Have Theory Will Travel

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Chapter for *Change Wars* (Solution Tree)

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A theory is a way of organizing ideas that makes sense of the world. A theory of action is a way of understanding the world in a way that identifies insights and ideas for effectively improving it.

This chapter is about a theory of action for whole system improvement in education. There are three conditions that such a theory must meet for the task at hand. First, it must meet the *systemness* criterion. Do the ideas stand a chance of addressing the whole system, not just a few hundred schools here and there? Second, our theory must make a compelling case that using the ideas will result in positive *movement*. We are talking about improvement after all — going from one state to another state. Third, such a theory must demonstrably tap into and stimulate people's *motivation*. I ask the reader to keep these three criteria in mind in assessing the theory I am about to offer, and in comparing it with other competing theories of action. Thus, to what extent do other theories or mine measure up to the systemness, movement, and motivation criteria.

I, and others have built this theory on attempts at system reform since 1997 — first in England and then more recently in Ontario. I have had an opportunity to draw on and test the theory in relation to the research literature on large-scale reform, and in comparison to the best research on successful businesses (Fullan, 2008a).

Most significantly we have had a golden opportunity to apply much of the theory to reform in the public school system in Ontario since 2003 and now heading to 2010 — 2 million students, 4,900 schools and 72 districts.

Improving large systems is complex so one can never be sure. I consider these ideas a work in progress — all the more reason to make them clear and up for debate.

In presenting this theory I will take special care to identify the underlying *thinking*. There is too much reliance on models, technologies, and strategic plans. These tools can be useful but they are only tools. The best of them are only as good as the mindset using them. William Duggan's (2007) *Strategic Intuition* makes the same case. Strategic plans which abound in the business literature are of limited use says Duggan, because they do "not tell you how to come up with a strategic idea" in the first place (p. 3). According to Duggan it is not imagination that counts, but rather it is discovery through cumulative action and insight. Gawande (2007) makes a similar point. We get breakthroughs according to Gawande through "the infant science of improving performance." It is learning by doing, but it is really learning by *thinking* in relation to doing.

Experience precedes insight. In cases of innovation people do not develop a vision and then implement it, they have purposeful experiences and then gain insight that they build on. Consolidation through reasoning follows experience and insight. Duggan puts it this way:

> Step 1 is: look in the laboratories of the other scientists [practitioners]. Step 2 is your own experiences … Step 3 is your reason. (p. 18)

A theory of action about change then, depends on insight that derives from experience, purposeful and otherwise. The theory about to be presented has come from at least a decade of action-insight-reason and so on. Let's call the theory a 'Theory of Action for System Change' (TASC). For each component of the theory I will describe its' meaning, discuss the underlying thinking that supports the component, and in the conclusion offer evidence of the theory's validity. The reader will notice an overlap with the Levin chapter because both of us are centrally involved in operationalizing the Ontario strategy.

Theory of Action for System Change

Figure 1 displays the six components of TASC. The only thing to remember at the outset is that all six are interrelated and all are addressed simultaneously. In each case I will describe the meaning of the component and the underlying thinking behind it.

Figure 1: A Theory of Action for System Change (TASC)

SystemReform

Direction and Sector Engagement

Each of the six components has several elements that must be understood. It is easy to get a theory of action wrong as nuanced meaning is everything. Direction from the center is especially delicate. It consists of at least five aspects:

1. An inspirational overall vision

2. A small number of ambitious goals publicly stated

3. A guiding coalition

4. Investment of resources

5. A sense of flexibility and partnership with the field

An inspirational vision means having a clear overall picture of the purpose, nature and rationale of the reform. It must contain both the purpose *and* the means of getting there. It taps into the moral imperative of educational reform — raise the bar and close the gap of all children. It articulates why and how education is key to societal prosperity. It calls for and seeks public confidence in the public education system. It is invitational rather than narrowly prescriptive. And it invites partnership with the education sector and other elements of society. It combines direction and flexibility. Finally, its essence is non-negotiable. To do all this leadership at the center has to 'get it right', i.e., capture a vision that attracts large elements of the education sector to the direction articulated (for a good recent example see Energizing Ontario Education, Ontario Government, 2008).

Second, many governments make the mistake of having a large number of equally desirable goals to the point that it is overwhelming and fragmented from the perspective of schools. Instead governments need to choose a small number of critical ambitious goals and then stay the course. In Ontario, for example, we have three core priorities, literacy, numeracy and high school graduation. It is essential to drill down on these goals while not conceiving them narrowly. They can and must be conceived as higher order learning goals, and linked to other parts of the curriculum such as the arts and character education. A small number of goals in relation to the well being of the whole child can be achieved.

One of the most controversial aspects of central goal setting concerns whether or not to have targets. Andy Hargreaves and I have a running debate about this. Neither of us is wholly for, or wholly against targets. If targets are imposed we both agree that they will become dysfunctional. My theory of action says that people do better if they have some outcome against which their efforts can be assessed. To me it is all right to have an umbrella target as long as it is not obsessively pursued. In any case, the most important element is to be able to assess how well you are doing relative to your starting point, and to keep track of this on annual and three-year rolling cycles. Doing this serves as both a strategy for improvement (along with daily 'assessment for learning' methods) and as an external accountability device. Thus schools compare themselves (a) to themselves, (b) to other schools in similar circumstances, and (c) to an absolute or external standard (such as 75%, 90% or whatever). The caution is to not obsess on the target but rather keep it as an aspirational direction.

Third, a guiding coalition is critical. At first this involves the six or seven key leaders at the center and their advisers — the Premier, Minister, Deputy Minister and others in the Ontario case. They need to meet frequently enough to be clear and consistent about the direction (this first element, but really about all six elements of the theory of action). As the strategy progresses the concept of the guiding coalition extends to other leaders at other layers of the system such as district leaders and school leaders and other vertical leadership elements including teacher unions, administrative organizations, and school trustee groups.

Any new system improvement requires investment. It will need additional money, reallocation of resources, access to time and to expertise. In one sense it is a quid pro quo proposition — initial and recurring investment amplified with greater commitment from other levels of the system. As success evolves, resource investment comes to be seen as money well spent.

Finally, none of this is unidirectional or simply top-down. It includes clear and firm direction as we have seen, but also a keen sense

of partnership with the field, and flexibility according to local needs and variation.

A key part of direction from the center is to establish engagement with the education sector — schools and districts in particular. Quite often systems do not function in a way in which teachers, principals and district educators experience that the education of students is front and center as the core priority. The goal of the center should be to identify the small number of ambitious priorities that are likely to resonate with local schools. Part of the solution then, is to anticipate and capture what is likely to resonate with local educators. As this is contemplated it is essential to connect with the field to determine of the identified agenda seems to be on the right track.

Communication, additional new resources, engagement in capacity building (element two in figure one) all serve to confirm that the selected direction is seen as desirable. We have found that starting with literacy and numeracy at the elementary level is bound to connect provided that it is not imposed in a narrow manner.

In my view, it works like this. You can predict that going deeper in literacy and numeracy is bound to be a solid start. As long as this is not pursued in a narrow fashion, and as long as the agenda is expansive (such as literacy across the curriculum) there is plenty to do to move literacy and numeracy forward. The idea is to have sufficient two-way communication with the field that literacy and numeracy becomes a goal for all. The system or individual schools and districts can expand from this starting point.

The test of the theory of action at this stage is whether the center and the sector generally agree on the path being pursued. Every jurisdiction I have seen will agree that more must be done on literacy, numeracy and high school graduation. The goal is to pursue this agenda with purpose and with a view to expanding it to literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, and to connect these developments with the well being of the whole child.

The crucial goal of sector engagement is that local educators find that the agenda is desirable not because it is the agenda of the center, but rather because it is also valued locally. No local educator will or should ever be sufficiently motivated to implement a priority "just because it is the government's agenda." Sector engagement means that the center and locals find a common goal worth pursuing jointly. Other elements underway consolidate this judgment.

Underlying Thinking

If we probe the underlying thinking of the direction and engagement element of the theory of action the assumption is that systems will not improve without system leadership of a certain kind — system leadership that realizes that top-down reform does not work, but neither does decentralized bottom-up strategies. Rather, system leaders strive for a 'blended' model of simultaneous top-down/bottom-up forces. Top-down direction and investment coupled with bottom-up capacity building. In a word, system leaders direct but do not try to micromanage the change. They trust the process and their theory of action embedded across the six elements of the theory.

Sector engagement is key and represents a dilemma. If the center is impositional, locals will reject the agenda. If the center is laissez-faire there will be little direction. The goal of sector engagement is to begin to foster a we-we sense of identify. Again, because it is literacy and numeracy defined widely almost every jurisdiction will find that it is an agenda worth pursuing. Every effort is extended to position and test the circumstance that locals and the center have a common interest. My theory of action — all six components — make it much more likely that common ground will be found. Take, for example, the evolution of the second component — capacity building.

Capacity Building With a Focus on Results

Capacity building is at the heart of TASC. It consists of the strategies and actions that mobilize capacity defined as (1) new knowledge, skills and competencies, (2) additional resources (time, ideas, money, expertise), and new motivation on the part of all to put in the effort to get results.

In terms of content, there are two separate but related dimensions of capacity. One concerns 'the pedagogical or instructional core of the change' (such as effective instructional practices in literacy and numeracy). The other equally necessary component relates to 'the management of change' — how to build professional learning communities, manage distractors, achieve focus, link to the various parts of the infrastructure.

Within capacity, one of the highest yield competencies relates to the deep and frequent use of data. This is a comprehensive proposition. It concerns establishing daily practices of 'assessment for learning' or more accurately, assessment as learning in which curriculum, instruction and assessment in relation to individual students' learning is synergized. Instruction and assessment become seamless (see Fullan, Hill and Crévola, 2006).

Capacity building with a focus on results also means 'assessment of learning' serving simultaneously as an additional strategy for improvement. I have already introduced this element in the first component of our theory. Schools begin to measure and track progress relative to their own starting point, and to external standards. Internal accountability within the school or district serves external accountability to the state.

Capacity building itself is promoted directly from the center with respect to training, curriculum resources and the like, but its most powerful form is *indirect*. By indirect I mean deliberate strategies designed to help peers learn from each other — within schools, across schools, and across districts. We call this 'lateral capacity building' and it is most powerful because educators are learning from their colleagues. The center has a proactive role to find and coordinate these activities. They seek best ideas wherever they can be found and use the 'wisdom of the crowd' to spread and assess their worth and impact.

Our theory of action is proactive but constructive. This is crucial for situations of underperformance or stagnation. Intervention in these situations is necessary but must be capacity driven rather than judgmentally based. In Ontario, we have been able to establish a turnaround school program — the Ontario Focused Intervention Program (OFIP) in which some 1,000 of the 4,000 elementary schools have been involved. The concept is to identify problematic situations, avoid stigmatizing them, and then to

engage them in turnaround capacity building. In 2006-2007 these schools gained ten percentage points more in literacy and numeracy than the rest of the system. It is not that judgment isn't warranted in some situations, but rather that it is a lousy motivator. Better to assume first that lack of capacity is the problem, and tackle that first.

Capacity building, then, encompasses:

- Knowledge, resources and motivation

- Instructional and management of change expertise

- Assessment for as well as of learning

- Direct and indirect capacity building

- A linkage between capacity and results

- Early and continuous intervention in case of need

Underlying Thinking

The neglect of capacity building has been the fatal weakness of reform policies (such as 'No Child Left Behind'). Politicians generally favor more direct external accountability schemes. By contrast, our theory of action argues that capacity is sine qua non of improvement. New capacities *cause* results.

Moreover, capacity enhancement is motivational. There is nothing like getting better at something important to want to do more of it. Capacity building enhances ownership.

Third, capacity building is empowering. When people become excellent at something they become experts. They become, for example, more critical of ill-conceived external ideas. Other potentially good but insufficiently developed ideas that might have been started from the center become tempered by the expertise of skilled practitioners. Empowered, competent people also talk back when the situation calls for it.

Finally, internal to the school, and external to the public accountability become interrelated. An effective balance between the two becomes established as a platform for going further. Intervention programs are capacity-driven and seem to serve accountability for the better because they get results with less rancour.

Supportive Infrastructure and Leadership

Third, all of this work requires a strong infrastructure to support and propel it. For this we have used the concept of 'tri-level' reform. What has to happen at the government, district and school/community levels to engage in the depth of change required?

At the government level, most state departments and ministries of education do not have the culture and capacity to lead the work. Thus, new structural and cultural arrangements are required. It need not and should not result in new layers of bureaucracy but rather involves re-configuring and adding to existing resources. But beware, as my colleague Ben Levin (twice Deputy Minister), warns of the folly of doing yet another reorganization. Reorganizations are distractors and thus should be kept to a minimum.

Ontario, as did England, created a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat staffed by some existing ministry personnel, but significantly strengthened by respected practitioners from schools and districts. The goal at the government level is to work on changing the internal culture of the ministry, and to establish a new two-way partnership with the field (the other two levels, district and school). Needless to say, capacity building is required at the department of education level.

We are all learning more about the characteristics of effective districts, and they are not at all removed from the theory of action espoused in this chapter — focus on instruction, use data, develop capacity, foster leadership, build learning communities, link to results, and so on (see for example, Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and Johnson, 2007). Near the beginning of a new change process some districts will be ahead of the government so to speak, and others will be behind. The goal then, is to develop the capacity of school districts so that they can lead in two directions — one as an effective infrastructure to its schools (with all the simultaneous top-down/bottom-up strategies that that implies); and the other as a pro-active agent vis-à-vis the government. Districts need to become semi-autonomous but engaged players vertically and laterally with other districts.

At the school and community level the new capacities of leading collaborative cultures need to be firmly embraced. Principal and teacher leadership is required for this task.

It is obvious that new forms of leadership are required at all three levels. We need leaders who can drill down and be plugged into the bigger picture simultaneously. There are now impressive 'qualifications frameworks' and corresponding programs for school principals. We also need formal and informal leadership development programs for all leaders. We are working with several leadership roles: school principals, superintendents, literacy and numeracy coaches and mentors, student success leaders (high school teacher change agents). Once you proliferate a critical mass of change agent leaders focusing individually and collectively on capacity building linked to results you have a set of powerful change forces that in many ways has a life of its own.

In sum, several components are required:

- Capacity development for each of the three levels of government, district, and school

- A degree of coordination and rapport across the three levels

- Leadership development for the raft of change agents working in the infrastructure

Underlying Thinking

It is obvious that capacity building (element two of our theory) will not develop on its own. It requires a refocused infrastructure whose main work is to build capacity with a link to results. Capacity building represents an enormous and never ending task. And if you don't refocus and refurbish the work of the infrastructure, it will continue to do whatever work it is cut out to do. Left alone, it specializes in bureaucracy — some of it necessary, but over the years it has come to represent one of the main hazards to system reform, namely, bureaucratic *distractors* that take us away from the core business of teaching and learning.

Manage the Distractors

In complex political systems distractors are ubiquitous and inevitable. It helps to build up the positive side of the equation — a relentless focus on capacity building-- but you have to be equally explicit and aware of addressing distractors — preempting some, and dealing with others as they come in a way that does not divert and sap energy.

The big one on the preventative list concerns collective bargaining. It is not always possible, but more and more jurisdictions are seeking and achieving four-year collective agreements which usher in a period of relative peace and stability. Another category is now to manage the managerial tasks ranging from paperwork, finances, buildings, safety, personnel, etc. In *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship* (Fullan, 2008b), I have specific recommendations for both principals and system leaders for dealing with these types of distractors.

It is clear that effective schools and effective districts are better at addressing distractors and at maintaining focus, and we must do work at spreading those habits. Guiding Coalitions and other leaders at all levels train themselves to make teaching and learning the core preoccupation and find ways to reduce the debilitating impact of distractors.

Underlying Thinking

We all complain about distractors inhibiting our ability to get the main work done. The difference in our TASC framework is that concept of distractors becomes an item for analysis and proactive action. People discover small and big ways to make distractors less consuming. Every hour saved is an hour gained for improvement work. Every frustration experienced from negative diversions drains energy at the expense of learning priorities. Since time and energy are of the essence in school improvement, if you can harness these resources effectively the benefits are substantial.

Continuous Evaluation and Inquiry

A theory, in essence, is a set of tested hypotheses about reality. It is never assumed to be valid once and for all. Rather the assumption is that a theory must always be subject to assessment in relation to today's and future realities. It is for this reason that constant inquiry and evaluation must be built into the mindset and actions as you go. Leaders at al levels are expected to have an inquiring disposition: are we implementing the strategy effectively; is it working; are there any surprises, and so on.

Second, any theory of change worth its salt must continuously search for and spread effective practices for the task at hand whether these be found in the system or in the worldwide literature.

Third, assessment of implementation is a must to determine where things are working, or not. For example, in year three of Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the Secretariat identified and conducted case studies on 8 of the 72 school districts that seemed to have sound strategies in place and were getting results. These case studies were fed back to the districts in question and made available to the system as a whole, prompting numerous site visits to learn about the specific strategies being employed.

Fourth, theories of action should employ third party evaluators to provide critical feedback on the strengths, weaknesses and impact of the strategies being employed.

Fifth, systems should disseminate their theories and findings to the larger international communicate party to contribute to the thinking of others, and partly to be subjected to external scrutiny and critique. Writing this chapter in *Change Wars* is a case in point. Further, systems should benchmark their efforts against the increasingly sophisticated and detailed international assessments of student achievement conducted by OECD in its PISA program, and by other international agencies.

Underlying Thinking

You have to practice what you preach. Modeling ongoing inquiry gives a powerful message in its own right. And you find out things essential to improvement. You are always testing and refining your theory of action. You learn to get better by gaining strategic insights of the kind that Duggan (2007) discusses. He says that such purposeful work builds on "intelligent memory" (what you have been experiencing) in a way that sparks new insights leading to more effective action. Such flashes of insight do not occur every day, but they are bound to emerge if you are immersed in implementing the kind of theory I am espousing this chapter.

Two-Way Communication

If you don't have a good theory of action and/or if your vision is mostly rhetoric and/or if the vision espouses goals but is comparatively silent on strategy, no amount of communication will get you anywhere. But assuming a solid strategy as in the previous five components, the lesson is communicate, communicate, communicate.

Within the education sector every opportunity should be taken to state the strategy (which can be stated succinctly once it is on the

table). This will help clarify it in the minds of the communicator, will lead to clarity in the minds of others, and will provide ample opportunity for feedback and refinement. It is an exercise in giving and receiving information. Further, because this communication is coupled with action (e.g., capacity building experiences) the meaning of it will become increasingly grounded. Leaders at all three levels — school, district state — should be able to articulate the strategy with a high degree of consistency and agreement. Meaning, specificity, and commitment are all served through this process.

Communication with the broader public is more complex. One of the most fundamental goals of system improvement, which should be stated and restated publicly, is to increase the public's confidence in the public education system. Since this is a goal and since transparency is part of our theory, evidence would have to be constantly communicated to parents.

Equally critical is to situate the public school system in realtion to societal improvement: literate, numerate citizens; fostering of social cohesion in highly diverse societies; character education; reduction of poverty; economic prosperity; and the general well-being and happiness of the population-- all figure in this equation, not through the education system alone, but as a vital part in conjunction with other agencies. We are, after all, talking about *societal* improvement.

The communication should be both small and big. Sometimes it is about individual school success, about parent engagement at both local and school level, and other times it is about the health of the society as a whole. As long as you are doing specific things to bring about improvement there will be plenty of interesting things to talk about.

In short:

- Communication about vision and strategy

- Opportunity to disseminate and receive feedback

- Grounded in capacity building, and therefore highly meaningful and commitment-generating

- Evidence based

- Related to society prosperity and well being

These are the elements that fuel communication and bring to the fore the actions and results embedded in the previous five strategies.

Underlying Thinking

Change strategies in large systems are complex. It seems that a perennial complaint is that people do not see the big picture. Maybe the problem is that system leaders do not, in fact, have a clear policy (especially with respect to the means of implementing it). Maybe people have different histories and interpret the same policy differently. How many leaders have complained that their policies are crystal clear but practitioners seem to misunderstand or misinterpret them?

You should take as a given that policies and strategies require many more times the communication than you might rationally feel is sufficient. And when you articulate strategies along with progress or lack therein you become more clear, you monitor and spur implementation, and you continually link to people's ongoing new experiences. Communication, communication, communication. But make sure you have something specific to communicate.

Conclusion

I offer this theory of action for system improvement as one that is grounded in intensive action over the previous decade, and as one that holds up well when compared to evidence in the wider literature. Using the theory in Ontario for example, has increased literacy and numeracy within four years; has reduced but by no means eliminated the achievement gap; has cut teacher attrition in the first three years of teaching by over two-thirds; and has increased the morale of all. We continue to expand what we consider to be desirable education outcomes such as: the well being of the whole child, the relationship between literacy, numeracy and the arts, greater parent engagement, and so on. And these broader outcomes redound on the action theory itself and its strategies resulting in continuous improvement of the theory.

There is still much work to be done in Ontario, and in other jurisdictions that are showing strong interest in the ideas. You may ask what if you are in a jurisdiction where leaders are not interested in this or that theory of action that you know to have great promise? Well, one of the reasons we put new theories into place and then report on them is to provide people with ideas that they can promulgate and use. But in the final analysis you have to do what you can in the situation you find yourself.

Finally, to those who would critique this theory, bring on the ideas! Remember the criteria: system change, improvement, motivational. Critique the theory, but it is incumbent on you to present the alternative with the sound reasoning, underlying assumptions and thinking, and evidence that your alternative promises to be better. This is what *Change Wars* is all about.

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