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Book Review

Indelible Leadership: Always Leave Them Learning

Michael Fullan

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Impact Leadership Series, 2017

104 pages; \$16.96 (paperback)

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<https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/indelible-leadership/book247827>

Reviewed by William V. Loose, Azusa Pacific University

*Multiple initiatives, minute-by-minute distractions,
and the ease of staying superficially with the status quo
all conspire to keep us in the state of inertia... (p. 22)*

Most school leaders can identify with the above quote, taken from one of the newest books by Michael Fullan, *Indelible Leadership* (2017). In this brief and concise guide for educational leaders, Fullan aims to teach readers how to break through distraction and inertia to enact deep systemic change. Fullan poses and pursues questions about how leaders can approach a set of six tensions. Each of these tensions is presented in a discrete chapter, which includes action steps to follow. By pursuing Fullan's recommended process, the school leader can lead a successful and deep change in her/his organization.

Indelible leadership is a term Fullan uses interchangeably with *deep leadership*, which he defines as a self-conscious focus on deep change achieved by mobilizing other leaders at all levels of the system in order to build capacity for today and tomorrow. Further, Fullan believes indelible leadership is for systemic change that is practical, realistic, and probable across the entire system.

Fullan's indelible leadership is a framework built on what he identifies as six global competencies: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. His goal is to provide a set of attributes that is graspable, manageable, mutually reinforcing, and synergistic. Fullan

shares that the concepts he is presenting are not brand-new; what is new are the key leadership insights provided for how to lead deep leadership transformation, which can be achieved through a process of simultaneously managing six tensions:

1. Combining moral imperative and uplifting leadership
2. Mastering content and process
3. Leading and learning in equal measure
4. Seeing students as change agents
5. Feeding and be Fed by the system
6. Being essential and dispensable

It is important to note that managing these six tensions are not intended to be pursued as a step-by-step or linear process. Rather, the six tensions are pursued simultaneously; each of the six leadership factors serves the others.

Unpacking the Six Leadership Tensions

Moral Imperative and Uplifting Leadership

This item is about one's moral imperative and commitment to what one does through identity, passion, and meaning. It regards finding meaningfulness in life and work and it is the pursuit of breaking through the status quo without knowing exactly how things will turn out. The leader's charge is to motivate people by helping them find meaning in the daily work and pursuit of the visions and goals that are being pursued by the organization. Leaders must help their staff find their passions and help answer the rhetorical question *why should anybody work here?* The ultimate goal for the leader is to develop a mobilized collectivity of passionate staff members pursuing and creating things that were never previously imagined.

Mastering Content and Process

This leadership quality concerns the content of a given change and the process to achieve it. As the content of a change is underway, leaders must adapt the process of change and assess how people are responding to the issues that are raised. One can think of the content as the change concept idea, and the process as what is undertaken by moving forward with the team.

Fullan notes that this is a merged duality of concepts because:

- the concept of the change will be shaped and reshaped as the team works and moves forward; and

- the process of the change will involve working through the human issues such as dealing with the often-encountered uninterested and resistant staff members, and other anxieties embedded in the change process.

Fullan suggests that the quality of the change is therefore dependent on the sophistication of the leader's ability to manage both the content and the process of the change.

Leading and Learning

This leadership quality reminds readers that we can never be too sure of ourselves, so we as leaders also need to continue learning while we are leading. Leading and learning must be pursued in equal measures through a balance of listening and learning. Fullan feels too many leaders do not actively engage in this dual-step process and practice. The importance of leading and learning is built on his premise that there simply is too much to be known today for any one leader; hence, there is always new knowledge to be obtained and shaped into the initiative. Further, it is essential for the leader to get an accurate read on the situation while assessing the impact of the change process while it is in progress. Much of the leading and learning concept incorporates work in conjunction with the [New Pedagogies for Deep Learning](#) initiative, which has as its three main components technology, pedagogy, and change leadership.

Students as Change Agents and Protégés

Fullan avers in this leadership quality that students of all ages are a hidden source of change leadership and are ready to emerge as key change agents in the areas of pedagogy, learning environment, and social change. He feels educators have underestimated what students can do, and advocates for including them systemic change efforts. This portion of the book begins by looking at what he terms have been the “wrong strategies” (p.31) to transform education.

Fullan examines the major educational reformation frames of the past 30 years, beginning with key documents including: *A Nation at Risk* (1983); *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986); *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (1996); and the 2001 Carnegie Report, *Teachers for a New Era*. Fullan critiques these policy efforts, noting that they were not successful in enacting lasting change, and then quotes from Jal Mehta's 2013 book, *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Re-make America's Schooling*, which asserts that the reform process was “hijacked by policy makers” whose efforts to fix schools have been focused on external standards and accountability, and which have not been successful.

What Fullan believes will successfully transform education is professional capital, a concept and term he has developed in collaboration with Andy Hargreaves (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Professional capital entails three interrelated forces: human capital (quality of the individual); social capital (quality of the group); and decision capital (expert judgement and the use of evidence). Fullan goes on to say that although the concept of professional capital has been widely endorsed, it has not had “widespread traction,” and therefore another tipping point is needed. That tipping point and secret ingredient to add to the formula is the student as change agent.

Feed and Be Fed by the System

In the fifth dynamic, Fullan projects that leaders need to be involved in a balancing act of going outward in order to improve inward. His concept here is *systemness*, where as one contributes to the larger system, she/he simultaneously reaps personal benefits from the process. He presents two views for leaders that embody this change principle. Looking upward, a leader wants the level above her to like what she is doing, but not to control it. Looking laterally and downward, one needs to be leading from the middle (LftM), where a leader is working with and empowering both those who are at the same level and those at lower levels of the organizational system.

Fullan believes this process will work because those at the middle levels are not “stuck with the mindsets” of those above them who are making the policies. With systemness, workers are able to make their own best contributions, through which they may realize that they are part of a bigger enterprise and learn from it. For example, Fullan recommends that teachers think beyond the students in their classes to consider all the students in the school; principals should participate in networks of schools; and districts should work in the realm of consortia to embody systemness.

Along with systemness, Fullan strongly believes that LftM has become the best and most promising hope for transformation of the educational system. The design of LftM synergizes several forces: collaboration and coherence; intra-school and intra-district; natural learning and problem solving occurring inter-district and/or inter-network; and partnership and engagement. Fullan also re-visits the importance of students as change agents of the previous chapter, highlighting their contribution here as being “leadership from the bottom” and is part of this change element. This section also highlights the work occurring in California where he believes these elements for systemic transformation are underway.

Be Essential and Dispensable

In the last leadership attribute, Fullan instructs readers that in the early stages, leaders must be essential to the change process. But, rather paradoxically, leaders' goal should be to become dispensable. Becoming dispensable is achieved over time by developing the leadership qualities of the entire team so they are capable of stepping forward and taking over when needed.

Fullan refers to this as the "second surge of energy" (p. 61) required by the change process. By developing the leadership skills of others in the organization, leaders are aware of what will happen when they leave the organization—they develop a dual perspective of their role as being essential for the present and critical to the future. If one has appropriately developed the leadership capacities of the team, the goals and work put into motion by the leader can continue long after he or she has left to pursue other career opportunities. In a sense, this is a development of one's legacy that carries on in the next generation of leaders.

Applicability for Catholic School Systems

In preparing this book review, I contacted Catholic school principals for their thoughts regarding the applicability of Fullan's work to the Catholic school system. My thanks to these administrative professionals for the following comments from their perspectives as to the applicability of this material to the Catholic school system setting. Related here are some of the commentaries and salient ideas that were shared with me:

Implementing the six steps that Fullan presents closely mirrors the expectations that are placed upon any Catholic education leader. Catholic education leaders, principals, superintendents, administrators, teacher leads, etc. are all concerned with making moral choices that are uplifting for not only the students, but everyone who lives in the family of the Catholic/ parish school. There is a distinct necessity to develop sound educational knowledge and expertise that not only rivals that of the public school education leader, but we are also challenged to surpass it.

The concept of mastery of content and process, something once considered a bonus in Catholic schools, now becomes the expectation by which every good Catholic education leader lives. Realizing that the

leader is not the soul keeper of knowledge, happy to hand out edicts from an ivory tower of isolation, the Catholic principal knows that one must lead but also learn at the same time.

In the Catholic systems I have administered, students are seen as the change agents, which makes sense because students are the reason why the school exists. The nature of change begins because of the needs of those we serve.

Fullan describes feeding and being fed by the system as one of the six tenets of this work. This rich cycle occurs daily in the lives of Catholic principals. We are constantly tasked with giving all of ourselves to help our communities while simultaneously refilling the well from the Holy Spirit that replenishes us as we seek to give more than we are to the community.

It is the knowledge that there is a greater power above us that gives us the strength necessary to continue providing for our communities as Catholic school leaders. Fullan's final step, being essential and dispensable, meshes well with the realities of Catholic education. Each person in the Catholic system from student to leader is essential and strengthens the culture from which the entire community gathers strength. However, we must always remember that Catholic education has survived for hundreds of years and that our leadership is dispensable in the sense that the Lord provides leaders who will step in to fill the needs when one of us is no longer present.

I can use Fullan's six steps in my daily life as a Catholic school principal. Fullan describes these concurrent areas of focus that closely mirror not only Catholic teaching but sound pedagogical and systems leadership.

This new work by Fullan provides a primer of sorts to help the Catholic education leader re-focus upon the many areas of importance that help shape and change a Catholic school for the better. Using his six

steps as a guide helps the Catholic principal to remember that the very nature of a good Catholic education experience is focusing upon the students first, and continually changing the system in order to provide the best educational experience for those students.

Indelible Leadership provides insights and guidance that are highly relevant to the needs of today's leaders in Catholic schools. In this book, Fullan presents critical knowledge in an accessible way that empowers school leaders to invest time and effort into supporting transformation in their schools.

References

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