

your comments

SPRING 2009

on Leadership and Integrative Thinking



Dear colleagues:

I am pleased to see that the spring edition of *In Conversation* with Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management, has sparked such thoughtful dialogue among school leaders.

These are challenging ideas, as many of you have pointed out. Integrative thinking demands, as one reader comments, that we practice what Heifetz calls “being on the balcony and the dance floor” simultaneously. At the same time, I think we can all see intuitively the value of this approach, and how keeping the whole and the parts in mind opens up opportunities to devise innovative solutions, particularly to complex problems. One reader, for example, speaks about applying these concepts to school re-organization. It will be interesting to read how integrative thinking supports that process, in particular with respect to the decision-making it entails, as it presents many of the apparently ‘contradictory’ demands that Roger Martin writes about.

I appreciate your willingness to share these comments with school leaders across the province, and look forward to hearing from you in the future.

Kevin Costante
Deputy Minister of Education



Spring 2009 Issue

Excerpts from reader responses: Spring 2009

The concept of integrative thinking

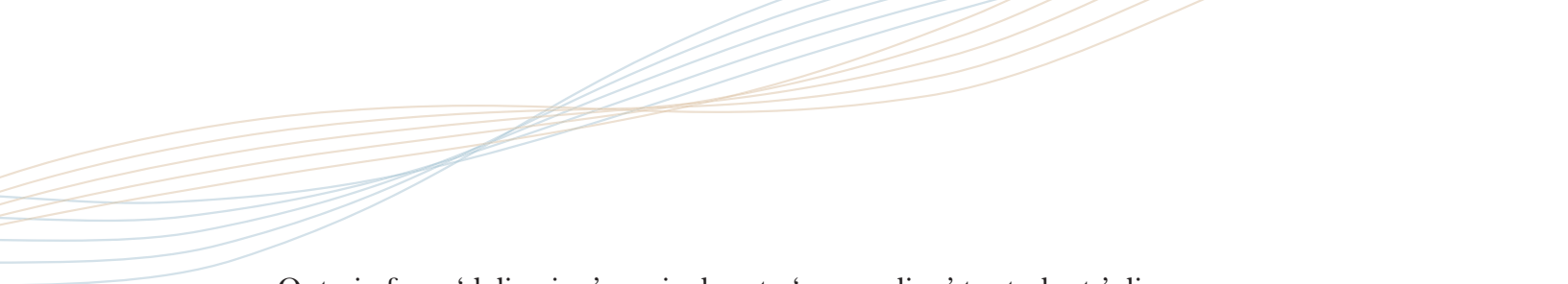
“The concept of integrative thinking moves us beyond all of the leadership theories studied in current educational leadership courses. It is refreshing to have validation for the view that no leadership models fit every situation. Leadership is contextual and particular theories or actions match with specific situations but do not cover all.”

“The introduction of integrative thinking into the mainstream of leadership action research is a timely and welcome innovation. For me, however, it is a complex concept that is not easily grasped - and that is after having taken the SO executive program at Rotman and having read Roger Martin’s book. I still find it to be an elusive practice. Perhaps it’s because, as with artists, ‘there is no clearly defined guideline’ that tells us where integrative thinking begins and ends. Or perhaps it’s because it is a habit of mind that ‘takes time’ and practice. Or maybe it’s because it too is yet another mental model, ‘an imperfect abstraction’ that we need in order to operate in the world.”

“I am intrigued by the concepts introduced in Martin’s model. What resonated clearly was the need to understand and challenge our own ‘world view’ or ‘filter’ in order to see all of the complexities and possibilities in any difficult choice. The need to stop and assess when the red flag goes up also resonated with me. I make hundreds of decisions a day and sometimes, out of necessity, they are made too quickly, without considering a possible creative solution. When the choice is not win-win, I will now table my decision to allow more time for information gathering and reflection. The key will be making it a priority to carve out that ‘thinking’ time.”

Integrative thinking in the education context

“[Integrative thinking] has significant implications for how we lead in the educational context: attempting to think this way has helped me immeasurably in collaborating with colleagues in our day-to-day decision making process. It has helped me to ‘keep the whole in mind while working on the individual parts’, what Heifetz calls ‘being on the balcony and the dance floor’ simultaneously, a stance that is increasingly necessary as we balance the ethical tensions that Duignan describes as arising as we meet the challenge of unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts. As we experience the seismic shift in learning across



Ontario from ‘delivering’ curriculum to ‘responding’ to students’ diverse needs, integrative thinking is a mental model that can really be a catalyst for the kind of transformative change that our community of learners demands.”

“In attempting to utilize integrative thinking as a leader, one faces challenges on many fronts. One goal of decision-making in our current context is that it aims to be transparent to all. As a leader engages in integrative thinking and creates models utilizing this level of complexity, it is often difficult for others involved to be able to visualize all of the components that were considered. Integrative thinkers face roadblocks in dealing with stakeholders who hold fast to one view and are not willing to attempt to understand the thinking process. It is often difficult to be transparent in your decision making when the process has been very complex.”

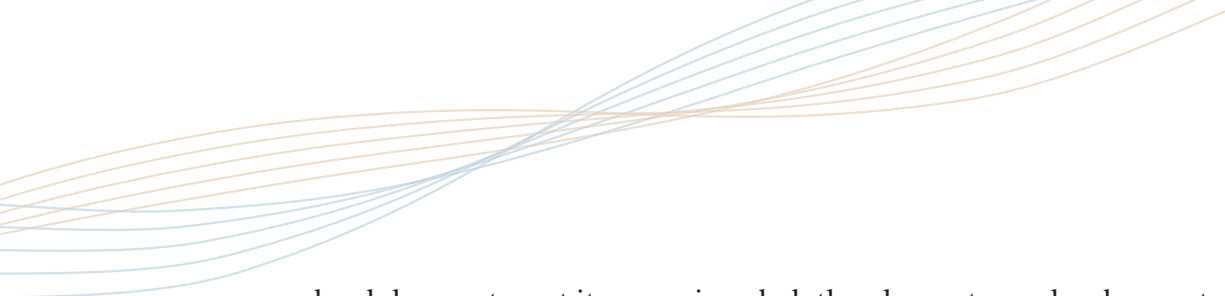
“The article ... forced me to look at how I censor the information I provide to staff when collaboratively making decisions. For example, around the influence of the home environment on student achievement, I tend to cut this dialogue off because I’ve always seen it as counterproductive, as staff being ‘preoccupied with the excuses of why students don’t achieve’ as Asa Hilliard put it. I will now let this dialogue in but then use it to shape the decision as in, ‘if this is part of our context, then what can we do about it?’”

Integrative thinking in practice

“It is ... difficult to engage in group decision making using integrative thinking. This can be especially problematic when dealing with groups that have specific agendas.”

“Time is ... a challenge when attempting to use integrative thinking. In our daily lives, we are often bombarded with so many tasks that the truly crucial ones may often be sandwiched between other troublesome, but perhaps non-critical, ones. As the year winds down and one has the chance to engage in reflective practice and review the year, it is often the case that we find that we have expended a great deal of time on issues over which we have had little impact. Taking time to carry out this type of review throughout the year would certainly be more helpful and may lead us to more instances where integrative thinking is utilized.”

“School and system leaders could, at the very least, consider applying integrative thinking when facing large scale change. For example, in our board, we are currently working on a project to create our first Kindergarten to Grade 12 school. This is not a popular change on any front. The secondary



school does not want its space invaded; the elementary school parents do not want their children integrated with the older students; the elementary teachers are concerned about safety; etc. This is a change that is warranted for economic reasons. Utilizing integrative thinking and considering all possibilities, this change situation could be transformed into an opportunity rather than being considered an imposed restriction.”

“Integrative thinking provides one with the opportunity to consider all aspects of a problem or situation. One is then able to make a choice that will, hopefully, provide the best of both (or more) worlds. The concepts presented in this paper challenge us, as educational leaders, to think outside the box and consider the needs of all when trying to choose between options.”