

MANAGING

Changing education begins at the bottom, not the top

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 4 HOURS AGO

UPDATED 37 MINUTES AGO

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When Benjamin Adlard Primary School in Lincolnshire, a highly deprived area 250 kilometres north of London, England, tried to improve, one unusual tactic was to invite students from other schools to come and tell them what from their vantage point was missing.

Among the messages: “Your library is full of books for girls. Where are your books for boys? Your playground is boring. It’s all concrete. Where is the grass?”

Michael Fullan, the former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, who has been working on educational reform for nearly 60 years, says the school had been stuck for many years in a sea of hopelessness. But

with a new, participatory leadership that restored professional confidence, it was turned around and is now a place where students and teachers want to be.

Educational reform is difficult. And it is generally not succeeding. “So far, the 21st century has been a flop when it comes to education,” he writes in his book, *The Six Secrets of Change 2.0*, a follow-up to the initial version he offered in 2008. Education performance has been declining across all OECD countries. In the past 20 years, we experienced what he calls “a sleeping decade” followed by what he calls a “deeply stuck” period, because nothing seems to be working.

When the public hears of educational reform, it is usually of a government trying to drive change. But the lesson Mr. Fullan draws from Lincolnshire is that success comes when you turn the system on its head. Instead of change coming from the top, it must rise from the bottom: Principal, parents, teachers and students coming up with an example others can learn from.

His 2008 secrets included a chapter warning us about the folly of leaping on apparent management truths. He stressed he was offering theories, not a guaranteed formula, and two decades later he has updated them for the dynamic complexity of the time:

- **Love your employees:** Change is “spirit work.” It involves deep care and commitment to humanity – in education to well-being and learning for all. No stakeholder is more important than any other. He points to the conclusion of famed management researcher Mary Parker Follett in 1925 that the more complex a change, the more crucial it is to involve those implementing it by jointly determining what should change and how to put that in practice. “The goal of management,” she said, “is to foster unity not uniformity; to achieve greater integration via ‘power with,’ not ‘power over.’”
- **Connect peers with purpose:** To lead effectively, you need what he calls “contextual literacy.” You must commit to understanding and valuing the context in which you are operating, to support, enrich and perhaps transform that situation for all members. “Joining a new organization or moving between classes or schools means becoming an apprentice,

learning from those familiar with the setting or others also facing similar changes,” he writes. You may be an expert, bringing new knowledge and skills to the situation, but you must also be an apprentice, learning. With schools having lost their purpose for the majority of students and many teachers, you must help everyone revisit why we have schools and make that purpose tangible.

- **Capacity building prevails:** Leaders must seek connected autonomy, so that people can feel simultaneously connected and autonomous. This is about explicitly considering connection to others but also a commitment to one’s own values and the situation. He warns an obstacle in education is that “teachers feel they are overmanaged and mistrusted. Managers come to feel that teachers are defensive and unreachable.” Change agents must do the hard work of breaking that cycle of mistrust. They must also be open to mavericks.
- **Learning is the work:** Schools are about learning. But so is change. It’s not just about training programs and meetings, but learning between those sessions – continuous learning. That means getting past barriers many teachers establish to being observed by others and learning from their colleagues in their classrooms. Leaders who want to have an impact must mentor others, nurturing a culture of leaders learning from each other. They will be judged by how many good leaders they leave behind.
- **Transparency rules:** In times of complex transition, nobody knows what is coming next and you need an exploratory mindset coupled with a testing orientation. “Be a postmodern anthropologist. You never know what you will unearth,” he says. You must be open to surprise – whatever you find – and also have the judgment to handle it properly. This happens better in a transparent than a closed culture. Leaders must look forward to receiving data on how their schools are faring. Transparency is also vital for the credibility and long-term survival of organizations dependent on public confidence.
- **Systems learn:** Most organizations do not learn and those that do are often not able to sustain their learning. When the methods he is advising are

followed, he argues the system can and often does learn. A key, in a bottom-up approach, is learning from specific, successful examples elsewhere.

Those are not simple ideas. But he is not offering a guidebook, just updated theories for change leaders in education or other fields to ponder and try.

Cannonballs

- Mike Figliuolo, managing director of the thoughtLEADERS consultancy, boils leadership down to four aspects: Leading yourself, leading the thinking, leading the people and leading a balanced life.
- Jon Verbeck, who advises business owners on their numbers and growth, says businesses rarely struggle because the owner stopped caring about the firm, employees, customers or reputations. Invariably the problem is the organization has grown more complex than its systems can support. He adds that companies rarely lose control all at once: “Reporting gets a little later. Collections slow down. Inventory grows. Exceptions multiply. Responsibilities become unclear.”
- Trust in leaders isn’t agreement, observes executive coach Dan Rockwell. It’s confidence that weaknesses won’t be used as a weapon; leaders serve something bigger than themselves; and words and actions walk hand in hand.

Harvey Schachter is a Kingston-based writer specializing in management issues. He, along with Sheelagh Whittaker, former CEO of both EDS Canada and Cancom, are the authors of When Harvey Didn’t Meet Sheelagh: Emails on Leadership.

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