change people’s behavior “you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured” (p. 173). Drawing from complexity theory, I have already made the case that if you want to change systems, you need to increase the amount of purposeful interaction between and among individuals within and across the tri-levels, and indeed within and across systems (Fullan, 2003a).

So, we need first of all to commit to changing context. Then at a more practical level each of the remaining six elements literally gives people new experiences, new capacities and new insights into what should and can be accomplished. It gives people a taste of the power of new context, none more so than the discovery of lateral capacity building’.

3. Lateral capacity-building through networks

In the past few years, lateral capacity has been discovered as a powerful strategy for school improvement. I say discovery because the sequence was: greater accountability

leading to the realisation that support or capacity building was essential; which led to vertical capacity-building with external trainers at the district or other levels; and then in turn to the that lateral capacity-building across peers was a powerful learning strategy.

The most systematic strategy-driven use of networks and collaboratives is evolving in England, partly as a response to the limitations of ‘informed prescription. Many of the new network strategies are being developed by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). For example, a consultant leaders’ program now engages 1,000 of the most effective primary school headteachers in the country working with 4,000 other schools. Thus, in this one strategy alone, 25% of all school headteachers in the country are involved in mutual learning.

There are a number of obvious benefits from lateral strategies (see also Hargreaves, 2003, Education Epidemic). People learn best from peers (fellow travelers who are further down the road) if there is sufficient opportunity for ongoing, purposeful exchange; the system is designed to foster, develop and disseminate innovative practices that work — discoveries, let’s say, in relation to Heifetz’s adaptive challenges (‘solutions that lie outside the current way of operating’); leadership is developed and mobilised in many quarters; motivation and ownership at the local level is deepened — a key ingredient for sustainability of effort and engagement.

Networks, per se, are not a panacea. The downside possibilities potentially include: (a) there may be too many of them adding clutter rather than focus, (b) they may exchange beliefs and opinions more than quality knowledge, and in any case how can quality knowledge be achieved, and (c) networks are usually outside the line-authority, so the question is how potential good ideas get out of the networks so to speak and into focused implementation which requires intensity of effort over time in given settings. Networks are not ends in themselves but must be assessed in terms of the impact they have on changing the cultures of schools and districts and the state in the direction of the eight elements of sustainability identified in this paper.

It is also important to note that lateral capacity is not the only strategy at work (in particular, the relationship to the other seven elements of sustainability must be highlighted).

Complexity theory tells us that if you increase the amount of purposeful interaction and infuse it with the checks and balances of quality knowledge, self-organising patterns (desirable outcomes) will accrue. This promise is not good enough for the sustainable-seeking society with a sense of urgency. There are at least two problems. One concerns how the issues being investigated can result in disciplined inquiry and innovative results; the other raises the question of how good ideas being generated by networks can be integrated in the line operation of organisations.

4. New vertical co-dependent relationships

Sustainable societies must solve (hold in dynamic ‘tension’ the perennial change problem of how to get both local ownership (including capacity) and external accountability. And to get this in the entire system.

We know that the problems have to be solved locally:

Solutions rely, at least in part, on the users themselves and their capacity to take school responsibility for positive outcomes. In learning, health, work, and even parenting, positive outcomes arise from a combination of personal effort and wider social resources [Bentley Wilsdon, 2003, p. 20].

The question is what is going to motivate people to seek positive outcomes, and when it comes to the public or corporate good, how are people and groups to be held accountable? The answer is a mixture of collaboration and networks, on the one hand, and what David Miliband, Minister of State for School Standards in Britain calls ‘intelligent accountability’ on the other hand. Networks and other professional learning communities (lateral capacity-building) do build in a strong but not complete measure of accountability. As such communities interact around given problems, they generate better practices, shared commitment and accountability to peers. Collaborative cultures are demanding when it comes to results, and the demand is telling because it is peer-based and up close on a daily basis.

Vertical relationships (state/LEA, LEA/school, etc.) must also be strengthened. One aspect of vertical relationships involves support and resources; the other concerns

accountability. Some of these will come in the form of element five (deep learning) and six (short-term and long-term results). It will be difficult to get the balance of accountability right in terms of vertical authority — too much direction demotivates people; too little permits drift or worse.

To address this problem we need to re-introduce a strategy that has been around for at least 20 years, namely, “self-evaluation.” In the past, self-evaluation has been touted as an alternative to top-down assessment. In fact, we need to conceive self-evaluation and use it as a both/and solution.

Miliband (2004) in a recent speech put it this way in advocating:

An accountability framework, which puts a premium on ensuring effective and ongoing self-evaluation in every school combined with more focused external inspection, linked closely to the improvement cycle of the school. [p. 6]

He then proposes:

First, we will work with the profession to create a suite of materials that will help schools evaluate themselves honestly. The balance here is between making the process over-prescriptive, and making it just an occasional one-off event. In the best schools it is continuous, searching and objective. Second, [we] will shortly be making proposals on inspection, which take full account of a school’s self-evaluation. A critical test of the strong school will be the quality of its self-evaluation and how it is used to raise standards. Third, the Government and its partners at local and national level will increasingly use the information provided by a school’s self-evaluation and development plan, alongside inspection, to inform outcomes about targeting support and challenge. [p. 8]

Despite, David Miliband’s reference to “intelligent accountability”, three teachers unions just released a paper advocating that ‘assessment for learning’ be reclaimed by the teaching profession. They say, in effect that the government’s intelligent accountability does not rely enough on teacher assessment and judgment:

Teacher assessment is at the heart of effective learning. The type of assessment which best supports learning is that which is based on the day-to-day informed professional judgments that teachers make about pupils' learning achievement and their learning needs (ATL, et al, p. 2)

Is it possible to reconcile the government's concern about intelligent accountability and the unions' position that assessment must be in the hands of the teaching profession? In any case, it is going to be extremely difficult to combine self-evaluation and outside evaluation. For sustainability to have a chance the system must be involved in co-dependent partnerships with leaders of the type discussed here.

5. Deep Learning

Sustainability by our definition requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising. As Heifetz (2003) says, adaptive work “demands learning,” “demands experimentation,” and “difficult conversations.” “Species evolve whereas cultures learn”, says Heifetz (p. 75).

There are three big requirements for the data driven society: drive out fear; set up a system of transparent data-gathering coupled with mechanisms for acting on the data; make sure all levels of the system are expected to learn from their experiences.

One of W.E. Deming's (1986) prescriptions for success was 'Drive out Fear'. In the Education Epidemic, David Hargreaves argues:

Government must give active permission to schools to innovate and provide a climate in which failure can be given a different meaning as a necessary element in making progress, as is the case in the business world ... mistakes can be accepted or even encouraged, provided that they are a means of improvement. [p. 36]

Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) in the Knowing-Doing Gap devote a whole chapter to 'When Fear Prevents Acting on Knowledge':

In organisation after organisation that failed to translate knowledge into action, we saw a pervasive atmosphere of fear and distrust. [p. 109]

Significantly, Pfeffer and Sutton identify two other “pernicious effects.” One is that “fear causes a focus on the short run [driving] out consideration of the longer run” (pp. 124-125). The other problem is that “fear creates a focus on the individual rather than the collective (p. 126). In a punitive culture, if I can blame others, or others make a mistake, I am better off. Need I say that both the focus on the short run, and excessive individualism are fateful for sustainability?

Second, capacities and means of acting on the data are critical for learning. Thus, “assessment for learning” has become a powerful, high yield tool for school improvement and student learning (see Black, et al, 2003). Critical aspects of the move toward more effective data use include: (i) avoiding excessive assessment demands (Miliband talks about reducing necessary paper and information burden which distract schools from their core business); (ii) ensure that a range of data are collected — qualitative as well as quantitative. In Leading in a Culture of Change (Chapter 4, Knowledge Building), I site several examples including the US Army’s After Action Reviews which have three standardized questions: What was supposed to happen? What happened? And what accounts for the differences? This kind of learning is directed to the future, i.e., to sustainable improvements.

Deep learning means collaborative cultures of inquiry which alter the culture of learning in the organisation away from dysfunctional and non-relationships toward the daily development of culture that can solve difficult or adaptive problems (see especially Kegan & Lahey, 2001, and Perkins, 2003). The “curriculum” for doing this is contained in Kegan & Lahey’s seven languages for transformation (e.g., from the language of complaint to the language of commitment), and in Perkins’ developmental leadership which represents “progressive interaction” which evokes the exchange of good ideas, and fosters the cohesiveness of the group. These new ways of working involve deep changes in the culture of most organisations, and thus the training and development must be sophisticated and intense. Perkins’ emphasizes how difficult this is going to be. He makes the case that “regressive interaction” (poor knowledge exchange, and weak social cohesion) is more likely

to occur because it is easier than trying to create the more complex progressive cultures. Be that as it may, the solution is to develop more and more leaders who can help shape school system cultures in these directions.

6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results

Like most aspects of sustainability, things that look like they are mutually exclusive have to be brought together. It's a pipedream to argue only for the long-term goal of organisations or society, because the shareholders and the public won't let you get away with it, nor should they. The new reality is that governments and organisations have to show progress in relation to priorities in the short as well as long term. Our knowledge base is such that there is no excuse for failing to design and implement strategies that get short-term results.

Of course, short-term progress can be accomplished at the expense of the mid to long-term (win the battle, lose the war), but they don't have to be. What I am advocating in that organisations set targets and take action to obtain early results, intervene in situations of terrible performance, all the while investing in the eight sustainability capacity-building elements described in this article. Over time, the system gets stronger and fewer severe problems occur as they are pre-empted by corrective action sooner rather than later.

Shorter term results are also necessary to build trust with the public or shareholders for longer term investments. Michael Barber (2004) argues that it is necessary to:

Create the virtuous circle where public education delivers results, the public gains confidence and is therefore willing to invest through taxation and, as a consequence, the system is able to improve further. It is for this reason that the long-term strategy requires short-term results.

7. Cyclical energising

Sustain comes from the Latin word, sustineo which means 'to keep up', but this is misleading. Sustainability on the contrary is not linear. It is cyclical for two fundamental reasons. One has to do with energy, and the other with periodic plateaus where additional

time and ingenuity are required for the next adaptive breakthrough. Loehr and Schwartz's (2003) 'power of full engagement' argue that 'energy, not time' is the fundamental currency of high performance. They base their work on four principles:

Principle 1: Full engagement requires four separate but related sources of energy: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual; [p. 9]

Principle 2: Because energy capacity diminishes both with overuse and with underuse, we must balance energy expenditure with intermittent energy renewal; [p. 11]

Principle 3: To build capacity, we must push beyond our normal limits, training in the same systematic way that elite athletes do; [p. 13]

Principle 4: Positive energy rituals — highly specific routines for managing energy — are key to full engagement and sustained high performance. [p. 14]

If we want sustainability we need to keep an eye on energy levels (overuse and underuse). Positive collaborative cultures will help because (a) they push for greater accomplishments, and (b) they avoid the debilitating effects of negative cultures. It is not hard work that tires us out, as much as it is negative work. In any case, we need combinations of full engagement with colleagues, along with less intensive activities which are associated with replenishment.

There is another reason why sustainability is cyclical. In many cases we have seen achievement in literacy and mathematics improve over a five-year period, only to plateau or level off. It may be related to burnout, but this is not likely the main explanation. People are still putting in a lot of energy to maintain the same higher level performance represented by the new plateau. If people were burning out, performance would likely decline.

A more likely explanation is that the set of strategies that brought initial success are not the ones — not powerful enough — to take us to higher levels. In these cases, we would expect the best learning organisations to investigate, learn, experiment, and develop better solutions. This takes time. (Incidentally, with the right kind of intelligent accountability we

would know whether organisations are engaged in quality problem-solving processes even if their short-term outcomes are not showing increases.)

While this new adaptive work is going on we would not expect achievement scores to rise in a linear fashion, and any external assessment scheme that demanded ‘annual yearly progress’ would be barking up the wrong tree.

Cyclical energizing is a powerful new idea. While we don’t yet have the precision to know what cyclical energizing looks like in detail, but the concept needs to be a fundamental element of our sustainability strategizing.

8. The long lever of leadership

First, if a system is to be mobilized in the direction of sustainability, leadership at all levels must be the primary engine. Second, the main work of leaders is to help put into place the previous seven elements — all seven simultaneously feeding on each other. To do this we need a system laced with leaders who are trained to think in bigger terms and to act in ways that affect larger parts of the system as a whole— the new theoreticians. In my upcoming book there are many examples of the kind of leadership development we need at the school, district and system levels to produce more of the leadership we are talking about here (Fullan, in press).

Implications

The purpose of this article is not to provide just an analysis of the problem. It is to challenge us to develop strategies, training, experiences and day-to-day actions within the culture of the organisation whose intent would be to generate more and more leaders who could think and act with the bigger picture in mind thereby changing the context within which people work in order to go beyond individual and team learning to organisational learning and system change. This, it seems to me, is the key to better organisational performance and to enhancing the conditions for sustainability.

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