



June 2017 | Volume 74 | Number 9
Gearing Up for Change Pages 8-14

Making Progress Possible: A Conversation with Michael Fullan

To achieve true reform, this expert on school change explains, we need to infuse collaborative professionalism throughout schools with a focus on deep learning for all students.

Naomi Thiers

In *The Six Secrets of Change*, you say the number one secret for leaders who want to improve their schools is "love your employees." What do you mean by that?

"Love your employees" means you need to set up conditions where people are motivated individually and collectively. If there's one word that captures change and change theory, it's *motivation*. People have tried extrinsic motivation—rewards and punishments. They get a little bit of progress, but not much. What really is the heart of successful change is intrinsic motivation, which is about purpose, mastery, capacity, working with others, and having a degree of autonomy. The best way you can love teachers is to create the conditions under which they can become successful.

The accountability movement has tried to put maximum pressure on teachers to get results—and it doesn't work because teachers need to know *how* to do the right thing, not just that the right thing should be done. Building accountability into our working lives is one of the key actions I talk about in *Six Secrets* that will lead everyone in a school to be more productive. But if you want to motivate teachers, you can't just try to convince them through, for example, research evidence. That doesn't work. Nor can you motivate people just through moral exhortation. You convince them by giving them experience as teachers in relatively nonthreatening circumstances, with others who can be helpful. And then when they start to experience success with their students, with other teachers, they really get motivated. Then it kind of accelerates.

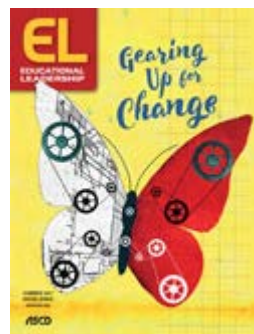
Andy Hargreaves and I call it *collaborative professionalism*. It's the teacher with a degree of autonomy interacting with other teachers, figuring out the best things to do to get results for the particular students they're working with.

The overall thrust of our work is to strengthen the middle (districts) and the bottom (students and their schools) so that they're less at the mercy of policies coming from the top. At the same time, we see schools and communities as proactive partners moving upward as they take into account and influence policy.

What kind of accountability would promote motivation and positive change among teachers?

Richard Elmore said 15 years ago, "No amount of external accountability will be effective in the absence of internal accountability." So what's internal accountability? It's when the group individually and collectively has a sense of responsibility about their work. When we look at collaborative cultures, the districts, the schools, even some of the systems that have strong degrees of collaboration, they have built in a growing and increasing sense of responsibility about what they're doing and how they need to explain themselves—not just to themselves, but to the wider system.

To have accountability that works means to have a framework of goals, to monitor the results that come from those goals, but to be transparent and specific about the evidence that people



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themselves are using to improve. And once you have trust, transparency, specificity, evidence, and nonjudgmentalism, you get a constellation of conditions that make progress possible. In effect, this turns accountability on its head. Such accountability is built at the level of action, which in turn interfaces with the external accountability system—inside-out more than the reverse.

In *Freedom to Change*, you note that research from the business world finds that employees need freedom from constraints like micromanagement to contribute their best. How does this concept of "freedom from" play out in education organizations?

There is a big difference between "freedom from" constraints and what you do with "freedom to" once you get it. This idea of "freedom to" has a long history, starting with sociologist Erich Fromm around 1930. Here's the essence of it: What people try to do first—because we all want "freedom from"; we want to not be imposed upon—is to get rid of constraints. So accountability is a big constraint. How do we reduce that? How do we reduce testing? Educators work to get rid of a whole bunch of constraints like that.

If you work on those things and you're successful, there's an inclination to declare victory. We got rid of the constraints! But what people realize once that happens is, now that they have the freedom to change, they're kind of at sea. They don't know where to go. And that's the part we've been working on—to provide educators with individual and small-group autonomy connected to collaboration.

Collaborative professionalism is fueled by both good autonomy and good teamwork. Autonomy is not isolation. If you have good autonomy, it means that you're your own person; you're trying things. But you have to be connected and learn from the group, otherwise your autonomy won't get stronger. You have to contribute to and learn from the group. These conditions of "freedom to" are the real solution to the dilemma that if you're completely free, it won't work, and if you're completely subsumed by the group, it won't work.

So this sophisticated type of freedom to change is really the part we're moving towards now. I think we're making progress getting rid of constraints, so there's a real opportunity. One thing I say to principals and teachers and district people is, your job is not to implement government policy. It's to exploit government policy for local priorities, to be less on the receiving end and more on the initiation end. So it's a proactive solution.

Can you give an example of a district or a local entity doing this?

Our team has been working a lot in California for the last five years. California has a thousand districts and seven million students. Five years ago, at all levels—the governor, the state superintendent of education, the key districts—California took a strong interest in our theory of school change, which values capacity building over compliance, moving towards coherence and internal accountability. Some key districts have been working proactively with the governor's policy of decentralization of resources, or local control in the context of a state policy of continuous improvement and accountability. This has liberated local districts, and we see several of them taking advantage of that. But interestingly, the "freedom to" problem shows up here. There's more leeway for local initiative, but some districts don't know how to do it. So they haven't taken advantage of the freedom the way they could.

Let's talk about how successful leaders perceive obstacles to school change.

One of my mentors, Seymour Sarason, said in 1970 that school principals and other leaders perceive more barriers than actually exist in the system. In other words, they're not pushing hard enough. I think part of how you treat obstacles resides in the individual leader. Those individuals who show more initiative, who have a greater sense of efficacy, will do more under the same conditions than somebody else who might say, well, I'm not allowed to do that. It's having a growth mindset.

The school district or the state education department may not even be forbidding certain things. Those who are able to do something don't ask for permission a lot. If they think it's going to work, they try to do it. You have to be proactive in every system and do the teamwork and capacity building that will enable you to go further.

There's another even deeper obstacle. Some people have called it—it's an odd phrase—*pedagogical legacy* or *cultural legacy*. This means that you as a teacher are used to a certain

culture. You're used to teaching in a certain way. You want to change, and you even start to change—but you find yourself slipping back into the old, comfortable way. We need to help educators persist at the early stages of promising change to get the payoff.

How might a school leader confront pedagogical legacy?

Research shows that the biggest factor in the effectiveness of a principal is the degree to which he or she "participates as a learner" working with teachers to get to a solution. Let's take a principal that goes into a school that's siloed: Teachers are teaching on their own. There's very little interaction. So what would an effective principal do in relation to the teachers? In my experience, that leader would do two things. One, he or she would start to interact with teachers individually and collectively as a learner, creating a climate where teachers are encouraged to take risks, to work together, to be supportive. A climate of trust, but one focused on results.

The other thing the leader would do is "use the group to change the group." Teachers are less likely to fall back into that pedagogical legacy if a whole bunch of teachers—helped by the principal—are pushing for what's more effective.

For example, Park Manor, a grades 6–8 school just west of Toronto that I worked with, uses this procedure: Every Friday, the three grade 6 teachers sit down together—as do the three teachers in grades 7 and 8—and use a protocol to examine the progress of one student from each of their classes. Let's say one of the grade 6 teachers says, here's Student X and here's what I'm trying with Student X. This is working, but I need some advice on that. Over the course of an hour, they discuss one student from each of their classes, every Friday, week after week. When you do that, you're pushing one another for what works. You pull out the knowledge.

So it's changing the culture—and I want to use the word *culture*—of the school and the culture of the district. Such a culture establishes the conditions for sustainability.

"Seeking balance between autonomy and cooperation" is one of the four important actions for change you mention in *Freedom to Change*. What does it look like when teachers in a school are both autonomous and connected?

First of all, we want to bring it into the open, to name these principles of autonomy and connectedness as two crucial aspects of the organization. We don't want to be, like, "I want people to be autonomous and collaborative, but I'm not going to tell anybody." This means that everybody knows that people have a degree of autonomy in this culture—they can be their own person—but they also have a responsibility to interact with one another.

The schools and districts I'm talking about think this way. The checks and balances that occur between the individual's degree of freedom and the interaction of the group are quite strong. They allow you to sort out what is effective.

At Park Manor, a high-technology pedagogy school, teachers are in fact doing their own thing, but they share when they discover something promising and begin to develop even better solutions together. They have many mechanisms to engage in collaborative professional learning. For example, they have each of the school's nine teachers demonstrate two things he or she is doing with technology that are highly effective. So each teacher has his or her own ideas and their colleagues can recognize what each of the nine teachers are doing that's working. This makes it likely that people will be drawn toward things that are working better. So the dynamic between individual initiative and group processing is quite strong.

You mention feedback as another guidepost for this constructive "freedom to." What kind of feedback leads to motivation to change?

Feedback is one of the hardest things for humans to get right. People will say, "I like feedback. I don't get enough of it. But I only want feedback that's positive." That's a natural human tendency. Even under the best of circumstances, we don't want feedback that feels, to us, judgmental. So in our work we try to help schools reduce inappropriate, negative, judgmental interventions, those that really decrease the possibility that feedback will be heard, and instead emphasize collaborative cultures. A collaborative culture has all kinds of feedback built into it. Teachers visiting one another's classroom, looking at what works with students together—if you're a teacher inside that, you're getting lots of feedback from colleagues. In this way,

feedback is organically built into the day-to-day culture of the organization.

Ed Catmull, the CEO of Pixar, wrote a book a few years ago in which he explored how Pixar made 14 blockbusters in a row in a highly competitive industry. Pixar achieved that because they set up a culture that incorporated peers giving feedback to peers. Their two guidelines were—his words—candor and autonomy.

At the beginning of each project, the directors presented their early ideas to other directors and people in the company who formed what Catmull called the brain trust. They got lots of feedback. The ground rules were, don't hold back—give people strongly critical feedback if it's deserved—but with the understanding that people receiving the feedback don't have to take it. That's the autonomy. Most people who get that kind of feedback are more likely to take it.

Another key action for change you mention is educators spreading their positive actions or ideas. You say that *diffusion* works better than traditional "scaling up" for this. Can you explain?

My coauthors and I have actually been writing about diffusion—or what we're now calling *intentional social movement*—in our new book on the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning initiative, which is forthcoming from Corwin. We're trying to change the nature of teaching so there's more partnership among students, teachers, and families. We're relating deep learning to six global competencies—character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Scaling up school by school will never work; you have to mobilize large numbers of schools and districts learning from one another while discovering and retaining what works.

I'm always interested in changing the whole system. A district would be the minimum size, but the preferred size would be a state or a province. And when I looked at bringing any new practice to scale, there have been examples over the years where people have had success. For example, the Annenberg Foundation worked on really tough problems like concentrated intergenerational poverty and the underachievement of black and Latino youth, and found out what it would take to change that dynamic; they identified factors similar to those we've been talking about. But their successes were very much in the minority. They didn't spread.

The assumption behind going to scale is, if we get some good pilot examples, we'll know what works there, and we can transfer it to other places, expand it. Well, that doesn't work. Why not? Because the new places don't have the capacity. Or the replication is too slow: You get 20 pilots, then 30, but it never adds up to the whole system. People lose interest; they change priorities.

What's going to work is what I call *diffusion* or *intentional social movement*. Let me give an example. About eight years ago, we worked in Ontario, which has 900 high schools. Their graduation rate was stuck at 68 percent. So we created an innovation that enabled schools to develop programs involving applied work in various sectors, such as aviation, forestry, finance, or whatever fields were of interest to the community. But instead of doing this innovation in a few of the 900 schools and trying to scale it, we said any school can apply for it and we'll support that school. And as we support those schools, we'll quickly disseminate what's being learned laterally to other schools. Eventually almost all the high schools were doing one or another part of this innovation, and learning from one another. The high school graduation rate went up from 68 percent to its current 85.5 percent. Moreover, the number of students involved in the programs grew rapidly, from 600 students in the first year to 48,000 within a decade. That's convincing. Pilots don't go to scale, culture does.

In our deep learning work, instead of sequential thinking (doing a pilot and going to scale), we're trying to get to the idea of simultaneous learning—people learning from one another. It's a bit complicated because you're investing in a lot of initiatives, some of which don't work out. People should not be too constrained at the beginning, so that they can do different things. Then you need to sort out rapidly what's working and what's not working and do more of the things that are working. It requires good leadership. It also requires that ability to look outside yourself, to "go outside to get better inside." Whether you're an individual school or a school district, make sure you're connecting to what's happening beyond yourself, and contributing to that as well as learning from it.

So you need to do rapid measurement as you go along?

Yes. Rapid measurement and looking at things as they develop, always paying attention to any change's impact on student motivation, student learning, and student achievement. You don't have to prove it works within 12 months, but you have to show progress in measurable ways as you go from year one to year two. People latch on to what is working if they have early access to the ideas.

Is there anything you'd like to mention about your current work?

Here's one exciting thing. When you start to implement those global competencies, the six Cs, with the new pedagogy, students gravitate towards wanting to do something that's worthwhile. More students and teachers get turned on because they're doing something relevant—and they feel they need to help change things. It's obvious that the world is a lot more complex and anxiety-producing now; even little kids know something's up.

We have hundreds of examples being produced by schools we are working with in many countries. In Uruguay, for example, we have 10-year-olds saying, "I am supposed to be helping humanity, so I think I'll start in my neighborhood." They then address specific local problems. Birds were eating vegetables in local gardens, so the students built an electronic device that vibrated when birds came nearby, scaring them away.

The exciting part is, with these new pedagogies—which are more tied into real problems, more about humanity and citizenship—the students who are most alienated from regular schooling are the ones who move the furthest and fastest into this learning mode I just described. Our preliminary evidence—I call it the equity hypothesis—shows that by doing this new work, those students who are least connected are being drawn in in a way that changes their lives. We call it attacking inequity with excellence. The breakthrough is that *all* students end up learning and being more equipped to cope with and influence the world. Indeed, our newest motto is "engage the world, change the world."

Editor's Note: This interview has been edited for space and clarity.

Michael Fullan is a recognized authority on educational change who has exerted a strong influence on school reform in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and beyond. He was a long-time dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (where he is professor emeritus), and in the 1990's, he worked with Prime Minister Tony Blair to help reform Great Britain's education system. As special policy advisor in education to the Premier of Ontario since 2004, Fullan spearheaded significant reforms that, through a focus on teacher and system development, boosted student achievement. Fullan's 35 books, manuals, and videos on education outline effective change strategies for leaders, as well as exploring the "moral purpose" of educational leadership.

Fullan now applies his expertise to New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, a global initiative that works with school networks in seven countries to nurture practices that lead to deep learning. In this interview on change, he explores a topic central to three of his recent books—*The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive* (Jossey-Bass, 2011), *Freedom to Change: Four Strategies to Put Your Inner Drive into Overdrive* (Jossey-Bass, 2015), *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* (with Andy Hargreaves, Teachers College Press, 2012), and *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action* (with Joanne Quinn, Corwin 2015). Much of the work he and his colleagues do goes under the banner of "Motion Leadership."

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