

Driving Change Starts with Ignoring Advice on How to Drive Change

Harvey Schachter - *The Globe and Mail*

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Change Leader

By Michael Fullan

(Jossey-Bass, 192 pages, \$33.95)

Michael Fullan begins his latest book on change management by telling you to be an effective change leader you would be wise to ignore, or at least be wary of, books like his. “Caveat emptor,” he warns.

Instead, the former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education – who has written several other thoughtful, if perhaps by his suggestion now-ignorable books on change – tells you to learn from your own experiences and the good practices of others, continually trying out new ideas to see how they work, and making improvements. Books offer theory – expert advice that is abstract, inconsistent and not necessarily related to your situation. You need the practical tools that come from your everyday work – everyday work that inevitably has been about making changes.

That doesn’t stop him, of course, from providing you with some theory. But at least his seven-step program begins with that overriding principle:

Practice drives theory

The effective change leader must actively participate as a learner in helping the organization improve. That means you must commit to deliberative, reflective practice, seeking evidence and insights – and your own theory of change management – from what is happening in your own life. Instead of taking someone else’s theories, develop your own. “You don’t have to be a superstar to be effective; rather you need to work on being a clear-headed, persistent learner in the setting in which you work, with an eye to the bigger picture. For example, you don’t have to read a hundred books to know that effective management is about people,” he writes.

Be resolute

Effective change leaders combine resolute moral purpose with what he dubs “impressive empathy.” We have always known that leaders must be determined, staying the course against all odds. They must model hope and optimism, even in the bleakest moment. But since change is about people, leaders must also be very empathetic because in the earliest stages of all change efforts they will encounter opposition. It is unwise to blow off such opposition since change leaders, no matter how resolute, can’t succeed alone. Impressive empathy starts by giving others respect, so that in turn they may respect you and your ideas.

Motivate the masses

You need something, beyond your impressive empathy, to engage followers and get them enthused about the changes you are promising. Most leaders believe they must offer inspired visions or moral exhortations or mounds of irrefutable evidence, but he says instead it comes down to “realized effectiveness.” People will be motivated to do more when they feel they have accomplished something they have never managed to do before. He encourages you to try what he calls “motion leadership” – laid out in his previous book of that name and summarized in this one – through a series of steps to ignite positive movement through a “ready-fire-aim” approach.

Collaborate to compete

Collaborative competition, he argues, is the yin and yang of change. You must build a collaborative climate, in which people pursue change together. But you also must build in competition: People must yearn to do better than they have in the past, and better than others in similar organizations.

Learn confidently

Change leaders are more confident than the situation warrants but also more humble than they look. These leaders have learned from experience, and have confidence in their ability to galvanize change. At the same time, they aren’t over-confident. They are humble enough to know they must continue learning, and growing themselves. “Scratch an effective, ‘humble’ leader and you will find a confident learner,” he says.

Know your impact

To learn, you must know what's going on, and that will mean keeping track through various metrics. But he stresses: "Statistics are a wonderful servant and an appalling master." Use them wisely, creating a feedback loop in which you tweak your change efforts as you learn from the results generated.

Sustain simplicity

Successful change is both simple and complex, what Time magazine writer Jeffrey Kluger has called "simplicity." For most problems, there are only a half-dozen or so key things you must focus on. But executing will be difficult.

So there's the seven-step theory you need to avoid, or at least be wary of, if you follow his advice to be leery of books on change. Or the seven practices you need to adopt, if you follow the earnest commentary in the book and it meshes with your own experience.

If you ignore his warnings and read his book, you will find it a nice blend of the practical and theory, as befits a professor of education who is active in change management himself.