

A combination review of
The Moral Imperative of School Leadership
and
Leadership and Sustainability
by Michael Fullan
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Corwin (New York, 2003 and 2005)
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Rating: 10

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Discarding anything lower than 6 produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

Michael Fullan gets it. Of course, what that really means is this: he sees things essentially the same way I do. *His* getting it, however, carries more weight than *mine* does because of the positions he occupies – formally, as a chief policy-maker for public education in Ontario, and informally, as a formidable presence on the contemporary education reform lecture circuit. While he focuses on public education, I believe his arguments transfer well to nonprofit and even for-profit organizations. And while in these books he writes largely about school principals, clearly the arguments hold at the district level as well.

Fullan writes clearly about the need for the school principals to take the moral high ground.

“Let’s be explicit. The only goal worth talking about is transforming the current school system so that large-scale, sustainable, continuous reform becomes built in. Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society. The role strategically placed to best accomplish this in the principalship – not the current one but the one envisaged in this book”

Thus the moral case calls for continuous improvement of outcomes across the board. Not periodic upheavals based on the latest doomsday report, but continuous improvement so that the schools prepare the students for life-after-high-school, whatever that may entail in the future.

Further, this improvement cannot depend solely on the current incumbent in a specific role.

“It should be clear that when I talk about leadership development I am not talking just about the principalship. The pipeline of leadership is crucial. You cannot have highly effective principals unless there is distributive leadership throughout the school. ... It is not turnover of leadership *per se* that is the culprit; rather, it is whether there is any attention to continuity of direction.”

Organizations cannot deliver better and better results when each change of leadership brings a new agenda and new priorities – especially after a hiatus of who-knows-how-long while the search for a new person takes place.

And it will not do for individual *schools* to improve – all the schools within the *district* must improve.

“Basically this means that individual school principals must be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in their district as they are about their own.”

One superintendent told me that is just what drew her to the superintendency – the recognition that while her kids did well at *her* school, when they left her building she was not satisfied with what happened to her kids at the *next* building. And they were *her* kids.

Fullan suggests that we do *not* need more research, we do *not* need to throw up our hands and cry “Alas, what shall we do?” We *know* what to do – the problem centers on actually *doing* it.

“Education and the public service more broadly do not suffer from too few innovations, but rather from too many ad hoc, unconnected, superficial innovations.”

R. B. Perry suggested that education depends on *inheritance*, *participation*, and *contribution* – learning from the past, involvement right now, and leaving things better for the future. John Warfield added one item to Perry’s list, based on the increasing amount of specialization: *integration*. We need to take all these good ideas, integrate them in a demonstrably useful way and get moving!

We must also attend prudently to both short-term and long-term goals. Too often, the long-term is forsaken.

“The lesson from our districts is that some reorganization of roles is necessary so that there is a laser-like focus on teaching and learning, building professional learning communities and partnerships, and especially, so that the normal ‘distractors’ – managerial issues, crises, and so on – are handled in a way that do not take school and system leaders constantly away from the focus on students and learning.”

And does the ‘tyranny of the urgent’ afflict only schools? Do other organizations also have a predominantly fire-fighting mentality? Does this phenomenon apply only at this scale? No, Yes, and No. Here’s what another thoughtful person wrote:

“Muddling through is a euphemism for failing to plan forward. It means acting tactically and without a strategy; it means confusing the means with the end. ... If we continue to avoid facing the facts ... the epitaph on the grave of our democracy will be ‘They sacrificed the long-term for the short-term, and the long-term finally arrived.’”

Sir James Goldsmith makes the point quite well: we have to look to the whole and to the parts, to the present and the future. Leaders especially must address the paradox of these challenges and we must help them. And ‘we’ means all of those with a stake in the outcome, whether we talk about public education or the state of our democracy.