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Thoughts and reflections on teaching and learning – Cohort 21 Member Blog

Book Review: Nuance by M. Fullan



In his latest book, *Nuance*, Michael Fullan refines his previous research and writings on what it takes to be an effective leader of educational organizations. We can all agree that this has never been more important. We can also agree that concepts of leadership, and practices successful leadership have never before been so disrupted.

Gone are traditional face-to-face connections.

Gone is the ability to convey, with ease, humour, confidence, support and empathy through body language and tone enhancing communication (“We are all just talking heads!”)

Gone are the many informal opportunities to connect in the hallways, lunch or staff room

In light of this, how should leaders behave? I believe that this book maintains its value in this time of disruption – it offers us answers and practices to successfully navigate these uncertain times.

When I looked up “leadership icons” to see if there was anything that captured “nuance leaders” here is what I found:



None of these support the author’s thesis. And so, in reading the below, I ask that you try your best to not see leadership as (1) male-dominated (2) leading from the front and (3) so interconnected that you can’t find the leader(s).

Michael Fullan offers up a few key characteristics of a what he means by a ‘Nuanced Leader’:

Nuance leaders have a curiosity about what is possible, openness to other people, sensitivity to context, and a loyalty to a better future. They see below the surface, enabling them to detect patterns and their consequences for the system. They connect people to their own and each other’s humanity. They don’t lead, they teach. They change people’s emotions, not just their minds. They have an instinct for orchestration. They foster sinews of success. They are humble in the face of challenges, determined for the group to be successful, and proud to celebrate success. They end up developing incredibly accountable organizations because the accountability gets built into the culture. Above all, they are courageously and relentlessly committed to changing the system for the betterment of humanity.

This is, as is Michael Fullan’s style, verbose in the description and (for me at least) hard to pin down – to really get behind this description as a leadership approach. So let’s break it down:

Nuance leaders have a curiosity about what is possible, openness to other people, sensitivity to context, and a loyalty to a better future.

For these set of characteristics, the author turns to Leonardo da Vinci’s life as a way of explanation. He explains that a nuanced leader must live within the processes of change. It requires leaders to ask questions about the lived experience of others within the organization and get to the deeper purpose. They do this by being open to others and to believe that all can contribute to their (the leaders’) better understanding of processes within the organization. They filter these contributions and information through the context of the situation and priorities that they have, but they always use these to guide them to their vision of what education can be.

For example, a leader can listen, understand and empathize with employees and faculty about their current situations in Covid19. They can respond in kind with messages of hope, take action to support them, and even alter some key practices to ensure that their wellbeing is taken care of. At the same time, these actions are taken with an eye to the future ahead. So this might be upskilling some to ensure that they can maintain adding value, and feeling valued at the school.

They see below the surface, enabling them to detect patterns and their consequences for the system.

Nuance leaders (Note, I am, nor does the author use the term “nuanced leaders”) seek to understand through patterns. They splice data to find the patterns, and are aware of emerging patterns as they unfold around them. They use these patterns to enhance their understanding of the direction of the organization, and who, how and what this means for the future. Nuance leaders can identify patterns in spending, in employment practices and in the culture and how these patterns are supporting or causing friction to the betterment of the school. They practice ideas to see how disrupting these patterns may or may not support the direction.

For example, a nuance leader will look at the new normal of Covid 19 to consider how community moments, like school assemblies, have supported or hindered the student experience. They will take a step back and look at the patterns of participation across the school by grade, by faculty and even by day of the week. Then they will test out something new, taking advantage of the times to push certain aspects of community time, and reimagine others – like how might students take more ownership over this time?

They connect people to their own and each other’s humanity. They don’t lead, they teach. They change people’s emotions, not just their minds.

Nuance leaders have ‘human-design’ at the heart of their practice and their decision-making. They consider the lived experience of others as a result of the current reality and how that might change with each decision. If a decision is undertaken, they educate the community on WHY that was the decision, and do so in a way that connects to their emotions, not just rationale.

For example, in the days of Covid 19, the lived experience of all members of a school has changed and there are emotions that are attached to this. Emotions of grief, anxiety, fear and hope and joy as well. Nuance leaders connects to these emotions, and (as much as possible through Zoom and other digital tools) empathizes with the community by sharing their losses, their fears, but also their hopes and their moments of joy. They educate the community, in a way that is fulsome and directed to different shareholders (parents, students and faculty, and alumni). But they also use this time to bring the community along in their vision of the future, their hope and their joy. They don’t mire themselves in a position of reactions, into a position of copying what others are doing, nor in a position of fear. No, they acknowledge all that we might do (status quo, hid in fear, do what others are doing) and then shift to the hope and joy that will come through a commitment to a betterment of humanity.

They have an instinct for orchestration. They foster sinews of success. They are humble in the face of challenges, determined for the group to be successful, and proud to celebrate success. They end up developing incredibly accountable organizations because the accountability gets built into the culture.

Covid 19 has taken educational institutions and disrupted their daily rhythms, shaken what it means to be a member of the community, and the roles that we all play within them. Nuance leaders will see the need for reorganisation and realignment of roles, of positions, as well as how these roles are positioned in the HOW of the delivery of school. Nuance leaders will bring in employees to support the vision of the school at this time, and unite them through meaningful and purposeful work, and how that vision is connected to the whole, the vision and direction.

For example, a nuance leader will reach out to faculty and assure them of their value, their compensation, and they will also assure them that in this new normal change will come for them. They will ask them to position themselves for that exciting change, and again reassure them that they will have the support and training to make these changes a success for them, and for the organization.

But they will also establish very clear lines of reporting and of being held to account. This looks like phased work plans for faculty and employees alike. It is asking managers of people to reach out and support the wellbeing of their direct reports, and by supporting their pivot to the new normal. By asking managers to seek the skills and characteristics that can support the organization in moving forward.

Above all, they are courageously and relentlessly committed to changing the system for the betterment of humanity.

Well, changing the system is already happening. But a nuance leader will have courage to leverage this time to not just continue to ‘do school’. They will use this time to reposition and align the human resources within the organization to support the learning experience in such a way that we capitalize on the upskilling in digital tools, and in digital pedagogy in making these a part of the new fabric of school’s DNA.

Now that we have seen this whole-school change in how we connect and how we learn, how we build relationships with and amongst each other, and how we understand ourselves within the school, nuance leaders will weave these skills, approaches and language into the culture of the school so that when we return to the campus, we return as humans with new skills, new hopes and ways of being that will have at its purpose human-design for the betterment of humanity.

May you go well into this ever evolving space of education. May you have time to reflect and appreciate the skills that you are gaining, the emotional fortitude that is growing your stores of resilience, and may you, now having seen what our students are capable of, pivot your practice to support their flourishing as human beings.