Leadership and sustainability
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Principal Leadership; Dec 2002; 3, 4; ProQuest Central
pg. 14

Safe Haven

Leadership *and* Sustainability

What *standards* were to the 1990s, *leadership* is to the future. This shift depicts awareness that standards strategies by themselves are not powerful enough to accomplish large-scale, sustainable reform.

By Michael Fullan

System transformation of the type educators now aspire to cannot be accomplished without first ensuring solid leadership at all levels of the system. Establishing the high-quality leadership that will facilitate reform is difficult because we are starting in a hole: we are losing scores of talented people as demographics shift and early retirements mount. These changes, of course, also provide an opportunity for new leaders to emerge, but the turnover is so high that we need to devote massive attention to the leadership "problem."

Fortunately, significant conceptual and empirical work is underway as educators and researchers seek to understand leadership under dynamically complex conditions.

The New Nature of Leadership

In the 1990s, we learned how to improve literacy and

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numeracy at the elementary level where the principal is the key player in leading reform and improving student performance. Some school districts have embraced the development and support of the school principal as instructional leader (Fink & Resnick, 2001), but despite these good beginnings, the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the weight of the reforms that we need for the future. We need, instead, leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself.

When I compared leaders from successful educational organizations with those from successful businesses, I found similar traits between the two groups. School leaders have an edge on moral purpose (but only an edge), and business leaders have an advantage in developing and sharing knowledge and setting expectations for excellence. But these are differences of degree. Essentially, leaders across all organizations shared a core of action-and-mind sets.

Leaders in effective organizations have a constellation of characteristics that I identified as hope (unwarranted optimism), enthusiasm, and energy. It is not necessary to be born with these qualities; a leader's vitality can be sapped or enhanced by the conditions under which he or she works or lives. Successful leaders tend to engage others with their energy and are, in turn, energized by the activities and accomplishments of the group.

I identified five action-and-mind sets that effective leaders combine: a strong sense of moral purpose, an understanding of the dynamics of change, an emotional intelligence as they build relationships, a commitment to developing and sharing new knowledge, and a capacity for coherence making (enough coherence on the edge of chaos to still be creative).

Although many valuable studies of leadership have been conducted, the leadership we are talking about is so complex that it is necessary to explore its nature beyond the work that has been done to this point. Dan Goleman's work on emotional intelligence in leaders and organizations furthers understanding of relationship building (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). Goleman and his colleagues talk about the importance of "resonant" leaders who, because of their emotional intelligence, develop relationships that are "in-sync" with and among those in their organizations, forming "an emotional bond that helps them stay focused even amid profound change and uncertainty" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 21).

Goleman consolidates his work on emotional intelligence into four primary domains—two under personal competence and two under social competence:

Personal competence

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

Social competence

- Social awareness
- Relationship management. (p. 39)

In total, there are 18 specific competences that cut across the four domains. Goleman and his colleagues emphasize that these competencies are not innate but are learned abilities. In essence, he found that emotionally intelligent people and leaders live better and more effectively in complex times. I won't say that they live more peacefully, but that they can handle more uncertainty—and conflict—and are better at working through complex issues in ways that energize rather than deplete the commitment of organizational members.

Of specific interest is research that draws on the database of Hay McBer and Company (now the Hay Group). The database comprises information from a sample of 3,871 executives from Europe, North America, Africa, Australia, and the Pacific Rim (Goleman et al., 2002). The database contains information on leadership style and its effect on the organizational climate and financial and related performance of the company. The data reveal six leadership styles:

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visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and commanding.

To oversimplify somewhat, Goleman et al., found first that four of the styles (visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic) were associated more with a positive effect on climate and performance than the others; second, that leaders had to be good at all four styles, drawing on them as needed according to personalities and situations—to be only visionary, only affiliative, and so on is a liability—and third, that pacesetting (try to keep up with me) and commanding (do as I say) leaders might have a short-term positive impact under certain conditions, but they fail sooner rather than later because they demotivate people—they do not develop capacity and commitment.

Under the right conditions, improving emotional intelligence of the individual leader and the group can be done and must be done to accomplish sustainable reform. This is reculturing of the highest order.

A study by the Hay Group compared the leadership characteristics of 100 highly successful leaders in business with 100 highly successful headteachers. The research revealed that both sets of leaders had a lot in common: "Headteachers perform well, both in comparison to their counterparts in private business and against the expectations of staff" (Hay Management Consultants, 2000, p. 3). From this study, the Hay Group identified five characteristics of effectiveness: teamwork and developing others; drive and confidence; vision and accountability; influencing tactics and politics; and thinking styles (i.e., the big picture).

The Teamwork Challenge

The one area that was most difficult to carry out for both business and education leaders was developing and sustaining teamwork. Richard Hackman (2002) studied teams across airline crews, symphony orchestras, and multiple business organizations and concluded that not only must the leader be enormously sophisticated about team development, but also certain conditions must be in place for effectiveness to transpire.

"Effective work teams," Hackman (2002) says, "operate in ways that build shared commitment, collective skills, and task-appropriate coordination strategies—not mutual antagonisms and trails of failure from which little is learned" (p. 28). He then delves into the five conditions that he and his colleagues found were required for teams to be effective over time:

> The likelihood of effectiveness is increased when a team:
> - Is a *real team* rather than a team in name only
> - Has a *compelling direction* for its work
> - Has an *enabling structure* that facilitates rather than impedes teamwork
> - Operates within a *supportive organizational context*
> - Has available ample *expert coaching* in teamwork. (Hackman, 2002, p. 31, emphasis in original)

Team composition is also complicated. Hackman advises principals to avoid "the more the better" fallacy, not assume that homogeneity (people getting along) is always best, and not assume that individual and group skills will evolve on their own. As a rule of thumb, Hackman suggests that groups contain no more than six members. Hackman's main conclusion is fundamental to understanding the new leaders' responsibilities:

> Both practicing managers and writers about management commonly view the actions of leaders as "causes" and the response of teams as "effect." In cause-effect models, particular leader behaviors and styles are viewed as strongly determining team behavior and performance. By contrast, I view the main responsibility of leaders as creating and maintaining the five conditions that increase the chances that a team will, over time, become increasingly effective in carrying out its work. (Hackman, 2002, p. 31)

The Spiritual Domain

One final set of attributes cuts across effective leaders and allows them to keep going. All of the indepth studies of leaders found a small number of personal characteristics that were akin to the spiritual (Webster's definition is "a life giving force") and that gave leaders meaning in life—as Charles Handy (2002) observes: "A worthwhile life...requires you to have a purpose beyond yourself" (p. 126).

Different labels were used in the various studies, but they all refer to this spiritual domain. Badaracco (2002) describes it as the three quiet virtues of restraint, modesty, and tenacity. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) refer to the three virtues of a "sacred heart": innocence, curiosity, and compassion (and how to avoid losing heart into "cynicism, arrogance, and callousness"). Hackman (2002) placed emotional maturity and courage alongside knowledge and know-how. And the 11 leaders in Jim Collins' (2001) *Good to Great* built enduring greatness "through a paradoxical blend of extreme personal humility and intense professional will" (p. 20).

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? In complexity theory, the answer is both. You need great conditions to develop the kind of leaders we have been talking about, and you need great leaders to develop the conditions that will produce great leaders.

I am not going to review the state of leadership initiatives now underway. Because leadership is *the* strategy of the decade, there are countless research and development activities underway (For an excellent analysis of the state of leadership in North American see Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach [n.d.]; for England, see Earley, Evans, Collarbone, Gold, and Halpin [2002]). Instead, I suggest five interrelated themes that have simultaneous cause and effect properties—that is, in combination they create conditions that enhance the chances of sustainability.

The themes are opportunity and depth of learning, policies for individual development, learning in context and sys-

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temness, leadership succession and leaders at many levels, and improving the teaching profession. The good news is that the characteristics of effective leaders are accessible to most of us; they do not involve heroics, charisma, or saint-like virtues. Under the right conditions, they can be learned. The difficult news is that it is going to require hard work over many years to simultaneously develop leaders and alter conditions.

Opportunity and depth of learning. We need to design and invest in many opportunities for people to learn to lead. The other themes cover some of the specific areas this entails: standards and individual development, mentoring and expert coaching, learning in and changing context, and so on. It takes a long time—perhaps 10 years of purposeful, day-to-day learning on and off the job—to become proficient enough to keep on learning and leading. The education system does not have this now.

Policies for individual development. Standards for what educational leaders need to know and be able to do and opportunities for working on these capacities are clearly needed. The National College of School Leadership in England focuses on the conceptions and skills of school leaders and is a strong example, as are the standards summarized by Earley et al. (2002); and Leithwood et al. (n.d.).

Learning in context and "systemness." Work on individual standards-based development will amount to naught without the opportunity to learn in and help change contexts. For one thing, people need to practice in the trenches with expert mentors and coaches. For another, even if they learn as individuals, they won't be influential if the context doesn't change. Never send a changed individual into an unchanged environment.

We also need policies and practices that are directed at changing the conditions under which leaders learn (see Fullan, in press). Learning with other leaders inside and outside the school is part of this. Although they are valuable, learning collaboratives that bring people together across schools and districts are insufficient because they do not necessarily meet the systemness criterion—policies and strategies aimed at altering the culture of a school or a district. We must work directly with schools and use school districts as local-system organizers to create new organizations that teach students more effectively precisely *because* they provide better environments for teacher leaders and school leaders to develop. All the way up and down the line, we are talking about increasing system capacity—the capacity of the district to work with schools and the capacity of the state to work with districts and schools.

Leadership succession and leaders at many levels. Succession planning needs attention at all levels. There is no more-neglected topic in research, policy, or practice. Researchers should investigate the optimum conditions for successful succession as much as we focus on new leaders and startups. We should be selecting leaders in terms of their capacity to create the conditions under which other leaders will flourish, leaving a continuing effect beyond their term. In this sense, the main mark of successful leaders is not their effect on the bottom line—of profit or student achievement—in the short run, but rather how many effective leaders there are in the organization at the end of their tenures. As Collins (2001) found in his study, good-to-great leaders "channel ambition into the company, not the self; [and set] up successor[s] for even greater success in the next generation" (p. 36).

Improving the teaching profession. Finally, and this brings us full circle, leaders need to help cause improvement in working conditions and development of the teaching profession because this is how great leadership is ensured for the future. We will only get quality principals in the numbers we need if we have quality teachers in numbers, because it is from teacher ranks that future leadership derives—a vicious circle. In sum, we are at the beginning of a period in which leadership development is the primary strategy for large-scale, sustainable reform. It should be an exciting decade. **PL**

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