Coherence Making

How leaders cultivate the pathway for school and system change with a shared process

BY MICHAEL FULLAN AND JOANNE QUINN

Overload, multiple initiatives, silos and compliance-oriented mandates seem the norm now for school district administration. It is inevitable that current systemic forces generate continuous churn.

Effective administrators in education recognize this as a starting point, but then do something about it. But more than that, they help their organizations get on top of innovation fatigue by developing coherence. Our insights about how highly successful school leaders help their systems focus with coherence are based on our work with coherence-making leaders in schools, districts, and state and provincial systems. These experiences contributed to our coherence framework.

Shared Understanding

First, we should clarify what coherence is and is not. It is not simply alignment of goals, resources and structures, although that may help. Our definition of coherence is *the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work*. In other words, it is fully and only subjective.

It does not serve much purpose for education leaders to "explain" coherence or rely on slick strategic plans. Because coherence exists in the minds of people, it must be developed across given groups.

So how do leaders achieve shared understanding about the work given the turmoil and the comings and goings of policies and people? There is only one way to do this — through purposeful interaction among members of the organization working on a common agenda, identifying and consolidating what works and making meaning over time.

Defining Features

Effective coherence makers know that the coherence is cumulative and ongoing. Common sense and experience tells you that things change: Staff members leave and newcomers arrive, policies change, the environment shifts, new ideas are floated, and so on. Coherence makers work to reduce

or eliminate unnecessary distractions and achieve about 80 percent coherence, defined as shared depth of understanding.

We have derived this knowledge by working in partnership with hundreds of education leaders who were not content to be ruled by their environments. Our work moves from practice to theory, figuring out what effective leaders do and then testing it in various circumstances. We also work alongside these administrators in workshops and consultancies to grapple with day-to-day problems as they make breakthroughs.

The work on coherence tends to have three features:

- It is about the whole system (100 percent of schools in a district or all districts in a state);
- It zeroes in on pedagogy — what teaching and learning practices are specifically effective; and
- It always examines impact and the causal pathways that result in measurable progress for all students, especially the hard-to-measure outcomes.

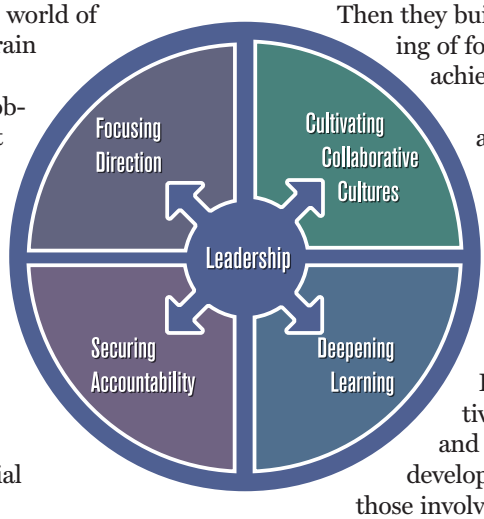
Coherence is the result of this hands on work.

Connected Components

The coherence framework (see graphic) is described in our new book. The first step in making headway in the complex world of subjective coherence, is to train yourself in *simplexity*. This means taking a complex problem, identifying the smallest number of key components (this is the simple part) and making them gel (the complex part). If you can't do this, you can't get coherence, and you can't get shared depth of subjective understanding among large numbers of people.

The coherence framework consists of four essential components:

- focusing direction, which builds collective purpose;
- cultivating collaborative cultures, which develops capacity;
- deepening learning, which accelerates improvement and innovation; and
- securing accountability based on capacity built from the inside out.



SOURCE: GRAPHIC BY TARYN HAURITZ FROM *COHERENCE: THE RIGHT DRIVERS IN ACTION FOR SCHOOLS, DISTRICTS AND SYSTEMS* BY MICHAEL FULLAN AND JOANNE QUINN, CORWIN: THOUSAND OAKS CALIF.

The first thing to know is that the model is not linear. You do not proceed by working through the quadrants in sequence. Each of the four components is served by the other three. Actions in one have an impact on the others.

Let's examine the four components of the framework and the leader's role at the center as both an activator and connector of components.

- **Focusing direction.** For starters you have to be clear about your deep, relentless moral purpose, the specific goals that might best influence the strategy you will use and your change leadership that will begin to mobilize people.

The threat to impactful goals is too many ad hoc, unconnected and ever-changing aims and initiatives. Reducing initiative clutter and focusing on two to three goals with a clear strategy builds coherence.

The Peel District School Board in Ontario, which has more than 200 schools, recently used the reduce, reframe, remove strategy to get a handle on both overload (too many initiatives) and fragmentation (initiatives experienced as disconnected from one other). Peel is a successful district serving a diverse population, but principals and teachers felt overwhelmed. District leaders worked with principals and key staff groups to identify the clutter and remove distractors.

Then they built deep, shared understanding of four key goal areas to improve achievement and innovation.

Goals and strategy, however, are not enough. The organization needs change leadership.

We have discovered a strange thing — that simply identifying what seem to be the best ideas, even when backed up by evidence, does not necessarily carry the day. Rather, we learned that effective change processes shape and reshape quality ideas as they develop capacity and ownership with those involved.

Many people are not convinced of the value of ideas at the outset just because leaders say so. They may not be skilled in the idea and fear failure or the leader may be wrong. And guess what? In our definition, leaders learn something, too, as they participate in the process. This is why we say effective leaders "participate as learners" and figure out how to make progress.

For this reason, it's not a good idea to spend too much time formulating the vision prior to taking

Principal Michelle Pinchot (right) of Peters K-3 Elementary School in Garden Grove, Calif., is addressing significant underachievement by mobilizing three collaborative teams, including the instructional leadership team.

action because doing the work, especially collaboratively, fleshes out the initial vision. Leaders need to set directional vision and then use the second component in tandem to build purposeful action.

▶ **Cultivating collaborative cultures.** This component is an essential companion to focusing direction. Leaders establish a nonjudgmental culture of growth. That means it is OK to make mistakes as long as you are working on the goals and learning from your action — and thus making fewer and fewer mistakes.

They model being lead learners through participation, and they create and support collaborative work on the problems at hand. Collaborating is not just about creating a place where people feel good but rather about cultivating the expertise of everyone to be focused on a collective purpose.

We saw this at Peters K-3 Elementary School in the Garden Grove, Calif., Unified School District as the staff tackled significant underachievement by mobilizing collaborative teams. The principal used a combination of push factors and pull factors. The former involved acknowledging the data of low performance and an urgency for improvement. The latter involved listening to the ideas of teachers and building three types of teams that manage the school.

Over five years, Peters has made significant gains with double-digit increases in literacy reported last year. Coherence is evident as all staff can "talk the walk." They can articulate clearly the goals for improvement, the strategy and their role in contributing to the changes.

Our own work on professional capital, plus John Hattie's work on the politics of collaborative expertise, show that collective efficacy is by far the most powerful change strategy if the group is focused and well-led. Leaders use the group to change the group. They participate as learners, but they also create a culture in which people have opportunities to learn from each other about specific problems and practices that work in solving them.

In this process, coherence becomes a function of the interplay between the growing explicitness of the idea (as leaders focus direction) and the change culture that promotes learning from the work. In sum, if focusing direction and collaborative cultures are working hand in glove, you get off to a strong start and establish the bases for going deeper.

▶ **Deepening learning.** The third component recognizes that schools and systems that influence student learning have a deep commitment to the learning-teaching nexus.

Rather than searching for a quick fix, they create communities of collective inquiry that deeply examine instructional practices and student impact. Some focus on getting the foundational pieces such as literacy in place while others tackle the deeper learning agenda accelerated by the digital world.

One example is a global partnership we lead with more than 800 schools in seven countries to shift pedagogy to deepen learning so that students develop essential skills and global competencies

PHOTO BY TALKING TEACHING

(www.npdl.global). The shift in pedagogy is transforming the roles of students, teachers and families as learning partners. Early evidence indicates students become "radical change agents" in influencing pedagogical practice and the organization of the school and serve as catalysts to societal change *(http://nationswell.com/students-help-humanity-core-learning/)*.

All of this represents a revolution in learning where digital access provides an accelerating platform. The challenges of such a radical shift require the entire fourfold coherence framework.

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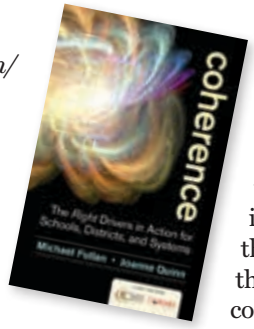

▸ **Securing accountability.** The final component acknowledges that wrong-minded external accountability has made matters worse, but there is a different approach that is proving to be much more effective. The idea is to focus on internal accountability as the lead into external accountability. Leaders need to build the internal capacity of their organizations so they establish strong internal accountability.

Internal accountability is when the group takes self and collective responsibility for its performance and reinforces this by engaging in the external accountability framework. The conditions for internal accountability include specific goals, transparency of practice and results, nonjudgmentalism, commitment to assessing impact, acting on evidence to improve matters, and engagement in the state accountability system (even if the external system is inadequate).

Policymakers are well advised to invest in building internal accountability. The good news is that external accountability seems to be moving away from excessive testing, although no evidence suggests a move toward investing in internal accountability mechanisms. Doing the first three components of coherence well is tantamount to establishing conditions favorable to securing accountability, but you then have to work explicitly on securing internal accountability by building capacity as you relate to the external accountability system.

Mastering Frameworks

We have been implicit so far about the role of leadership, which functions as the glue connecting and integrating the four components of the coherence framework. Certainly the role of leaders is to internalize the coherence framework in the minds and actions of system members. Because people come and go and circumstances change, coherence making is never-ending.

One final key point: The main goal of the leader is to build a coherent collaborative culture for five or more years to the stage where the leader becomes dispensable. This makes ultimate sense because if too much depends on the leader, the organization will fall apart upon his or her departure. On the other hand, if the leader is constantly tending to the development of coherence making in others, he or she is paving the way for the future. Junior members of the leadership team are learning to lead coherence making, which will feed forward to the benefit of the organization.

In short, coherence making is an ongoing conundrum, but we are finding that leaders who want to make a difference are drawn to the challenge. Focusing direction gets you into the game, cultivating collaborative cultures provides the pathway for change, deepening learning is the core strategy for affecting student results and securing accountability is essential to measure growth and be accountable to ourselves and the public.

These ideas make it possible for education leaders to rise to the occasion and make a lasting difference in their organizations and in society. ■

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Additional Resources

The article's two authors suggest a fuller description of how their model works can be found in their recently released books, *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts and Systems* and *Taking Action Guide: Building Coherence in School Districts and Systems.* The latter includes tools for working on coherence in a school system.

Also suggested:

▸ *What Works Best in Education: The Politics of Collaborative Expertise* by John Hattie, Pearson, London.

▸ *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* by Andrew Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, Teachers College Press, New York, N.Y.