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in conversation

Values- Driven Leadership

Your responses to the first *In Conversation* were very positive, and the ideas expressed by Michael Fullan resonated with many people. Both around the province and here at the ministry, a number of people have asked what I believe to be essential to leadership. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on leadership, and expand on the dialogue we began in conversation with Michael this past fall.

As always, I encourage you to respond to these ideas, whether you agree with my perspective, disagree, or have additional insights to offer from your own professional experience. I also encourage you to share these thoughts in conversation with colleagues. This kind of dialogue is essential, I believe, to fully realizing the unique potential school leaders have to effect positive change across the system.

Email your thoughts to InConversation@ontario.ca by January 30, 2009. We will review them and share them with the entire community on the [In Conversation page](#) of the ministry website (www.ontario.ca/eduleadership).



Steve Marshall
Deputy Minister



Values-Driven Leadership

For me, personal leadership involves outlining a personal vision and declaring a set of values in an explicit way. It involves being fair to staff so that they clearly understand the direction that I, and you as leaders, will be undertaking.

My vision for education in Ontario is that it is, and is recognized to be, the best in the world. This recognition is based on the achievements of learners; the capacity, skills and positive attitudes of staff, and the inclusive practices that underpin all that occurs. For me, a vision must also acknowledge the moral purpose associated with how we develop learners' talents, so that they can help build a more inclusive, equitable and prosperous society. This moral purpose galvanizes our shared commitment to excellence.

It is incumbent on me as Deputy Minister to be open about my vision so that it can be shared and further developed through contact with all involved. This will build our collective skills and knowledge of how we get to the next level.

In addition to the vision and moral purpose outlined above, my values – and yours – influence the organization as a whole. One important value I

INSIGHT

What is optimism?

According to Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, optimism means having a strong expectation that things will turn out all right in life, despite setbacks and frustrations.

have espoused consistently is the notion of optimism – an expectation of high achievement set within a “can do” environment.

The importance of choosing optimism

When I meet with staff, I often contrast the value I put on optimism with a mindset I dislike, namely “habitual cynicism” – the type of cynicism that erodes the confidence of others.

In explaining what this means to me, I ask staff if they have ever worked with a person who is constantly complaining – one of those people who cause you to run and hide when you see them walking down the hall. These are people who light up the room *after* they have left. They are people who seem to have a dark cloud over their heads. If you're not careful, that dark cloud may land on you.

I am not talking about people who are depressed. This is a medical condition that needs to be taken very seriously, and treated with support and counselling. What I am referring to here is habitual cynicism – with emphasis on *habitual* – as these people continuously carry with them a culture of despair. They seem to be imprisoned by their own thinking and, whether they are aware of it or not, they try to pass the cynicism on to others.

I have always believed in the significance of choosing optimism over habitual cynicism and, over time, I have become even more acutely aware of the significance of this quality as a driver of performance and a way of building interdependence.

Optimism helps to align people to purpose and can be a positive force in clarifying and developing shared understandings around the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities required of us all.

LEADERSHIP VALUES

OPTIMISM
DISCIPLINE
ENERGY
SYNERGY
ETHICS
ACCOUNTABILITY

From optimism to discipline

While optimism plays a critical role in my leadership style, I am also very influenced by Jim Collins and his insights on discipline.

Like Collins, I think discipline begins with disciplined thought. Quite often, people

will think and then speak – without creating a gap between their thinking and speaking. It requires discipline to create that gap and to use it to find out whether or not what you say is congruent with your values.

And so disciplined thinking is critically important because it leads to disciplined action and disciplined behaviour.

For me, discipline is about putting values into practice in such a way that, when under pressure and in difficult circumstances, one does not revert to traditional cultural paradigms, such as laying blame. I believe that if you want to nurture a learning culture, you must be disciplined so

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Steven R. Covey

Few books in the personal and professional development field have had as profound an impact as Stephen R. Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc. – 1990). Readers revisiting this classic will note Covey's now-familiar principle that interdependence can only be built on a foundation of true independence. Algebra, says Covey, comes before calculus and, likewise, private victory precedes public victory.

INSIGHT

Creating a culture of discipline

Collins argues that going from good to great is about creating a culture of discipline. It all starts with disciplined people. Next is disciplined thought. "You need to confront the brutal facts of reality while retaining resolute faith that you can and will create a path to greatness." Finally comes disciplined action. "But disciplined action without self-disciplined people is impossible to sustain, and disciplined action without disciplined thought is a recipe for disaster."

that when things do go wrong, you learn from the experience both individually and together, instead of blaming others.

This involves applying appropriate processes that lead to analysis, draw out what can be learned, and put into action steps and processes that resolve issues and result in improvements.

There is a set of disciplines at the individual level and a set of disciplines at the organizational level, and both are important.

What, for example, should be done when a person or team is acting against the norm of the organization and against the agreed values?

Taking action in this circumstance requires both discipline and courage. Quite often, people will avoid tackling hard issues such as poor personal performance because of the interpersonal conflicts that might emerge. But unless you can confront the brutal facts with diplomacy and openness – and without blame – you will not change the culture.

Discipline becomes important in the way you honour the commitment to the organization and that commitment and discipline, I believe, has to start with the individual.

As the Deputy Minister, and leader of a large complex organization, and because I accept the responsibility for being the emotional barometer of the organization, discipline has to start with me. If I am not disciplined in my thinking and in my behaviour then how can I reasonably expect others to be disciplined in their

thoughts and behaviour? And so I have to be disciplined in the way I model what I expect in the organization, as you – and all leaders – must.

Using personal energy to drive improvement

Energy, which I consider to have elements of enthusiasm, resilience, optimism and commitment, is a critical component of my model of effective leadership.

Energy is something that can reside within an individual, a team or an organization.

I think people often discount or ignore energy as a critical factor in cultural change. I would suggest, rather, that

“People often discount or ignore energy ...”

energy can actually be planned for. It can be exercised in the way people think and conduct themselves.

INSIGHT

Proactive vs. reactive

According to Covey, proactive people focus their efforts on the things they can do something about, which he refers to as their circle of influence. The nature of their energy is positive, enlarging and magnifying, which causes their circle of influence to increase.

Reactive people, on the other hand, focus their efforts in the circle of concern. They focus on the weakness of other people, the problems in the environment, and the circumstances over which they have no control. The negative energy generated by that focus, combined with neglect in areas they could do something about, causes their circle of influence to shrink.

If, for example, a person walks into a room and creates a negative energy simply by being present – whether through verbal or non-verbal behaviour and whether it’s intentional or not – the impact on others is to lower the morale of the group.

The challenge, when you are in a group and confronted by negative energy, is to demonstrate resilience and discipline so that it doesn’t have an impact on you. It requires you to be more a light than a judge and to live the behaviour that will energize the group and overcome the negativity of others.

Some people may try to wrap their emotions around you and attempt to strangle you emotionally. This has to be resisted. All of us need to distance ourselves from becoming entrapped by other people’s problems and negative emotions. We need to maintain our energy and our commitment, remembering that what we do is so important for the students in our schools.

Synergy: using our collective knowledge and skills

In enacting leadership – and in creating a leadership team – the importance of synergy can not be overstated. Synergy is about maximizing the benefits of working in deep collaboration with others.

It is not something that you *do* as an action. Rather, it’s the result and consequence of thinking win-win and behaving that way. Of knowing what your vision is, and of knowing what your priorities are. Of putting first things first and listening to others to understand their perspectives. When all of those things are in place, you arrive at a public victory – not just a

private victory – that culminates in a collective victory that could not otherwise be achieved.

Leadership ultimately is about both the means and the end. It is about achieving results for the right reasons.

It is about having the ladder up against the right wall and

achieving things that are for the benefit of society, the community and the learner. Achieving high outcomes is critical, but there is also the need to achieve results in a way that is open, that builds people’s trust and capabilities, and that brings people along with you.

“Leadership ultimately is about both the means and the end.”

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Jim Collins

In *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins – 2001), Jim Collins explores the kind of leadership found in organizations that go from being merely good to sustainably great. These leaders, he suggests, show a combination of determination and self-effacement. They find the right people, give them jobs suited to their capabilities and relentlessly give them credit, instead of taking it themselves.

INSIGHT

Ontario’s Leadership Framework

[Ontario’s Leadership Framework](#) was developed to inspire a shared vision of leadership in schools and boards, and to promote a common language that fosters an understanding of leadership, and what it means to be a school and system leader. It identifies the core practices as well as the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are the foundation of good leadership.

Leadership must recognize the importance of synergy and the contributions of others. The attributes of a true leader are revealed through processes and behaviour.

A leader needs to have energy and commitment and strong planning, interpersonal and communication skills, and the capacity to live in uncertain times. Along with these attributes, there is also the need to place leadership within a moral framework. Results, while important, can be used for the wrong purposes. We can all think of leaders who were able to generate great commitment and obtain an enthusiastic response, but for destructive purposes, and so I would not judge them to have been good leaders.

Leadership for me is a combination of obtaining outstanding results and achieving those results for the right reasons. In that sense, there has to be a moral underpinning and an ethical set of principles and behaviours behind what leaders do.

Behaving ethically

This brings me to the issue of personal ethics, which is fundamentally about being true to your inner self and knowing that your ethics manifest themselves in the

“Your ethics manifest themselves in the work you do ...”

work you do and how you conduct yourself.

There are ethics attached to individual values, such

as ensuring that what you do is not just in your own best interest, but also in the best interest of others. Ethics also have an impact on organizational behaviour – ensuring that you keep your promises

DIGGING DEEPER

Robert J. Starratt

Robert J. Starratt, in *Ethical Leadership* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. – 2004), points out that, “in reality, leaders do not start their day by asking, ‘How can I enact my core ethical principles today?’ Rather ethical principles are kept in a supply closet in one of the backrooms of our consciousness. They are maps that we consult only when the familiar terrain we are traversing becomes a tangle of underbrush with barely discernible and uncertain trails...that is when the leader goes back to his or her supply closet to consult the codes of ethics for guidance.”

both to the organization and the people in it, and that you manage resources in a way that is transparent and ethical. It means that you treat people with respect and dignity. Sometimes that means being tough, but when you are transparent and have the right moral reason, such action is justified.

Highly effective educational leaders also need to develop trusting relationships in which people trust each other to do the right thing. Stephen Covey talks about trust as having two dimensions – character and competence. Character has to do with integrity and ethics. When people experience others acting with integrity they see the link between motivation and action and when they also believe that the person will treat others fairly and ethically, trust is built.

But having the right character is not enough. For example, in order to trust a surgeon, you need assurance that the surgeon knows what to do and is able to deliver a high-quality result. This leads to another aspect of trust,

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Patrick Duignan

Patrick Duignan author of *Educational Leadership: Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions* (New York: Cambridge University Press – 2008) tells us that leaders must be fully present in their relationships in order to influence others. No presence = no relationships = no influence = no leadership.

namely competence. Competence is about having the right capabilities and being able to deliver results. If we wish to be trusted as leaders, we need to ensure that we behave ethically, and that we deliver quality results.

Getting results – the importance of personal and professional accountability

Using your values and aligning your purpose with organizational goals starts by setting directions and outlining clear expectations. This is one of the most important roles for leaders and is fundamental to accountability, which to me means a commitment to transparency and openness. If you don't know what it is you are striving to achieve, you are likely to run around in circles with little purpose.

The government set core priorities and ambitious targets for education in [Energizing Ontario Education: Reach Every Student](#). While these core priorities are central to what each of us does, there are other targets we need to establish for ourselves and for our organizations.

Target setting within education is becoming quite a science. For example, in other

countries groups of teachers and principals have developed both minimum standards and ambitious targets for classrooms, schools and systems. They argued that they need to make explicit what teachers tend to keep implicit. They debated what performance levels were achievable for their students and what teacher expectations should be.

“Target setting within education is becoming quite a science.”

What has tended to follow is discussion around two issues. First, what should happen if a student does not achieve the standard and, second, will we “dumb down” our expectations to ensure all children succeed?

These are clearly questions that need to be debated. To address these questions, many jurisdictions have paired the development of both standards and aspirational targets with personalized learning support programs for students at risk.

Of course, accountability is about more than setting directions and establishing expectations. Accountability is connected to values and ethics, because it requires openness and honesty in, as Jim Collins says, “confronting the brutal facts.” This is not a punitive process. Instead it requires that we self assess to see if we have achieved both our own and the government's expectations.

Often this process is helped by having a critical friend work with us to ensure we are being open and honest and that our self assessments are valid. This is often

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A critical friend

“A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.” Costa, A. and Kallick, B. (1993), *Through the Lens of a Critical Friend*, *Educational Leadership* 51(2).

difficult, but it is necessary if we are to identify what we have done well and also which areas of performance need some priority attention.

Then comes the most difficult part – improvement planning. Most of us have experienced identifying the same problem time and time again, but being unable to make much progress in finding solutions.

However, I believe that solutions to what have been intractable problems in education can be found if we act collectively and interdependently. Someone once said that the solutions to our problems are out

there somewhere; we simply need to find them. While this may be an over-simplification, I do believe that the solutions to these intractable problems can be found within the collective wisdom and experience that exists within our education community.

“Solutions...can be found if we act collectively and interdependently.”

The future

Choosing to be optimistic, and bringing to our various roles our individual energy and willingness to share and contribute to designing the future, will develop an organization in which people – at the school, board and ministry level – choose to be interdependent and deeply connected.

Likewise we can, and should, choose to create one of the most effective education systems in the world. I value the leadership each of you brings to improving opportunities for our students through more effective teaching and learning. It is a challenge I thoroughly enjoy sharing with you.

What are your thoughts on the ideas presented in this issue of *In Conversation*? Email your comments and insights to InConversation@ontario.ca

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