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The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact

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The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact

Michael Fullan

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014

174 pages, \$27.95 USD (hardcover), \$18.99 USD (e-book)

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Reviewed by William Loose, Azusa Pacific University

Michael Fullan's new book highlighting three key traits of impactful principals in the current educational environment arrives at a very opportune time for both school leaders and institutes of higher education (IHE). For current school principals, Fullan provides guidance on the roles and directions principals should make their focus. For IHE, especially California institutions currently working to address state-required credential and certification revisions for the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), Fullan provides insight on the skills that today's practicing principals need in order to be effective at their sites.

This current work builds upon Fullan's well-known body of work that began with the publication of *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship?* (1988, Teachers College Press) Fullan describes that era as a watershed moment and draws a parallel to today also being a watershed moment. He opines throughout the book that the current role of the principal has become ineffective for creating change at any significant scale.

Fullan provides the reader with background regarding how the current role of the principal has become nearly impossible, unsustainable, futile, and too complex due competing demands brought to the role by:

- legislative acts (e.g. No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top);
- accountability issues and requirements;
- various quick fixes, short cuts, and temporary remedies promoted through legislation that are popular with the lay public but not effective for real school reform;
- unpredictability and ambiguity within the current educational system due to the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). And,

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as being experienced in California, through the incorporation of the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Fullan does provide specific commentary regarding California in Chapter Four.

In particular, Fullan believes that some previously-envisioned roles for principals are problematic: (a) principals being constructed as transformative leaders who “raise the bar” and “close the achievement gap” by rallying teachers to somehow accomplish these goals that they never previously achieved; and (b) principals acting as the primary “instructional leader” within a school. Fullan asserts that these ways of understanding the principal’s role have led principals down an unproductive, narrow path by expecting them to micro-mange and directly affect instruction through a one-teacher-at-a-time approach that is not effective. Further, Fullan states the cause-and-effect of these developments has resulted in a time-wasting system where a principal either goes through the motions or “plays the game.” According to Fullan, these approaches have not worked; therefore, the time to revise the principal’s role is now.

Based on this rationale, Fullan’s goal for the reader is to reposition the role of the principal as the instructional leader and to rethink the principalship in order to put the principal in a position to proceed more confidently in this uncertain era. In addition to the three keys to maximize impact as a school principal, Fullan also provides commentary on the future related to the unplanned digital revolution, and makes a prediction regarding the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Fullan provides a list of action items at the end of each chapter encouraging school principals to reflect on their current roles incorporating the information he has presented, as well as a series of prompts intended for use by school leadership teams for group discussion and development of the concepts.

The Three Keys Fullan promotes are:

1. Leading Learning
2. Being a District and System Player
3. Becoming a Change Agent

Of the three keys, *Leading Learning* receives the most emphasis in the book. Fullan promotes the concept of the principal as a learning leader who shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis. In this mode, the princi-

pal is simultaneously an independent thinker, part of the instructional team, and a member of the entire educational system.

In the Learning Leader role, principals are instructional leaders who work for progress as a collective endeavor in a collaborative and group improvement process. In the role of the Learning Leader, the principal does not directly lead many groups-- teacher leaders do. Instead, the principal participates in the process, learning alongside the teachers what does and does not work. The principal focuses on a small number of key elements and shared goals, and the professional learning that takes place is targeted to these goals as a collective enterprise. Fullan feels this approach is more effective than the current system where principals must spend large blocks of their time evaluating teachers individually on a more piecemeal and inefficient reform and improvement effort.

To develop the traits of a Learning Leader, Fullan provides a framework for seeing one's school in terms of its existing and potential "professional capital." He advises principals to build professional capital across and beyond the school. The chapter presents additional information related to the development of professional capital through discussions of human, social, and decisional capital dimensions of the school and the Learning Leader.

Fullan's second key is *Being a District and System Player*. In his discussion of this key, Fullan encourages principals to be system players who build internal and external partnerships and networks. In this way, the principal can leverage resources for improvement and success through "leadership from the middle." Fullan contends that an individual principal can only get so far by going it alone. For successful continuous improvement, learning from other schools within one's own district as well as from schools outside the district is essential, as it expands the principal's ability to identify and share effective practices for the school, making both the principal's school and the other schools more effective.

Fullan's third key is *Becoming a Change Agent*. This element's focus is the qualities of the leader that allow him or her to move the organization forward under difficult circumstances. To help the principal, Fullan provides a list of seven leadership competencies identified by Lyle Kirtman in his work, *Leadership and Teams: The Missing Piece of the Education Reform Puzzle* (2013, Pearson). Fullan provides these competencies as a template for the principal's own development as a leader and change agent.

In the last section of the book, *The Future is Now*, Fullan highlights the unplanned digital revolution currently taking place through the explosion of

ubiquitous learning, and concludes with commentary and a prediction regarding Common Core. Fullan predicts that a growing number of states will drop out of CCSS the closer the implementation phase occurs. He cites as evidence the several states that have already dropped out of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

While Fullan's book is primarily focused on the principalship from a public school perspective, the tenets provided are equally applicable to parochial school principalships. Although parochial schools are not legally mandated to follow the legal edicts and mandates of legislated educational initiatives such as Common Core, the reality is that many parochial schools mirror these developments due to parental concerns that the parochial school curricula be synchronized with public schools. Further, being a Leading Learner, developing a collaborative, systemic approach to a school's effectiveness and improvement, and endeavoring to be an effective change agent are certainly shared traits among parochial and public school principals.

Perhaps, Fullan's key that is most applicable to parochial schools is *Being a District and Systems Player*. Most private, parochial schools are much smaller in scope and size than their public school counterparts. Forming strong external partnerships beyond the parochial system can be a definite advantage, allowing parochial schools to access resources, methods, expertise, and materials that may not be readily available in the quest for effective and sustained school reform and improvement.

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