

**UPDATED**



**LEADERSHIP  
IN A DIGITAL AGE**

*By Michael Fullan*

*The William Walker Oration*

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# Leadership in a Digital Age

## By Michael Fullan

It is a great honor to present the William Walker oration to such a large diverse audience. One of the challenges of giving the final keynote speech of the conference is that so many great ideas have been generated throughout the last few days. We started with 'commitment and courage in leadership', and have added two key Cs: 'compassion' and 'compulsion (to act)'. All four Cs are essential. Commitment and courage are based on the moral imperative of raising the bar and closing the gap for all children. Compassion is deep empathy for all those for whom we work and care. Empathy does not mean that you agree with everything about other people but rather that you understand their situation and where they are coming from. Finally, because in our own work we are so committed to getting things done — we go from practice to theory — I was especially impressed with how leaders who were highlighted in this conference were men and women of unstoppable action. This stance was evident in the first presentation of the conference by Mark Donaldson. Here was a man who ran out into a hail of gun and rocket fire to rescue a wounded Afghan interpreter, lying wounded in the open terrain, later receiving the Victoria Cross for bravery (Donaldson, 2013). When asked why he did this against all odds, he said that at the time he never thought of it. A voice just told him he had to do it. In thinking about it later he said, 'You don't leave a team member behind'. He did not have a conscious reason. When the first three Cs well up in you — the fourth one, compulsion to act, is inevitable.

In this paper I will paint core ideas about leadership for action in two sections:

- What are the fundamentals of education leadership?
- What new challenges face us as we head toward 2016, and what leadership skills will be needed to address these challenges?

### Fundamental of Education Leadership

Here I integrate findings from three recent books. Note again that these ideas all arise from our work with lead practitioners. The three sources are: *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact* (Fullan, 2014); *Professional Capital* (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012); and *Coherence: Putting the Right Drivers in Action* (Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

### *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*

In 'The Principal' I took stock of the state of the principalship. What had been emerging was a strong emphasis on the 'instructional role' of the principal. However, this finding from good practice and research had been over interpreted. What was happening, especially in the U.S., was the principals were not being expected to observe (using checklists) and give feedback to teachers on a daily basis; while supervisors at the district level were appointed to ensure that principals were carrying out such a role. This development backfired as principals found there was not enough time in the week to carry out the role and further, that such actions, when carried out faithfully, alienated the relationship between teachers and principals.

What had been missed in the research on effective principals was subtle. I re-examined Vivianne Robinson's (2011) comprehensive research (that I review in the book) and re-discovered her main finding. Robinson found that effective principals worked with teachers to firm up 'goals and expectations', and that they were good at securing resources (time, money, materials). However, there was one finding that stood out as twice as powerful as any other factor in 'effect size'- principals who 'participated as learners' working with teachers to make improvements had twice the impact on school-wide student achievement compared to any other factor. This made sense: principals impact learning *through teachers*, that is they affect student learning indirectly but nonetheless explicitly by working with teachers individually and especially as a group.

Let me be clear about the importance and place of walk-throughs, classroom observations and the like. These practices are useful for the professional pedagogical development of principals, but they are not the way to run the schools. I then turned to how the school principal could maximize impact (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Three Keys for Maximizing Impact

The first big concept is *lead learner*. Principals who have the most impact on student learning work alongside teachers in figuring out and implementing what is needed to improve learning. They establish a culture where it is okay to try new things, where teachers learn from each other, and where specific goals are pursued explicitly in terms of best instructional practices that produce measurable impact on student learning. To use John Hattie's mantra they 'know their impact' because they do the things that cause greater impact (Hattie, 2015). These principals 'name, model and monitor' their role as lead learners. They created cultures and mechanisms for teachers to learn from each other. We have a 'sticky phrase' arising from this work: 'If you want to change the group use the group to change the group'.

Compare two beginning principals. Principal A helps teachers set goals and expectations, gets resources for the school but does not participate as a learner for the first five years of their career. Principal B establishes a supportive climate, indicates that he or she is a learner (and acts that way), and works alongside teachers to focus on pedagogy linked to results. He doesn't chair many meetings but participates, helping to mark progress, and so on. It is obvious that Principal A will not learn very much over the first five years of their career (five times nothing is nothing), whereas Principal B will get better and better at his or her lead learner role. Let us also pin down the critical short term and long-term value of being a 'lead learner'. Such leaders help develop a focused collaborative culture.

Put it this way, the main job of a lead learner is to work 5 - 7 years in developing a collaborative culture to the point where he or she *becomes dispensable*. More gets done in the short run because the group is working on the task. At the same time the junior members of the group are being trained as future leaders who can carry on after the initial leader departs. Short run impact and sustainability are enhanced as leaders leave a legacy of further collaboration that can go beyond what they have started.

We will return to the lead learner role when I talk about 'professional capital', but for now it becomes the backbone of the effective principal (and indeed, lead learner — participating as a learner with others to make progress — is a guideline for all leaders.)

A second new development in the role of principal is '*system player*'. Another of our recent sticky phrases is 'systemness'. System player is someone who carries out his or her own role effectively while being aware of, contributing to, and learning from the larger organization or system. This is a very concrete and powerful phenomenon. When a school moves from being an individualistic culture to a collaborative culture the following phenomenon happens every time; teachers stop thinking only about 'my kids my classroom', and instead think about all the children in the school. Similarly, when principals work together in a network of schools to accomplish something they come to value the progress of other schools in the network almost as much as their own school. These are concrete increments in 'systemness' and they are powerful. They bring commitment and resources to the common enterprise.

The third concept concerns 'change leadership skills'. Another sticky phrase is '*simplicity*'. Take a complex phenomenon, identify the smallest number of key components (the simple part), and make them gel in practice (the complex part). Take my simplicity definition of the change process. It has only two pieces: all effective change processes are a function of shaping and reshaping good ideas, as you build capacity and ownership in the group. Miss one of these — developing the idea, or increasing capacity and you have nothing. Let me give a concrete example from our practice. We were working in ACT, Australia a few years ago and in the first year we were in Canberra Secondary School. They had just introduced 'peer coaching' using a quality teacher framework. Three teachers had been trained in the use of the framework. Most of the teachers in the school told us that they did not want to participate (i.e. we don't want peers coming into our classroom, observing and telling us how to teach). We returned to this school three years later and all teachers were participating. Teaching had improved, students and teachers in the school were excited about what they were doing, and results were getting better.

At the end of the day when I was sitting with the Deputy Principal and I said that, "What I was observing was impressive". In year one, most teachers were against the change; now, three years later everyone was engaged even though it was the same group. I asked the Deputy this question: "Is participation in the peer coaching practice voluntary or mandatory?" Without hesitation he said, "It is voluntary but inevitable". This captures the skills of change leadership: work with good ideas and

develop competencies and ownership. The good process 'causes' the change: voluntary but inevitable.

On the matter of 'change agent skills' my colleague, Lyle Kirtman and I have published a book on 'the seven competencies of system leaders' (Kirtman and Fullan, 2015). I won't elaborate on them here, but essentially they combine good ideas and effective process.

In sum; effective leaders maximize their impact by becoming lead learners, system players, and skilled change agents. However, there is more; they need to grasp the meaning of 'professional capital'.

### **Professional Capital**

Andy Hargreaves and I (2012) made the case that the teaching profession has declined in many countries over the past decade because it fails to develop the 'professional capital' of its members. Professional capital has three components: human (the quality of the individual), social (the quality of the group), and decisional (the quality to make expert decisions based on evidence and judgment). Most policy makers start and stop with human capital: how to attract and cultivate more effective individual teachers, and leaders (such as school principals). This seems obvious and understandable but it has a blind eye: you can add *individuals* to systems until the cows come home but the existing culture will eat them up faster than you can treat them. For that reason we have tended to see social capital as the center of gravity for changing culture. Our own research and practice has shown that 'collaborative cultures' when focused and developed with quality have the most powerful effect on student learning. But let's turn to the work of Professor Leana Carrie (2011) of the Business Faculty of the University of Pittsburg. Leana has been studying social capital in schools for over a decade. She typically carries our three measures in samples of schools: human capital (based on the resumes of teachers), social capital (from responses to questions like, 'to what extent do you and other teachers on staff work collaboratively in a focused way to raise the bar and close the gap for all students in the school'), and year-long math achievement (more about decisional capital in a moment).

What Leana found was that: i) individual teachers with strong human capital got results, ii) by far the best overall math results came from schools with

high social capital, and iii) on the average teachers with lower human capital working in a school with high social capital also got better results with students on math achievement. Social capital develops the individual and individuals in turn develop the group. A virtual circle ensues where both get better in continuous interaction.

Hargreaves and I (2012) then observed that many examples of teacher collaboration were superficial, including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where administrators and teachers met but did not go very deeply into analysis and improvement. Any professional worth their salt, we said, must develop their decisional expertise — the capacity of individuals and groups to develop a culture of evidence that serves to guide their diagnoses and decisions.

In terms of leadership then, it is the job of school principals to help develop the professional capital of teachers. This is the essence of 'lead learner' that I talked about in the previous section.

### **Coherence**

Joanne Quinn and I (2016) have pulled this work together recently under the concept of 'coherence'. It is well known that education systems suffer from multiple initiatives, ad hoc and fragmented policies. We note that structural alignment might help but that the fundamental solution must involve 'coherence', which is a subjective phenomenon. More specifically coherence is 'the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work'. You can only get 'shared', 'deep', 'comprehension' in relation to improving learning for all students, by working together in a focused manner over time. Our fourfold 'Coherence Framework', is derived from working with schools and systems consisted of four interrelated components: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability.

In sum, the fundamentals of educational leadership consist of being a lead learner in micro change (one's school), and a player in system change (one's district and state). Such leaders influence student learning indirectly (through teachers), but nonetheless explicitly. One final point about lead learners: their job, to put it oddly, is to develop collaborative cultures for 5 - 7 years in their jurisdictions to the point that they become dispensable. In other words: they build leaders who can collectively make a

difference, while the junior leaders of the initial team become the next generation of leaders who can carry on with even better impact (because a lot has been learned). It does little good if so much depends on the incumbent leader that things deteriorate once the person leaves. Lead learners leave a legacy of future lead learners.

So, establishing the critical importance of what lead learners do is the first key point I want to make. The second matter is what new challenges face education as we head into 2016, and what specific leadership skills will be needed in this digital age.

### New Challenges and New Leadership

The new challenges for education, and hence for leadership come internal and external to the system. Internally traditional schooling is boring as you move up the grade levels. By the time students get to Year 9 not much more than a third of the students are engaged. And a school principal said, 'teachers were bored too but they just didn't know it as much'. On top of this, as I observed in the book, *Stratosphere: Integrating Technology, Pedagogy and Change Knowledge* there are three big forces currently underway: technology, pedagogy, and change knowledge (Fullan, 2013). Technology outstrips the others in dynamic movement; pedagogy (the expertise of teaching and learning) lags; and change knowledge (how to lead change) is in scarce supply. In any case traditional schooling is an outdated failure. Put another way, learning has left the building. The internal challenge is boredom; the external challenge is uncoordinated threat and opportunity. In the push-pull scenario something has to give. The solution consists of radically different learning possibilities that we call '*new pedagogies for deep learning*' ([www.npdl.global](http://www.npdl.global)). First, the criteria of the learning must combine five elements, namely learning scenarios that are:

1. Irresistibly engaging
2. Elegantly efficient and easy to access
3. Ubiquitous 24/7
4. Steeped in real life problem solving
5. Involve deep learning

To pursue this solution we have established a global invitational initiative that is based on the following framework: 10 clusters of approximately 100 schools each from 10 different countries who want to move in this direction (namely leave traditional schooling behind and move to a new solution). The guiding framework is NPDL. NP stands for a 'new learning

partnership between and among teachers, students and families', while DL refers to 'deep learning outcomes based on 6 Cs: character education, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking'. Seven countries have joined so far (Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Netherlands, Uruguay, and United States). Involving almost 700 schools, this initiative involves countries pursuing positive solutions where new pedagogy (learning partnerships) is the driver, deeper learning are the outcomes and technology or digital is the accelerator. By definition this involves unknown innovation territory. Such a movement is essential because traditional schooling no longer works.

From a change perspective we are entering innovative territory. Clayton Christensen (2000) refers to this phenomenon as 'disruptive technology'. Let's be clear on what Christensen said. He first observed that a given system continues as new forces threaten the status quo but he also said something crucial related to our purpose. He noted that the first 'new solutions' are inferior products (compared to the status quo). In other words; the early solutions are not yet proven and remain to be further developed. This is the stage we are at in NPDL: many promising solutions at the early stage of development. Thus our change model must be dynamic and consist of three phases: directional vision; letting go; and reigning in (see Figure Two). This is what we have now—a great deal of natural experimentation. We think this dynamic model is appropriate to the problem, which also means that leadership in this digital age must be more dynamic.

We can only report here what the new leadership looks like (i.e. the leadership that is appropriate to progress under these conditions). We are conducting

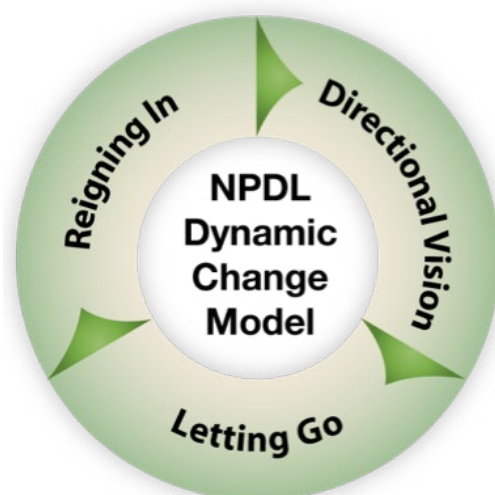


Figure Two: NPDL Dynamic Change Model

case studies on our NPDL schools as we go. The schools are at an early stage but some revealing ideas are emerging (see below).

### Leadership in a Digital Age

- A cycle of trying things and making meaning
- Co-learning dominates
- Leaders spend a lot of time listening, learning and asking questions
- Leaders help articulate what is happening, and how it relates to impact
- The role of tools is to provide focus and shape without suffocating context
- Ultimately, you need people to take charge of their own learning in a context of individual and collective efficacy

You see from the flow of these findings that 'participating as a learner' is at a premium when the nature of the innovation is yet to be developed. Leaders create the conditions for directional vision (ie, NPDL) and letting go. People know generally what they are seeking; a climate of innovation, non-judgmentalism, and risk taking is established. Teachers and students work in new discovery learning partnerships. They know they are in new territory. The leader's role is crucial as the process evolves. Broadly the sequence is: directional vision; trying things and making meaning; endorsing ubiquitous co-learning by all parties; leaders listen, learn and link; they probe and ask questions primarily to understand; they begin to articulate and test the accuracy of what they see happening; they push the link to impact (not so much for accountability, but for clarity relative to the causal pathway to student learning; and they seek new measures (for example on the 6Cs).

### Conclusion

As I said these are early stages of a massive innovative transformation in learning. There is much to be done including things that I haven't delved into, such as the role of parents and communities, and the re-design of learning spaces. Over the next three years NPDL as a collectivity will have important documentation and findings. Some of these features will include: the rise of students as agents of transforming *teachers' pedagogy*; organizations (school culture and structure) and indeed society — everyday schools engaged in this work — schools around the corner so to speak (this is for everyone); new measures appropriate to the 6Cs and well being;

and the flourishing of leadership from all quarters with respect to social entrepreneurship. Overall, this is action research at its best. William Walker would be proud of the way in which leadership is evolving. The circle of influence and participation ever widens!

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