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Reshaping School Leadership

Leadership for the 21st Century: Breaking the Bonds of Dependency

Michael Fullan

Overload and vulnerability make it difficult for reform-minded principals to think outside the box. But a new mindset and four guidelines for action can help them truly lead.

> Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts (75 nights a year out). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency.[1]

The job of the principal or any educational leader has become increasingly complex and constrained. Principals find themselves locked in with less and less room to maneuver. They have become more and more dependent on context. At the very time that proactive leadership is essential, principals are in the least favorable position to provide it. They need a new mindset and guidelines for action to break through the bonds of dependency that have entrapped those who want to make a difference in their schools.

The Context for Dependency

Dependency is created by two interrelated conditions: overload and corresponding vulnerability to packaged solutions. First, the system fosters dependency on the part of principals. The role of principals in implementing innovations more often than not consists of being on the receiving end of externally initiated changes. The constant bombardment of new tasks and the continual interruptions keep principals off balance. Not only are the demands fragmented and incoherent, but even good ideas have a short shelf life as initiatives are dropped in favor of the latest new policy. Overload in the form of a barrage of disjointed demands fosters dependency.

These demands have recently taken on an even more intrusive quality as school boundaries become more permeable and transparent. In the third book in our trilogy, *What's Worth Fighting For Out There*, Andy Hargreaves and I document how very different the school environment is today compared to even five years ago (1998; see also Fullan 1997 and Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). The walls of the school have come tumbling down, metaphorically speaking. "Out there" is now "in here" as government policy, parent and community demands, corporate interests, and ubiquitous technology have all stormed the walls of the school. The relentless pressures of today's complex environments have intensified overload.

The situation just described makes principals and other leaders especially vulnerable to the latest recipe for success—the second aspect of dependency. Providers of management theories and strategies are only too happy to oblige the demand for instant solutions. Management techniques, like

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so many fads, have a terrible track record. Part of the problem lies in the nature of the advice. As Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) say about the "guru business": "it is constitutionally incapable of self-criticism; its terminology usually confuses rather than educates; it rarely rises above basic common sense; and it is faddish and bedeviled by contradictions" (p. 12).

Where does that leave the modern boss? ask Micklethwait and Wooldridge:

> The simple answer is, overworked. He [or she] faces a far more complex challenge than his [or her] predecessors: today's boss is expected to give power away while keeping some form of control, and to tap the creative talents of . . . employees while creating a common culture within the company (p. 172).

The most serious problem, however, is not that the advice is wrong, but that there is no answer out there. Mintzberg (1994), who wrote the definitive critique, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, observes only half-facetiously, "Never adopt a [management] technique by its usual name" (p. 27). Farson (1997), the author of *Management of the Absurd*, advises, "Once you find a management technique that works, give it up" (p. 35). These authors drew these odd conclusions because they wanted to stress that there is no external answer that will substitute for the complex work of changing one's own situation.

Contrary to what management books would have us believe, organizations did not become effective by directly following their advice. Evans (1996) notes:

> It is one thing to say in most successful organizations members share a clear, common vision, which is true, but quite another to suggest that this stems primarily from direct vision-building, which is not. Vision-building is the result of a whole range of activities (pp. 208-209).

Educators and business leaders have wasted precious time and resources looking for external solutions. Times of uncertainty and relentless pressure prompt an understandable tendency to want to know what to do. The first insight is that there is no definitive answer to the "how" question. Take, for example, the very clear research finding that student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative work cultures that foster a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continuously on improving instructional practices in light of student performance data, and link to external standards and staff development support (Newmann and Wehlage 1995). To know and believe this does not tell educators *how* to change their own situation to produce greater collaboration. They can get ideas, directions, insights, but they can never know exactly how to go about it because such a path is exceedingly complex, and it changes as they work with their organization's unique personalities and cultural conditions.

Realizing that there is no answer, that we will never arrive in any formal sense, can be quite liberating. Instead of hoping that the latest technique will at last provide the answer, we approach the situation differently. Leaders for change get involved as learners in real reform situations. They craft their own theories of change, consistently testing them against new situations. They become critical consumers of management theories, able to sort out promising ideas from empty ones. They become less vulnerable to and less dependent on external answers. They stop looking for solutions in the wrong places.

Giving up the futile search for the silver bullet is the basic precondition for overcoming dependency and for beginning to take actions that do matter. It frees educational leaders to gain truly new insights that can inform and guide their actions toward greater success, mobilizing resources for teaching and learning with children as the beneficiaries. We formulated four such novel guidelines in *What's Worth Fighting For Out There* (1998):

1. Respect those you want to silence.
2. Move toward the danger in forming new alliances.
3. Manage emotionally as well as rationally.
4. Fight for lost causes.

Respect Those You Want to Silence

Reform often misfires because we fail to learn from those who disagree with us. "Resistance" to a new initiative can actually be highly instructive. Conflict and differences can make a constructive contribution in dealing with complex problems. As Maurer (1996) observes:

> Often those who resist have something important to tell us. People resist for what they view as good reasons. They may see alternatives we never dreamed of. They may understand problems about the minutiae of implementation that we never see from our lofty perch atop Mount Olympus (p. 49).

Thus, for example, it is a mistake for principals to go only with like-minded innovators. Elmore (1995) puts it this way: "Small groups of self-selected reformers apparently seldom influence their peers" (p. 20). They just create an even greater gap between themselves and others that eventually becomes impossible to bridge. In turbulent times the key task of leadership is not to arrive at early consensus, but to create opportunities for learning from dissonance. Mobilizing people to tackle tough problems is the key skill needed these days: "Instead of looking for saviors we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple painless solutions— problems that require us to learn in new ways" (Heifitz 1994, p. 2).

Move Toward the Danger in Forming New Alliances

I have said that the boundaries of the school have been permanently penetrated. I also conclude that this is a good and necessary development because school reform cannot succeed without community reform. Healthy neighborhoods and healthy schools go hand in hand (Schorr 1997), and school-community relationships are key. The problem is, What do you do if you do not have a strong relationship with the community? Here leaders have to do the opposite of what they feel like doing. Instead of withdrawing and putting up barricades, they must "move toward the danger." Today's environment is dangerous, but it is also laced with opportunities:

> In a school, where mistrust between the community and the administration is the major issue, you must begin to deal with it by making sure that parents are present at every major event, every meeting, every challenge. *Within the discomfort of that presence* the learning and healing could begin (Dolan 1994, p. 60, emphasis added).

The same is true with other dimensions of the new environment. For example, educational leaders must directly address state policy that results in student performance data being generated and published. The way to deal with potential misuses of student performance data is to become assessment-literate. Schools put themselves in the driver's seat when they invest in professional development and collaborative cultures that focus on student learning and associated improvements in instructional practices.

In all cases, the new leadership requires principals to take their school's accountability to the public. Successful schools are not only collaborative internally, but they also have the confidence, capacity, and political wisdom to reach out, constantly forming new alliances.

Manage Emotionally as Well as Rationally

Leaders moving their staff toward external dangers in a world of diversity cannot invite disagreement without attending to their own emotional health.

As Maurer (1996) says, "Dealing with resistance can be very stressful. People attack you and your precious ideas. Sometimes they seem to show no respect for you" (p. 59). Someone will always be dissatisfied with the leader's performance. Relaxation exercises, physical fitness, recalling a higher purpose, teaming up with a supportive peer, separating self from role, and ignoring the temptation to get even are some of the remedies Maurer suggests.

The emotionally intelligent leader also helps teachers, students, parents, and others create an environment of support, one in which people see problems not as weaknesses but as issues to be solved. Managing emotionally means putting a high priority on *reculturing*, not merely *restructuring*. Restructuring refers to changes in the formal structure of schooling in terms of organization, timetables, roles, and the like. Restructuring bears no direct relationship to improvements in teaching and learning. Reculturing, by contrast, involves changing the norms, values, incentives, skills, and relationships in the organization to foster a different way of working together. Reculturing makes a difference in teaching and learning.

Reculturing, because it is based on relationships, requires strong emotional involvement from principals and others. It also pays emotional dividends. It contributes to personal and collective resilience in the face of change. It helps people persist as they encounter the implementation dip when things go wrong. Principals who manage emotionally as well as rationally have a strong task focus, expect anxiety to be endemic in school reform, but invest in structures and norms that help contain anxiety. Collaborative cultures promote support, but they also elevate expectations.

Fight for Lost Causes (Be Hopeful When It Counts)

In *What's Worth Fighting For Out There* Andy Hargreaves and I carefully examine the fascinating concept of "hope." It turns out that the best definition of *hope* is "unwarranted optimism." Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, captures this best:

> Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless (1993, p. 68).

Principals with hope are much less likely to succumb to the daily stresses of the job. They place their problems in a loftier perspective that enables them to rebound from bad days. Once leaders realize that having hope is not a prediction, that it is independent of knowing how things might turn out, it becomes a deeper resource. Leaders with hope are less likely to panic when faced with immediate and pressing problems.

It is especially important that leaders have and display hope, that they show they are prepared to fight for lost causes, because they set the tone for so many others. Teachers are desperate for lifelines of hope. They understand that hope is not a promise, but they need to be reminded that they are connected to a larger purpose and to others who are struggling to make progress. Articulating and discussing hope when the going gets rough re-energizes teachers, reduces stress, and can point to

new directions. Principals will be much more effective (and healthier) if they develop and pursue high hopes as they reculture their schools and their relationships to the outside.

Scale Up

As we approach the next century, the big question preoccupying policymakers and others is how to scale up. We have witnessed pockets of innovation, but little that could be characterized as large-scale patterns of success. The main problem, I would say, is not the spread of good ideas. Making reform widespread is related to replicating the *conditions* of successful change, not to transferring products (Healey and DeStefano 1997). These conditions involve scores of principals and other educational leaders breaking the bonds of dependency that the current system fosters. The societal context for educational reform has radically changed. To be successful, future leaders of the school, district, or other levels will require very different characteristics than those expected of leaders in the last decade.

Dependency is a function of insecurity, which can never be resolved under conditions of uncertainty. The education leader of the 21st century, paradoxically, will find greater peace of mind by looking for answers close at hand and reaching out, knowing that there is no clear solution.

"Life is a path you beat while you walk it," wrote the poet Antonio Machado, and DeGues (1997) calls this line of poetry "the most profound lesson in planning and strategy that I have ever learned." Breaking the bonds of dependency involves grasping this basic truth: "It is the walking that beats the path. It is not the path that makes the walk" (p. 155).

Endnote

[1] Evans, R. (April 12, 1995). "Getting Real About Leadership." *Education Week*. 14, 29: 36.

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Michael Fullan is Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 1V6.

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