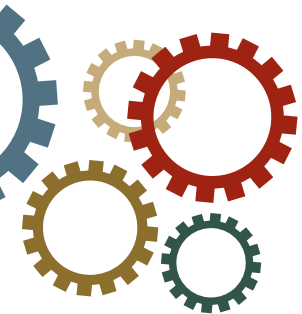




your comments

on Leading Change (Fall 2008)



Dear colleagues:

I am very pleased by your positive response to the first issue of *In Conversation*, and thank you for your contributions. I found your responses interesting and enjoyable reading.

I have selected brief excerpts from the many thought-provoking messages I have received, and very much respect your willingness to engage and share your professional insights and observations.

Your insights reaffirm my belief that school leaders exert a very powerful influence on our ability as a system to create change and build a culture of continuous improvement. *In Conversation* is one of many vehicles for the professional dialogue I believe will be critically important to supporting you in that role, and supporting each other as we learn our way forward as leaders.

I thank you for your committed leadership and although my health may interrupt the regularity of *In Conversation*, I look forward to sharing another edition with you in the new year.

Steve Marshall

Steve Marshall
Deputy Minister



Fall 2008 Issue

Excerpts from reader responses: Fall 2008

“I believe the two key insights derived from this article are: one, that learning must be linked to ‘actions that are specific, precise and non-negotiable’; and two, that the ‘learning is the work’ in the setting of the actual workplace. In terms of the six secrets, the staff at my school are currently on the ‘cusp’ of incorporating daily learning at work into their mindset and practice. Certainly, the ‘super-stars’ are already there and the thrust and direction of the others is gaining momentum in this area, though many are at different points on the continuum of change. I consider this along with teacher interaction with data and with successful practices to be major keys to our current success as a school community. Division and grade groups have made it status quo to share ideas that work, and presentations and discussions around these best practices have led to school-side adoption of many best practices.

“I believe we continue to struggle with issues of transparency however, and facilitating all of our staff to a place of risk-free openness and participation continues to be a priority. Furthermore the juggling act of balancing capacity building against judgements continues to challenge. Analyses of data can easily be perceived as judgements if not handled carefully. Yet staff members need to be somewhat judgmental if they are to recognize and be motivated toward the need for change. It merits a delicate sense of proportion and timing, but Fullan’s emphasis on avoidance of a pejorative stance is well-taken advice.

“... on the issue of cultivating leaders, our system is challenged by the house-keeping reality that most often Vice Principals are relegated to ‘running the school’ when most of our PLCs, School Learning Plan teams, and guest facilitators meet with our teachers and the principal. As a result, the ‘principals-in-training’ are the ones left in the ‘fog’ of vicarious participation. Certainly we update with the principal and the teams, but participation in the action is never quite reproduced in a follow-up debriefing, and the benefits of process are lost or at best substantially diluted. I believe that there are other systems which have come to creative solutions for this dilemma and I would like to investigate those ideas more deliberately. Hence, Fullan’s contention that principals must learn from dialoguing with each other, can be borne out even on the system level in a case such as this. Likewise, systems and system leaders must be willing to embrace actions beyond conversations to explore venues to positive change.”

“What an incredibly exciting time to be an educational leader in Ontario!”



“Putting this kind of deep thinking into a format and context that can readily be shared is terrific and long overdue. I do believe that progress is being made in understanding the transformative power of adaptive leadership in education in Ontario and the link between leadership and learning.”

“Throughout my life I have followed my own set of principles which have helped me to keep a steady course and accomplish my goals even when faced with some pretty difficult and unanticipated circumstances.

“First: I have always felt that I must live my life in response to a sense of calling to a higher purpose greater than my own personal wants. This sense of duty to others and to make a difference in my society has been the precursor to everything that I have set my mind to.

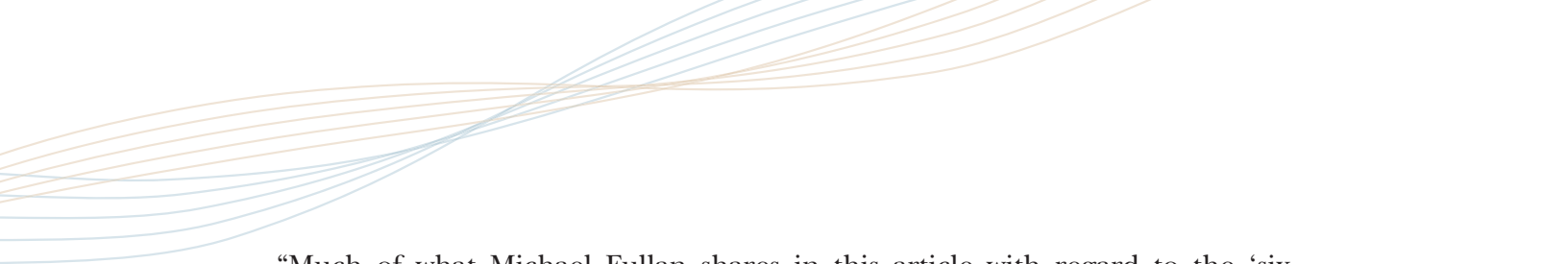
“Second: Part of living out that sense of calling is knowing that I need to find a balance between my social and familial role and my professional role. Whenever I have departed from this, it has been at my peril, the peril of my family and also has damaged my effectiveness as a professional. My professional goals and my personal family goals do not need to be antithetical, but I strive for a win-win situation. Sometimes one has to take a back seat to the other, but I always try to negotiate an agreement to make up for the imbalance one way or the other and restore harmony.

“Third: I manage by objective and set goals which are challenging but achievable. I work my way back from the desired end and determine the steps needed to achieve it, in clear measurable and timely ways.

“Fourth: The plan sometimes gets derailed by unexpected circumstances, but the plan is also flexible. If I hit a wall, I re-examine my situation and look for ways around the obstacle, or even ways to incorporate the obstacle into the plan. I will revise as necessary but rarely have I had to abandon a well thought out and valid goal.

“Fifth: Stick-to-itiveness is a characteristic that leaders need to have. [It is] the ability to keep at a task and work towards a goal in spite of opposition. But it involves patience and wisdom to know how to build alliances and work towards change.

“Sixth: There is a need to celebrate victories and acknowledge achievement not just for yourself but for others when goals are accomplished. When you do achieve your goals to take the time to retreat and reflect and start the process all over again.”



“Much of what Michael Fullan shares in this article with regard to the ‘six secrets’ resonates deeply with my experience as a Catholic school leader. The secrets, albeit very complex, provide a clear framework from which meaning can be derived for school communities. In my experience building a Catholic professional learning community has been very challenging for primarily two reasons: one being time and the second being carving out sustained reflective dialogue for myself.

“As for time, the tension (in my opinion) is created not because teachers don’t have enough ‘planning time’ but because our system is established on a concept of providing ‘individual’ planning time. It is extremely difficult to carve out ‘common’ planning time for same grade teachers and even more so for divisional ‘teams’. Sustaining rich, professional dialogue at the end of the day is difficult.

“Fullan’s six secrets speak directly to the rich work currently happening in Ontario schools. I can identify them in my own school community at various points along a continuum of development, some more deeply in place than others.

“But, as a solo administrator, it is very difficult to be reflective without a partner in the building. I regularly seek input and consult with the school’s leadership team (which consists of 9 staff members plus me) but often require a conversation with a fellow administrator to clarify objectives and pathways for myself. I envision someone who would be available to me on a fairly consistent basis (twice monthly at least) to engage, probe, share, push my pedagogy and leadership to further develop and create possible strategies to implement. A coach essentially (in the Gary Bloom sense of the word) who would mentor me to deeper job embedded learning. I seek these people out amongst colleagues, but it is time consuming and not built into our current structures.

“Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on what is a challenging but deeply rewarding vocation.”

“A challenge: My experience over more than 10 years indicates that teachers who design the learning for their students using constructivism are some of the most reticent to become principals. Yet running a constructivist classroom is very much like the job of principal... you are always constructing meaning primarily because you can’t be a technician and ‘pull the solution off the shelf’. Teachers who are not constructivist and operate with the framework of ‘if X happens, then you do Y’ would I believe be very frustrated with the work of school leadership. It isn’t linear.



“Along the same lines: I have yet to figure out, but I continually keep working at it... as to why our activity can be so superficial. It continues to be a challenge to ‘convert the conversation into insightful action’. Example: moving from over reliance on a textbook for teaching mathematics, to moving to multiple resources to address student needs.

“The challenge for any principal, either new to the role or new to a location, is balancing the development of relationships when other aspects are calling for attention: i.e. demonstrating high expectations through the use of data which a staff may not be accustomed to addressing in a substantive way... perhaps they were ‘just talking’ and ‘not converting’.

“[One of the] systemic items that can sometimes stand in the way of love your employee is the TPA process (judgemental) or knowing that some actions are undermining the work of the school... again a judgement by a principal has to be applied. What’s the ‘secret’ to knowing when to address this? Is the relationship built? Is the relationship strong enough? That being said, teachers do feel the idea of ‘love your employees’ when a principal addresses issues that they know within the culture of a site need to be addressed. In summary, it is a delicate balance when juxtaposing ‘being judgemental early in a relationship’ when it will result in de-motivation.

“While I have concentrated in this response on the relationship piece, it certainly underscores the interconnectedness of people, knowledge/skills and systems. Fullan’s work resonates with my practice as I have recognized the need as a principal to be personable, strategic, thoughtful, reflective, respectful, to name but a few of many skills and attitudes that are necessary in the day-to-day complexities of the principalship.

“It is my goal to leave my current site in which I have worked for the past five years with professional learning that is much deeper than when I arrived. There is daily evidence that this will be the case in substantive areas of instruction particularly as related to assessment and evaluation. As always in our work, there is still work to be done. Once we attain a goal, we raise the bar again.”

“When I was a school principal, I prioritized professional development and teacher collaboration. [We had] 17 different book clubs, study groups and ad hoc committees going at one time, almost all with voluntary participants. I encouraged my teachers to first become experts and then to share their expertise with others by presenting. My school hosted its own conference for three years in a row (2004, 2005 and 2006) - ‘teachers teaching teachers’. It became



more popular every year and we received lots of comments indicating that it was ‘the best PD [participants] had ever received’.

“I believe the secrets that underlie my effectiveness and success are:

- an absolute commitment to consultation with teachers (the ‘front line’) before planning or implementing any change of direction,
- an emphatic belief in the energy, passion, dedication and expertise of teachers, and the power unleashed by their collaboration,
- a love of learning and particularly, of learning through reading,
- strong facilitation and communication skills,
- good instincts for what teachers (and others) need to move to ‘the next level’ with regard to whatever they are learning or working on.”

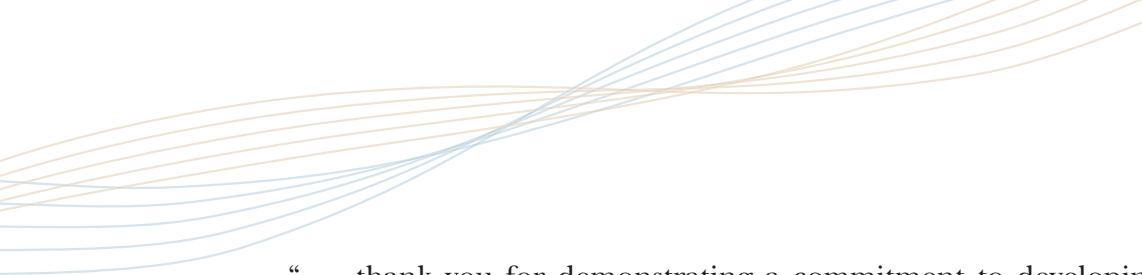
“I have come to a few realizations over the last 8 years as principal:

- 1) Principals as a rule are perfectionists who seem driven, thus driving others. This seems to be a major roadblock in establishing a warm, relaxed culture in a school.
- 2) No matter what we say or profess, we rarely take on small, targeted, doable goals.

We tend to bite off too much and forget to be the Gatekeeper for the school community.”

“I do love ‘my people’ – my staff, my students and my parents – it is authentic and a reality that I cherish. They are my ‘working family’. I agree with Michael Fullan as he also said in ‘Leading in a Culture of Change’ (Relationships, Relationships, Relationships), and yet I don’t believe that this is something that can be forced. You need to honestly live and breathe this love of your people. Regarding the great staff, I borrow the phrase from Jim Collins, ‘get the right people on the right bus and going in the right direction’.

“To borrow Fullan’s phrase – I believe in education today we all need to ‘face the danger’ – whatever that is. The present Minister of Education and our present government has done a great deal to bring stability back to the system, for which I am grateful. Continuing to look at the funding model and make it fair to all is essential to helping principals ... to do a good job.”



“ ... thank you for demonstrating a commitment to developing a leadership plan within the Ministry. It helps when you know that you are being valued and respected for the work you do.

“The role of the principal has definitely evolved since I began over 8 years ago. I think we have gone beyond the role of the principal as autocrat. It may have had some merit in the past but we are now in an environment of collaboration and dialogue. All school staff need to feel that they have a voice that will be listened to. They have to be given opportunities to express their opinions and know that they are being heard. This fits in very well into the ‘love your employees’ secret. Respect and relationships are two of the most important areas to focus on as a P/VP, especially if you are a new P/VP or new to a school.

“In order for the community to run effectively, you need to be able and willing, to tackle some difficult questions and then act on the decisions made. This means that sometimes you have to put your pride on the side burner and be able to take constructive criticism. I ask every month at the staff meeting if there is something that I have done or could do to improve the running of the school. By asking this question, I invite conversation and generally will get a mutual desire to improve the current situation. This way no one deals with concerns in isolation.”

“The past two years have been a wonderful opportunity for me to participate with my principal colleagues in a project with the Secretariat for Literacy and Numeracy. After reading the recent article on Leading Change, I was reassured that our school is on the right track. I am fortunate to be working with a group of dedicated, professional educators who are up-to-date on the needs for changes in our school.”

In Conversation is available in the leadership section of Ministry of Education web site at: www.ontario.ca/eduleadership.