

Preface

All the dilemmas in education reform are coming home to roost: top-down versus bottom-up; short-term versus long-term results; centralization versus decentralization; informed prescription versus informed professional judgment; transactional versus transformative leadership; excellence versus equity. And how does one achieve large-scale reform, anyway; reform that is characterized by serious accountability and ownership?

As it turns out, “sustainability” is at the heart of all these dilemmas. Its definition is not straightforward. It is not how to maintain good programs beyond implementation. It is not how to keep going in a linear, sustained fashion. It is not how to keep up relentless energy. For the moment, let’s be satisfied with a general definition: *Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose.* There is a lot packed into this definition. It is not just the outcome of continuous improvement we need to observe, but we must also understand the key characteristics of systems that display dynamic sustainability.

My thanks in particular to my colleague, Andy Hargreaves, who has been working on the concept of sustainability over the last several years. His definition overlaps but is different from mine. As he and Fink put it: “Sustainability does not simply mean whether something will last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment now and in the future” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000, p. 30; Hargreaves & Fink, in press).

I focus not so much on particular initiatives but on the system itself. My concern is not just whether system thinking is important (Senge, 1990). It is. Rather, I tackle a question that has never been addressed before: How do you develop and sustain a greater number

of “system thinkers in action.” I call this breed of leader “the new theoretician.” These are leaders at all levels of the system who proactively and naturally take into account and interact with larger parts of the system as they bring about deeper reform and help produce other leaders working on the same issues. They are theoreticians, but they are practitioners whose theories are lived in action every day. In fact, that is what makes their impact so powerful. Their ideas are woven into daily interactions that make a difference.

The agenda for the new theoreticians is laid out in Chapter 2 as eight elements of sustainability: public service with a moral purpose, commitment to changing the context, lateral capacity building, intelligent accountability, deep learning, dual commitment to short- and long-term results, cyclical energizing, and the long lever of leadership. The agenda is exceedingly complex and demanding. I show specifically why it will be hard to accomplish. But I also show what the new work looks like in practice, because it is now going on. This book is about identifying what leaders at all levels of the system can do to pave the way for greater sustainability.

One other matter. We are getting into complex territory. I undertake in the book, as the new theoreticians do in practice, to link every abstract concept with a concrete example of what it looks like in practice. You can’t be a system thinker in action if you don’t know what the action part looks like and feels like. Learning by doing has never been so thoughtful and so challenging.

The revolution I am talking about is under way in all of the public services: education, health, employment, transportation, crime, and in business, for that matter. As agencies have pushed for greater performance and public accountability over the past two decades, we have seen some incremental improvements, but it is obvious that these improvements are fragile and not deep. But we are reluctant to let go of the strategies that have brought us this far, in favor of strategies that are far more complex with many more unknowns. In this book, my goal is to portray where we are in public service reform, with education as the main example, and to outline how we might pursue longer-term sustainability without jeopardizing short-term results. Indeed, the public will insist on this reconciliation.

In the systems level work, I have benefited enormously from my association with Michael Barber, head of the Prime Minister’s Policy Delivery Unit in Britain. Michael is one of the great theoreticians in action that I write about in this book.

Leadership (not “leaders”) is the key to the new revolution. This book is about the two-way street between individual leadership and system transformation. They must feed on each other in a virtual cycle, even though at any given time they may be asymmetrical; that is, individual leaders in a given instance may find the system is less than helpful, and in another circumstance, system leaders may find individual leaders to be stumbling blocks to improvement. In any case, leadership is to this decade what standards were to the 1990s if we want large-scale, sustainable reform.

In education, the many initiatives in large-scale reform over the past decade have provided the foundation for challenging the future. We understand (and will review) what brought us incremental success in, for example, districtwide reform, as when the performance of most schools in the district improve. By looking closely, we can also see why the strategies that brought us initial success cannot take us the distance.

My colleagues and I have been fortunate to be partners, codevelopers, critical-friend observers of several significant large-scale reform initiatives around the world, but especially in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. The ideas, translated into many languages, are in use around the globe, not only in education, but in the public service more broadly as well as in the corporate world.

We have learned a great deal from our evaluation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England and now, in the aftermath in the more fundamental policy work, to go beyond improvements in literacy and numeracy.

My special appreciation to David Miliband, David Hopkins, and the scores of educators in England at all levels who are providing us with a living laboratory of educational reform on a grand scale. Thanks also to David Hopkins for very helpful comments on the manuscript.

In the United States, the work in Chicago; Greensboro, North Carolina; and in Louisiana with the Center for Development and Learning is producing powerful lessons about districtwide reform (as well as the research literature more broadly on district reform). My association with the Gates Foundation Leadership initiative, and now Microsoft’s Partnership in Learning, adds significantly to the laboratories of large-scale reform.

I have been privileged over this past year to be the H. Smith Richardson Jr. Visiting Fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership

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(CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina. John Alexander and his colleagues at CCL have been an inspiration to work with in pushing the boundaries of new work on leadership.

In Canada, districtwide reform initiatives in Edmonton Catholic District, Toronto School District, and more recently and deeply, York Region School District are great examples of building system capacity. In Ontario as a whole, with the recent election of the Liberal government, we have a golden opportunity to swim in deeper waters as the Premier, Dalton McGuinty, and the Minister of Education, Gerard Kennedy commit to provincewide reform based on many of the ideas in this book.

In Australia, we are in the early stages of significant system level developments in the state of South Australia as the state has committed to system redesign, again based on the new work of capacity building. Virtually all of the states in Australia have started down the path of large-scale reform.

My point is not to limit the observations to these cases, but to say that these are only some of the ones where we have direct involvement. They are part and parcel of the larger revolution. I will also argue that it would be easy to fall back on strategies that are getting some short-term results, but this would be a fundamental mistake. The new breakthroughs are complex and sophisticated, and will require leaders who have more comprehensive conceptualization than most leaders of the present (more accurately, systems have not fostered and permitted the development of such leadership).

The new knowledge, as I have said, is being led not by academic theoreticians; the new theoreticians are certain policymakers and lead practitioners working with a wider set of ideas and interacting with academics who themselves are immersed in practical theorizing and doing. This is crucial because it means the ideas and strategies are being formed around real problems—big ones never before solved. Never before have we had such a change crucible at our fingertips.

In many ways, this book builds on the ideas that were set out in what I have come to call the “ad hoc trilogy on leadership.” *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001) demonstrated that successful leaders in education and business have much in common. The five core mind-action sets—moral purpose, understanding change processes, relationship building, knowledge building, and coherence making—characterize successful leaders in all learning organizations, that is, all organizations operating in complex times.

In *Change Forces With a Vengeance* (2003a), I advocated the tri-level reform model, namely, what has to happen at the school/community, district, and state levels, and in their interactions across levels. We will see that concerted tri-level developments are central to system transformation, to changing the very contexts within which people work.

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* (2003b), I took the ideas further by arguing that not only must moral purpose guide and drive our efforts, but moral purpose must also go beyond individual heroism to the level of a system quality.

What is exciting is that there are new, fundamental attempts at systems thinking, strategizing, and doing that give us much more to think about and build on—again, the purpose of this book.

I would be remiss if I did not say that we could identify examples that are mired in the old pattern of incremental inertia at best and compliant dependency at worst. At their extremes, incremental inertia and sustainability are mutually exclusive. However, I will argue that it is possible, and necessary, to pursue a dual strategy that pays attention to short-term results while simultaneously laying the groundwork for sustainable engagement. We need to have our cake and eat it, too.

I thank Robb Clouse of Corwin Press, who is constantly pushing the envelope; the Ontario Principals' Council for its entrepreneurial leadership and support; and Claudia Cuttress for producing this book, and the many training materials and books that have fed into it, all with amazing quality and speed.

I dedicate this book to the new theoreticians—doers with big minds, who treat moral purpose as a cognitive as well as an emotional calling.