

**Partners in Learning
Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity
Leadership for Change Library**

Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action

Michael Fullan

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press; Toronto, Canada: Ontario Principals' Council, 2003

136 pages

Leadership at all levels of the system is necessary to successfully facilitate large-scale and sustainable reform. Fullan defines sustainability as "the capacity of the system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose." He identifies leadership (not leaders) as the key to creating sustainability, to stretching boundaries in a new change revolution.

The challenge clearly articulated by Fullan is to create "system thinkers in action" at all levels of the system, who proactively work with large parts of the system in pushing for reform. He calls these leaders the *new theoreticians*, doers with big minds, who relentlessly translate sound theory into practice during their daily interactions. He links every abstract concept with a concrete example of what it looks like in practice.

Within a context of increased accountability and higher expectations for school systems, Fullan examines how we can pursue a dual strategy that pays attention to long-term sustainability, without sacrificing short-term results.

The first chapters of the book furnish examples of large-scale reform that have been considered successful. Fullan then methodically presents reasons why progress has been neither deep nor sustainable. He writes about the emerging nature of what sustainability is and the strategies that constitute and promote it.

Fullan identifies eight correlated strategies for sustainability:

1. Public service with a moral purpose

The whole system needs to be committed to three aspects of moral purpose: (1) raising the bar and closing the gap of student learning, (2) treating people with demanding respect, and (3) altering the social environment for the better.

2. Commitment to changing context at all levels

Changing the system means changing the entire context within which people work. Contexts are the structures and cultures within which one works. In the case of educators, the tri-level contexts are school/community, district, and system.

3. Lateral capacity building through networks

Lateral capacity across schools involves principals and teachers collaborating with other schools to learn from and contribute to school improvement, not only in individual schools, but also in the district as a whole.

4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships

Intelligent accountability combines self-evaluation and outside evaluation. Vertical relationships involve using information provided by a school's self-evaluation and development alongside focused external accountability to inform outcomes about targeting support, resources, and challenges (too much intrusion demotivates people; too little permits drift, or worse).

cont'd ...

Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action

Michael Fullan

5. Deep learning

Three requirements for deep learning are: drive out fear, set up a system of transparent data gathering coupled with mechanisms for acting on the data and, make sure all levels of the system are learning from their experiences.

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

Set aspirational targets, take action to obtain early results, and intervene in situations of terrible performance, all the while investing in the eight sustainability, capacity building elements.

7. Cyclical energizing

Managing energy is the task in the new system. People need times of full engagement with colleagues, coupled with rituals or periodic breaks for energy replenishment.

8. The long lever of leadership

If a system is to be mobilized in the direction of sustainability, leadership at all levels must be the primary engine.

Leadership and Sustainability expands on the meaning of each element throughout the chapters of the book. The context for his writing is education, but the case is made that the same strategies can be applied to any public service or corporate institution. The book integrates thoughts from research studies, other writers, and reform cases around the world.

Throughout the remaining chapters of the book, Fullan's attention is turned to examining the kind of leadership that is needed for sustainability. A critical mass of leaders is needed at all levels of the system for lasting change to occur. This critical mass of leaders must understand what we have learned about sustainable change, and they need to be committed to practicing the eight elements of sustainability.

Fullan describes the new work of leaders and how it needs to play out at the school, district and system levels to ensure the sustainability of reform initiatives. He presents valuable lessons learned from research literature and reform efforts at each of the three levels. He provides specific practical guidelines for school/community leaders, district leaders, and system leaders.

The book concludes that the breakthroughs he describes are very hard to do and presents a range of reasons why this is the case. *Leadership and Sustainability* presents a framework for success and gives plenty of ideas for today's system thinkers in action who in numbers can change the system by engaging others in tri-level reforms at the school/community, regional and state levels.

