

COMMENTARY

School Leadership's Unfinished Agenda Integrating Individual and Organizational Development

Michael Fullan

In their aptly named book on organizational management, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton write about *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense*. A hard fact is something for which there is solid evidence. A dangerous half-truth is when this fact is superficially applied. And total nonsense is often the outcome of not knowing the difference.

We can gain insight about the current state of school leadership by applying this organizational thinking to two of education's hard facts: The principal is crucial to school success, and professional learning communities are more effective than individual professionals working in isolation. In doing so, we should remember that the danger in the half-truth is not just that it is incomplete or misleading, but that its proponents are unaware that it is not true.

Let's begin with the first hard fact. Principals do make a difference in school improvement and student achievement. As my colleague Kenneth Leithwood has concluded from his research, in impact on student learning, the principal is second only to the teacher. This is why policymakers have decreed that we must produce school principals who have the qualities known to make a difference.

In the best cases, this push for high-quality principals has led to the development of rigorous programs designed to produce candidates who promise to make a significant difference in school improvement. The hard fact is that this is a step in the right direction. The half-truth is the assumption that it will be sufficient to make a decided difference. In other words, these high-quality individual-development programs are not in themselves a bad idea, but they are incomplete. They represent one part of a whole—individual, but not organizational, development. They give policymakers a false sense that they are actually solving a problem.

Consider examples of some of the best of these programs. The recent McKinsey & Co. report on "[How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top](#)" cites three such principal-development programs, in Boston, Chicago, and Singapore. Boston, for example, develops new principals by focusing on a fellowship program that includes three days a week of apprenticeship and two days a week in classes, supported by mentors and coaches and clustered in learning networks. Similar programs have been established through new leadership academies in New York City and several other districts.

Whole countries have established high-quality "qualifications" programs for new school principals. The Scottish Qualification for Headship program, which recently received rave reviews in an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report, is a good case in point. It takes two to three years to complete, through courses, experiential learning, mentoring, and coaching. Similarly, in England, the National College of School Leadership has developed a qualifications program that is mandatory for all school heads.

So what's the half-truth? It is that individual leaders, no matter how great, can't carry the day. They can't. It may be possible for this or that heroic leader to change the organization for a time, but it won't happen in numbers. The culture of the organization is too powerful for one or even many individuals to overcome. (Incidentally, although this may seem like a backhanded compliment, the greatest contribution of good qualifications programs may be in avoiding *bad* leaders.)

Everybody knows that the culture of the organization is crucial, and that purposeful, collaborative organizations are more effective (a hard fact). Therefore, the reasoning goes, we should implement "professional learning communities" everywhere (a dangerous half-truth). My colleagues and I, as well as other researchers elsewhere, have found that professional learning communities are being implemented superficially. They give the educators involved a false sense of progress, while the deeper cultural changes required for school improvement are not being tackled.

In my most recent book, *The Six Secrets of Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), one of the secrets to successful change I identify is that "learning is the work." It is a maxim precisely about the need to address day-to-day cultural change. Learning is not workshops and courses and strategic retreats. It is not school improvement plans or individual leadership development. These are inputs. Rather, learning is developing the organization, day after day, within the culture.

There is much more to organizational development than I can address in this brief essay. It is about openness of practice, precision, creativity, wise and continuous use of data, learning from each other inside and outside the organization, and linking into the big picture. This is turning out to be much harder than anyone thought, and the presence of half-truths in action serves only to give the semblance of progress, dangerously taking the pressure off the need to focus on the deeper changes required. In short, changing cultures is the hard fact that remains elusive. An even harder fact is sustaining a learning culture once it is implemented.

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We can draw two conclusions from this kind of analysis. The first is that, within both individual-development and organizational-development pursuits we should push for quality implementation. The second and more powerful conclusion, however, is that we should never do one without the other; that is, we should not have leadership-development programs for individuals in the absence of parallel strategies focusing on changing the culture of school systems. It will take the combined efforts of both components. Individual and organizational development must go hand in hand.

As an early example of this integration, I offer our work in York Region District School Board, a large, multicultural urban district just north of Toronto. York Region consists of some 160 elementary and 30 secondary schools. District leaders there started with organizational development, and then reinforced it with systematic individual development. Concentrating first on the former, the

district established a literacy collaborative framework, worked with school teams, and went about its business of identifying and sharing effective practices. Learning networks also have been established, whereby schools learn from each other. York is, in other words, working directly on changing the culture of its schools and the district itself. Organization development means *system* development as well.

As York began to identify the particular leadership qualities associated with success, district leaders turned their attention to individual development, by creating a "leadership-development framework." The leadership-development requirement applies to all future and current principals. There are three dimensions: roles, competencies, and learning activities. The roles are: (1) emergent leaders (those preparing to become principals), (2) first-time administrators, and (3) experienced assistant principals and principals.

Competencies fall into four domains: setting direction and sustaining the vision, building relationships, leading and managing instruction, and further developing the organization. For each domain, the knowledge, skills, and subcompetencies required are spelled out.

The third, crosscutting dimension concerns the learning activities and experiences people will need in order to obtain the competencies.

The daily concentration on effective teaching and learning practices meshes with the individual development requirements. And with so much mutual reinforcement, the culture of the district gets changed, through the combined efforts of individual leaders and collaborative learning communities that support, stimulate, and add to each other.

Even strong, national school systems benefit from viewing change through this individual and organizational lens. Finland, for example, which has been the top performer in literacy, math, and science among the 32 OECD countries, has strong teachers and school principals. But unless it fosters daily learning among educators (good teachers working with other good teachers get even better) and pays explicit attention to individual leadership development, even Finland's overall system will weaken. A recent OECD review observed that 60 percent of Finland's school principals will retire in the next few years, and recommended that the country "develop a clear national strategy for leadership and succession."

In short, efforts to reform school systems are doomed unless educators can combine and integrate individual and organization development, focusing on mutually reinforcing content and strategies. This is demanding and unending work. The best guideline for doing it well is to work explicitly on both elements, and on their integration. And, as you do so, worry about whether you may be engaged in a half-truth.

Whole or full truths are hard to come by in the school improvement business. Unless we combine and integrate these two important aspects of leadership development within a single strategy, we will never progress. It is easier to do one without the other, but that is ultimately self-defeating. The promise is that, if we work on both components in tandem, we may get the significant breakthroughs in system transformation that we have been seeking.

Michael Fullan is a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and serves as a special adviser on education to the premier of Ontario