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Freedom to Change: Four Strategies to put your Inner Drive into Overdrive (Book Review)

Michael Fullan

San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2015

192 pages; \$27.95 USD (hardcover)

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Reviewed by William Loose, Azusa Pacific University

Michael Fullan's 2015 book is offered to individuals, school organizations, and corporate entities. The focus of the narrative relates to the individual and school systems, with some brief and occasional corporate applicability references. Fullan offers four strategies for intrinsic motivation, which he promotes as useful for enhancing individuals' inner drive and motivation and, in turn, benefitting both the individuals and the organizations with which they are involved.

This book provides four strategies built on the following "recipe":

- Three parts from Daniel Pink's (2011) book on motivation, *Drive*: some degree of self-directed autonomy, a sense of purpose, and mastery
- One part from Eric Fromm's 1969 work, *Escape to Freedom*, which Fullan encountered during his graduate studies;
- One part Everett Rogers's concept of "diffusion;"
- One part of Stone and Heen regarding "feedback;"
- One part "simplicity," a concept coined by Jeff Kluger; and
- One part from the "Freedom Report," by LRN which provides the foundation of the "Freedom From..." to "Freedom to" platform that this entire book uses as a unifying theme.

An interesting organizational approach to this new book is that each chapter ends with a visual/graphic summary rather than a traditional writ-

ten summation. This style of conclusion was very helpful to this reviewer in contemplating the contents of each chapter in order to delve deeper into the material presented.

Fullan begins by reminding readers of the complexity of the 21st century world and of the many complications that arise in personal and professional lives on a daily basis. It is easy to become alienated. Fullan encourages readers to put aside such attitudes and possible excuses and begin to tackle challenges directly by oneself and with others.

Fullan distinguishes between “freedom from,” which is about removing obstacles and constraints, and “freedom to,” which is about figuring out what to do once one becomes more liberated.

The concept of *Simplexity* is introduced in chapter 2. Fullan takes this term and concept developed by Jeff Kluger, and expands it to fit into this work. Simplexity is the concept that “simple things become complex,” and “how complex things can be made simple.” Fullan’s take on this concept is that when one faces situations that seem beyond one’s control and appear to be complex, two steps should be taken:

1. Identify the smallest number of key factors that can make a big difference
2. Make these factors “gel” using the four components of his strategy (autonomy and cooperation, feedback, accountability, and diffusion)

Throughout the book, Fullan provides examples using the education system as illustrations. Here he reminds the reader of his observations in his 2014 book, *The Principal: 3 Keys for Maximizing Impact* (see Loose, 2014 for a review of this book). Fullan recounts how principals have been forced through policy and legislation to devote extreme amounts of time to individual teacher evaluations. This situation has resulted in an ineffective process for both the teacher and the administrator. Due to these extreme time demands, the reality has become that the evaluation process is now one where everyone is just “going through the motions” to meet administrative and legal requirements rather than seeking substantial improvement.

The first part of the journey in “freedom from” to “freedom to” is to embrace *simplexity*. Through simplexity, complicated issues can be simplified by isolating five or fewer inter-related pieces. This procedure produces a “maximal effect” created by the leverage of these interacting key forces working together developing a solution to the issue/problem.

Having embraced *simplicity*, the next part of the journey is towards *autonomy and cooperation*. Citing Fromm, Fullan points out that autonomy and cooperation are a conundrum. That is, having complete autonomy is not healthy for humans because of humans' need for contact and social interaction, but joining a group requires surrendering one's own identity. On the quest toward "freedom to," Fullan advises taking a cooperative approach with the goal of an outcome that is mutually beneficially for the individual and the group.

To illustrate this concept, Fullan provides the story from Daniel Brown's 2014 book, *Boys in the Boat*, about the 1936 U.S. men's rowing team, which won a gold medal in the Berlin Olympics. Using this framework, Fullan illustrates how a perfectly synchronized flow of the individual's muscles, oars, boat, and water became unified in a symphony of a crew in motion. To Fullan, this epitomizes the "individuality with connectedness" concept. What matters is *how* everything is harmonized and *how* all of the individuals are working together. This is the ultimate example of how a relationship to self and others in service of a great cause is achieved.

Autonomy and cooperation comes with two caveats. The first is to be wary of "group think," in which individual thought is lost due to peer pressure and a high desire for harmony and conformity. The second is the reminder that autonomy and cooperation are somewhat of an equation. That is, one should not choose between them because one needs the dynamic interaction of both. When the equation is out of balance, there are problems. Too much autonomy means losing connectedness with others; too much cooperation means surrendering to the group and, perhaps, becoming victims of group think.

Fullan's next concept and strategy is *feedback*. Fullan acknowledges that some of these key concepts regarding feedback come from work conducted by Stone and Heen. Feedback is a "goldmine" of information for potential growth, but it is hard work for most people according to this account. Why? Because feedback is "painful to the ego." If we can get ourselves past this issue, feedback can be the "key simplifier to make change." Therefore, people are encouraged to seek both informal and formal feedback (e.g. professional work appraisals/evaluations) because feedback is conducive to our continuous learning. Ignoring feedback shuts down the potential for great insights to one's own improvement.

The problem of receiving feedback is the distortion between contrasting elements. We want to learn, we want to be liked, and we want to like our-

selves. But these three things don't mesh together well as part of the feedback process. This puts receiving feedback at the intersection of our drive to learn and our need for acceptance.

Fullan advises readers to reflect on feedback by asking: "What am I trying to learn about myself?" in all circumstances. If we are able to do this, the feedback process can help prevent us from wasting time. By actively seeking out this feedback and overcoming any self-fears, the individual gains the following:

- Better relationships
- Secure self-esteem
- Being more assured at seeking feedback and feeling better about receiving it
- Feeling less threatened by one's toughest opponents

Fullan next presents three concepts regarding *accountability*: external, internal, and "push me – pull me." External accountability is a process in which educational systems are well-versed, as policymakers have passed many statutes and mandates regarding school accountability in recent years. Fullan points out that this kind of external accountability does not work and is a micromanagement effort that has brought schools to a standstill .

External accountability only gives results, does not work, and gives no "clue how to fix things" in Fullan's perspective. While educational systems may not be able to just "dump" external accountability, he suggests two inter-related activities. The first is to invest more in internal accountability activities creating conditions for greater local responsibility at a level of day-to-day practice. The second is setting and projecting clear goals that protect the system when performance is persistently low.

Internal accountability is based on the concept that the individual and group in which one works can transparently hold themselves accountable for their performance. Internal accountability is based on visible expectations combined with consequences for failure to meet those expectations. This is the "leverage" Fullan invites us to pursue as an alternative to external accountability.

Internal accountability is a shift toward a more collaborative culture that honors and aligns individual responsibility with collective expectations. This approach fits perfectly with the "autonomy and collaboration" element of the book's strategy. In such a culture, people encountering problems first get help

from the principal and colleagues. If this does not yield improvement, this type of person often “weeds themselves out” because they are not comfortable with the culture.

“Push Me–Pull You,” is the final concept for accountability. Fullan says a positive “pushy pressure” results when:

- people are attracted to a compelling vision and working with colleagues towards a compelling destination (pull); and
- people are working in a climate where high expectations are explicit and in which peers interact on common goals, all working towards continual improvement (push).

The “Push Me–Pull You” culture creates a strong allegiance to the cause and each other because people are helped and not berated, work with collective efficacy, and are working with a high degree of precision and transparency.

The concluding thoughts regarding accountability refer to “protecting our own interests” and is a nod back to the autonomy and cooperation concepts that start off the book. The most powerful thing one can do is to connect with peers because the identification with others in pursuit of important goals (i.e. cooperation) is highly motivational. But, one must remain vigilant against the aforementioned group think, while also being wary of peer pressure so that we maintain our own moral compass (i.e. maintain autonomy).

The final part of the process and strategy is *Diffusion*. The theme embodying diffusion is what Fullan calls “systemness.” This is defined as one’s awareness and commitment to and benefit from a larger system. This is typified in a change of perspective of school staff from “my kids and my class” to “our kids and the whole school.” We are encouraged to not wait for others to act, and to be productive and be “up and out.”

The concept of diffusion is adapted from Everett Rogers’s work, *Diffusion of Innovations* (1962). Fullan expands this concept from being related to the spread of good ideas that are adapted as people take them on, to including his concept of “Leadership from the Middle” (LftM).

In Fullan’s view, LftM is needed because top down leadership doesn’t work (one cannot control everything from the top and one can only do so much as there are limits). Similarly, bottom up leadership doesn’t work either because it creates only ad hoc pockets of change that are unlikely to last over time. The answer, then, is LftM.

Fullan emphasizes that there is always a middle—and that the middle is where the most is accomplished. Therefore, to effectively utilize the earlier components of the strategy (autonomy–cooperation, feedback, and accountability), one should use LftM as the catalyst. LftM increases the role of middle layer as an agent of cohesion and progress. Fullan wants readers to become better partners both upward and downward to effect vertical and horizontal improvement and innovation.

School administrators receive a double assignment in diffusion by being responsible for helping teachers work together as well as linking to other schools for mutual learning and development.

As in his 2014 book *The Principal: 3 Keys to Maximizing Impact*, California once again receives special notice. In the chapter entitled, “California—No Longer Dreamin’” Fullan shares his optimistic belief that California is positioned to engage these strategies, and that LftM is being eagerly adopted. Such change can be seen in Governor Brown’s new funding model, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), and the accompanying Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Additionally, Fullan sees the California Department of Education trying to shift from a compliance organization to a capacity building system.

Fullan highlights California as a large test case for the possibility of jettisoning “key distractions” in favor of these new opportunities. Fullan shares that the hardest part is not getting rid of the old shackles, but rather it is taking advantage of the new freedoms.

In summation, the main lesson provided is that leaders should work from the premise that individual and organizational interest are best served by codetermination, by individuals and groups working together becoming more skilled at balancing the tensions between autonomy and cooperation.

For Catholic School Administrators

As noted in the beginning of this review, this new book attempts present arguments that are generalizable to many different types of corporate and school organizations. Therefore, administrators in Catholic schools will likely find much of the discussion extremely applicable to their school contexts.

All school organizations, including Catholic schools, are bureaucracies that involve many procedures, standards, and rules (both formal and informal) that administrators are bound to follow to meet both ethical and legal requirements. Over time, these combined elements can become a daunting

maze and labyrinth for the school leader to navigate. Oftentimes, school leaders can find themselves feeling stymied and frustrated, feeling that there is little flexibility from which to operate. This finds the school leader in exactly the position that Fullan describes early in his book.

Truly, this then is the perfect opportunity to employ and utilize *Simplexity*. The savvy Catholic school leader should endeavor to make complicated tasks “doable” by breaking challenges down to five or fewer key inter-related pieces. According to Fullan, this technique then produces a “maximal effect” created by the leverage of these interacting key forces working together developing a solution to the issue/situation.

The Catholic school administrator who is embracing *Simplexity* may also wish to consider Fullan’s approach in conjunction with the concepts expressed in Frederick M. Hess’s book, *Cage Busting Leadership* (2013). In *Cage Busting Leadership*, Hess encourages school leaders to find ways “out of the cage” (with the cage representing many of the same stymying elements Fullan expresses). By utilizing *Simplexity* to identify and approach problems and then expanding the journey through *Cage Busting Leadership*, Catholic school leaders can move their school organizations forward

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