



Michael Fullan

Dr. Michael Fullan, former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, is widely recognized as an international authority on educational reform. His ideas on leadership, the change process, and school improvement are studied throughout the world. Some of his more acclaimed books include the series *What's Worth Fighting For* (with Andy Hargeaves); *Change Forces*; *The New Meaning of Educational Change*; *The*

Moral Imperative of School Leadership; and *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*.

Dr. Fullan is active in training, consulting, and evaluating change projects throughout the world, and he recently led the evaluation team that conducted the assessment of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. He is special advisor to the Premier and Minister of Education in Ontario.

In this paper, Dr. Fullan acknowledges that there is an increasingly clear picture of the nature and importance of schools that function as professional learning communities, but he contends such schools will remain rare and transitory if the larger system of education is not examined and improved. He offers the concept of "tri-level development" as the best strategy to increase the capacity of the larger system to build and sustain professional learning communities. This solution focuses on what needs to be done at three levels of the larger educational system: the school/community level, the LEA or regional level, and the state or national policy level.

Dr. Fullan regards the ability of leaders to develop other leaders as key to the success of the tri-level strategy. He cautions, however, that individual educators should not assume his call for systems change and enlightened leadership absolves them from personal responsibility for doing what they can to bring about meaningful change in their own setting. As he concludes, "professional learning communities writ large is everyone's agenda across the tri-levels."

For more information about Dr. Michael Fullan and his work, go to www.michaelfullan.ca

Professional Learning Communities Writ Large

Michael Fullan

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We have an increasingly clear picture of the nature and importance of professional learning communities in schools. We now understand that such communities do not merely represent congeniality. Rather, they dig deeply into learning. They engage in disciplined inquiry and continuous improvement in order to “raise the bar” and “close the gap” of student learning and achievement.

We have seen in the work of Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000) that effective schools develop the collective capacity of the full staff to improve achievement through:

- Developing teachers' skills
- Improving the quality of ongoing interaction among staff
- Achieving a coherent focus
- Mobilizing resources
- Developing school leadership

DuFour (2004) and the other authors describe professional learning communities as contributing to high performance by:

- Ensuring that all students learn
- Fostering a culture of collaboration
- Focusing on results

We do, in other words, know a great deal about professional learning communities at the school level. In this chapter, I seek to place professional learning communities in a larger perspective. I will argue that if we do not examine and improve the overall system at three levels, we will never have more than temporary havens of excellence that come and go. Without attention to the larger system, professional learning communities will always be in the minority, never rising above 20% in popularity in the nation, and will not last beyond the tenure of those fortunate enough to have established temporary collaborative cultures.

The Tri-Level Solution

In my most recent work, I am pursuing through specific initiatives what I call the “tri-level solution.” The tri-level solution involves three levels:

- The school/community level

- The LEA or district level
- The state or national policy level

This solution represents a total system focus—a self-conscious attempt at all levels to use best knowledge to strategize and bring about improvements and build capacity. Capacity-building is the development and use of policies, strategies, and actions that increase the collective power or efficacy of whole groups, organizations, or systems to engage in continuous improvement for ongoing student learning. Typically, capacity-building synergizes three powerful collective phenomena:

- New skills and dispositions
- More focused and enhanced resources
- Greater shared commitment, cohesion, and motivation

In professional learning communities writ large, the system as a whole adopts the agenda of fostering deep learning communities. In other words, schools and communities explicitly pursue the development of new cultures of professional learning; districts, regions, and schools establish infrastructures to support and monitor such development; and states or provinces commit themselves to policies and strategies for systemically addressing the evolution of professional learning cultures. This is a tri-level solution because it builds capacity across the three levels.

The school/community level.

We know a fair amount about professional learning communities at the school/community level, although our knowledge of how parents and communities contribute to student learning is much less developed. What Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000) found is particularly instructive. They examined individual schools that had the high collective capacity to bring about improved student achievement. They then asked the question, “Where does this capacity come from?” They suggested that, in theory, individual school capacity could come from policies and programs at the district and state level. As they examined this potential link, they could find no evidence that school capacity to bring about improved achievement was caused by the external infrastructure working to produce it. If the infrastructure did not help develop school capacity, then what did?

My own view is that it was largely a matter of luck or serendipity that these schools developed a high capacity. The right principal came along, certain teachers gravitated to this principal, the chemistry was great, and the group experienced cohesion and success. When this happens, it is wonderful—as long as it lasts. So if the infrastructure is not systematically working on capacity-building in the school, professional learning communities will occur in only a minority number of cases and will not last beyond the tenure of the right leader or group.

The LEA or district level.

Because of the limitations of working on individual school-

based professional learning communities, we and others began to work with whole districts with the goal of building capacity with all or the vast majority of schools in a district. In the same way that professional learning communities refer to the *culture of the school*, we have shifted our perspective to the *culture of the district*. The question then becomes, “How do entire districts become professional learning communities where all groups (within and across schools) exemplify professional learning communities in action?”

We have worked with over a dozen districts in Canada, the United States, England, and Australia to help build district-wide capacity in order to raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement at the district level. Reports on district-wide success experienced by others are now appearing in the literature. Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) found that districts successful in their capacity-building had the following characteristics:

1. Leaders with a coherent driving conceptualization
2. A collective moral purpose
3. The structure and roles most effective for developing capacity-building
4. Leadership and capacity-building for those in key roles
5. Lateral capacity building
6. Deep learning
7. Productive conflict
8. Demanding cultures
9. External partners
10. Growing financial investment

When district leadership understands the change process and the corresponding capacity-building, they appreciate what needs to be done. They in turn foster a collective moral purpose, organize the structure and roles most effectively, provide ongoing leadership development for those in key roles, and formulate strategies where schools learn from each other (lateral capacity-building). They pursue deeper learning agendas, appreciate that conflict is part and parcel of moving forward, raise expectations of all to achieve more, and seek external partners and resources that enable them to go even further.

This success has been largely confined to elementary and middle schools. There are no examples, as far as I know, of district-wide high school reform where all or most of the high schools in the district have established professional learning communities collectively as a district. This is partly because high school reform is more complex and more difficult, and partly because we have not tried until recently. There are now several ongoing major reform initiatives in the four countries mentioned previously, so we should expect to see in the near future examples of high school reform across whole districts.

When district leaders understand and use the knowledge base represented by these 10 components, they will see district-wide success. It is critical, then, that the first two levels—

school/community and district/regional—depend upon and reinforce the work of one another.

The next logical question is this: “Where does district-level capacity come from?” One could speculate that state or federal level policies and programs help foster district-level capacity across the whole state or country. Alas, this is not the case. District-wide reform remains in the minority and, like individual school success, it probably does not last beyond the tenure of one or two superintendents and school boards.

The state or national level.

This takes us to the third level in the tri-level solution: state or national policy. This policy level is the most difficult to develop because of its political complexity and its propensity to favor quick and inevitably superficial solutions. There is a natural political tendency to focus on accountability because it is easy to legislate change in this area. Capacity-building, on the other hand, is more difficult and requires time and cultivation. Accountability without capacity building amounts to little or no gain.

What we need instead is for those at the third level—the state policy makers—to become knowledgeable and action-oriented about fostering capacity-building along with accountability. I cannot emphasize enough that this involves learning how to think and act accordingly. Policy makers must become deliberate learners in the same way that an effective principal is a self-reflective learner and a successful superintendent conceptualizes and solves problems.

Becoming more knowledgeable requires that policy makers become increasingly familiar with the value and concepts of professional knowledge communities. It requires that they begin to think and act differently by appointing new leaders to the central team, to pass different policies, and to formulate different strategies that integrate accountability and capacity-building with a focus on results. They must also refocus and enhance the investment of resources to support capacity-building as a fundamental characteristic of the system.

There are a small and growing number of examples of system-level engagement in capacity-building. England was the first to do so. In 1997 when the Blair government was first elected, it designed an integrated strategy that combined “pressure and support” to focus on literacy and numeracy. There was a strong accountability emphasis, but at the same time there was a major orchestrated strategy to increase the capacity of teachers and school principals to work together to achieve new levels of student achievement. The outcome was impressive with large gains achieved. Sixty-two percent of 11-year-olds were at proficiency levels in 1997 in literacy; for numeracy, the figure was 61%. By 2002, the scores had reached 75% for literacy and 73% for numeracy. This represents a remarkable accomplishment because the whole system—some 20,000 schools—moved forward. All this was achieved within one election period—less than 4 years. It did, however, raise some difficult questions concerning sustained reform.

The gains in literacy and numeracy leveled off, or plateaued, by 2001. The scores in 2001, 2002, and 2003 were identical. The

initial highly, centrally driven, very supportive strategy was effective—but only to a point. To go beyond the plateau requires a deeper strategy of addressing the “hearts and minds” of teachers and principals. This is not a straightforward issue because the additional gains must be real and achieved on a large scale in the system as a whole (Fullan, 2005b).

The plateau problem notwithstanding, large systems are now engaging in accomplishing large-scale reform. As we have seen, England has had significant success. More recently, the province of Ontario, South Australia, and Washington state are all explicitly focusing on tri-level reform strategies in which the goal is to develop each level and their interrelationships.

State-Level Development

In the cases of state-level development that we have studied, state policy makers began to gain new knowledge (they began to take seriously the growing knowledge base on capacity building, professional learning communities, and the like); they began to think differently; and they began to act differently as reflected in the policies they promoted, the strategies they formulated, the leaders they appointed, and the resources they allocated (they both refocused and enhanced financial investments fuelled by their growing success).

In all of these cases, entire systems are actively engaged in tri-level reform, where the criterion of success is large-scale development of all three levels, and the outcome is an increase in collective capacity for continuous improvement and greater accomplishments in “raising the bar” and “closing the gap” in student performance.

Tri-level development promotes professional learning communities as a *system* quality. We are by no means there yet, but the cases we have observed are extremely promising. For the first time, we are seeing improvement on a very large scale, not just in isolated schools.

Four Implications

There are four implications to the tri-level solution I describe:

1. The need to address the problem of bias toward individualistic solutions.
2. The radical need for systems thinkers in action.
3. The importance of learning from each other as we go.
4. The danger of waiting for others to act.

Bias toward individualistic solutions.

The bias toward individuals concerns policies and strategies that look like they are intended to change the system, but upon closer inspection, it is clear that they change individuals and not the system. I am referring to state policies that provide new standards for teacher education, for professional learning, for educational leaders, and so on. These are crucial, but by themselves they represent only about thirty percent of the

solution. They are necessary but not sufficient for system-wide change.

Let us take the professional learning component of standards as a case in point. All of the new standards for teacher education, leadership, and professional learning contain components that emphasize collaboration with and learning from others. The assumption is that if we produce enough individuals with these new characteristics, they will change the system.

The truth is that the system changes individuals more often than individuals change the system. In addition to the appropriate standards, we need to focus directly on changing cultures so that there is a growing opportunity to *learn in context*.

In fact, the tri-level solution examples in the previous section all involved altering cultures (at the school, district, and state levels) so that people *experience* the new values and behaviors in their day-to-day actions. When people learn new things in context, two powerful things happen:

1. The new learning is specific to the context in which they are working.
2. Because the learning occurs in context, people are learning with others so that the outcome is shared learning and further changes in the culture.

Radical need for system thinkers in action.

“System thinking in action” (Fullan, 2005a) addresses sustainability and the need to change context. Professional learning communities writ large means *changing cultures to create new contexts*. How do contexts or systems change? They do so over a very long period of time. System change evolves as a result of major alterations in demographics, technology, and other social forces. But we want to accelerate the development of good changes like the spread of professional learning communities. The key to this involves conceptualizing sustainability and using leadership to change context or the environment by (1) increasing leaders’ participation in wider contexts and (2) helping to develop leadership in others so they can do the same.

After about 2 years of working on district-wide reform, my colleagues and I noticed the following phenomenon: Individual school principals became almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they were with the success of their own school. This is a direct result of being engaged in a larger purpose and getting to know other schools through walk-throughs and other lateral capacity-building strategies. These strategies might involve small clusters of schools working together to improve literacy or principals and teachers conducting walk-throughs of a school or schools to provide critical feedback to the staff. Their world-views and commitments increased to encompass the larger system, but at the same time, they helped change the very system within which they work. They literally changed their context.

The key to sustainability is to change context. Hargreaves and Fink (in press) put it this way: “Sustainability does not simply mean whether something will last. It addresses how

particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment now and in the future.” Sustainability is about changing and developing the social environment. Professional learning communities writ large is not about the proliferation of single schools; it is about creating new environments across the system through tri-level development.

The following eight items (Fullan, 2005a) are elements of sustainability and part of the writ large agenda:

1. Public service with a moral purpose is an explicit commitment on the part of the system to endorse and pursue an agenda for raising standards and closing the gap.
2. Commitment to changing context at all levels involves the realization by leaders at all levels that they are changing the culture of schools and districts.
3. Lateral capacity-building through networks means identifying and investing in strategies that promote schools learning from each other.
4. Intelligent accountability and vertical relationships focus on developing great self-review capacity in the context of transparent external accountability.
5. Deep learning means that the system is continually pushing the envelope to address the fundamental learning goals of thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, and learning across the curriculum.
6. Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results requires system leaders to realize that they must pursue simultaneously short-term increases in student achievement and mid- to long-term results. They must lay the foundation for the long-term learning of all students.
7. Cyclical energizing emphasizes that “achievement at all costs” is self-defeating. Capacity must be built over time. Periods of intense development must be coupled with opportunities to recoup. Sustainability is about energy more than it is about time. Thus, monitoring and stimulating energy are key.
8. The long lever of leadership—leaders fostering the development of other leaders by widening their sphere of commitment and participation—is an integral part of this agenda. In this sense, the main mark of a school principal at the end of his or her tenure is not just his or her impact on the bottom line of student achievement, but equally on how many good leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further. This is the long lever of leadership. Leaders also need to help provide wider learning experiences through networks, clusters, paired schools, and other lateral capacity-building strategies.

Learning from each other.

The third point in moving this ambitious agenda forward is the critical importance of learning from each other. We know this but need to address it explicitly with respect to tri-level reform. School cultures improve when teachers within the school learn from each other on an ongoing basis. District cultures improve when

schools learn from each other, and when districts learn from one another. When schools or districts want to know where to start reform, they would be wise to conduct site visits to other schools or districts that are further down the road.

During a site visit, teams from the visiting school or district prepare questions for the host school and then gather data to address these questions. They then examine their findings and identify specific actions to take. This is an example of continuous learning that includes seeking out better information and learning from one's own experiences and from the experiences of others.

In addition, states engaged in tri-level reform need to learn from each other (both within and across countries). The learning principles are no different, just applied on a larger scale. Paying attention to the growing knowledge base, problem solving and learning through reflection, cultivating networks of interaction, and enlarging the world view are all part and parcel of increasing capacity and changing.

The danger of waiting for others to act.

Finally, it would be a fundamental misunderstanding of systems theory to assume that the system should change first. Each of us *is* the system; there is no chicken and egg. We must connect with others to change whatever parts of the system we can. Whenever one is acting to promote professional learning communities, there should be an obligation to connect it to larger issues—bigger dots, if you will. Waiting for others to act virtually guarantees preservation of the status quo. If individuals are proactive, they stimulate others and make it more likely that the system will begin to change, resulting in new breakthroughs.

Engaging the Three Levels for System-Wide Success

The purpose of this entire agenda is twofold (Fullan, 2003): (1) to constantly seek and refine better ideas and practices (the knowledge dimension) and (2) to foster greater cohesion and shared commitment toward a higher purpose (the moral imperative). When all three levels—school/community, district or regional, and state or province—are engaged in this agenda, it will be possible to make substantial progress. Huge accomplishments literally become more within our reach. But they can only become doable if we make them system-wide pursuits. In the absence of tri-level participation, professional learning communities on any scale will be impossible to achieve. Professional learning communities writ large is everyone's agenda across the tri-levels.

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