The Role of Leadership in the Promotion of Knowledge Management in Schools

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Despite being in the learning business, schools and local education authorities (LEAs) are notoriously poor knowledge sharers. There are structural and normative reasons for this, built-in to the history and evolution of schools. Structural in that teachers have little time in the course of the day to get together to share ideas and refine their teaching. Normatively because teachers do not have habits of giving and receiving information. Indeed in many cases, the cultures of schools discourage such sharing (e.g., I don't want to blow my own horn; who does she think she is; others won't be interested in what I am doing etc.).

In this paper, I make the case that the teaching profession, if it is to come of age, must be seen and experienced as an *intellectual* as well as a moral profession. Because the intellectual or scientific basis of teaching has been underdeveloped I spend most of the time focussing on the knowledge- sharing aspect of schools and LEAs. In the final two sections of the paper, I take up the questions of moral purpose and knowledge sharing, and leadership and sustainability.

Knowledge Building

The cover story in the business section of the October 30 *Toronto Globe and Mail* was titled "Knowledge Officer Aims to Spread the Word" (2000). In its profile of Rod McKay, international chief knowledge officer at KPMG, the article said, "McKay's challenge is to get KPMG's 107,000 employees at all levels worldwide to share information" (p. M1). "Knowledge-sharing," says McKay, "is a core value within KPMG. Every individual is assessed on their willingness to share their experience with others in the firm" (p. M1).

Knowledge building, knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, knowledge management. Is this just another fad? New buzzwords for the millennium? They could easily become so unless we understand the role of knowledge in organizational performance and set up the corresponding mechanisms and practices that make knowledge sharing a cultural value.

Information is machines. Knowledge is people. Information becomes knowledge only when it takes on a "social life" (Brown & Duguid, 2000_. By emphasizing the sheer quantity of information, the technocrats have it exactly wrong: if only we can provide greater access to more and more information for more and more individuals, we have it made. Instead what you get is information glut.

Brown and Duguid (2002) establish the foundation for viewing knowledge as a social phenomenon:

> "Knowledge lies less in its databases than in its people" (p. 121).
>
> "For all information's independence and extent, it is people, in their communities, organizations and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters" (p. 18).
>
> "A viable system must embrace not just the technological system, but the social system—the people, organizations, and institutions involved" (p. 60).
>
> "Knowledge is something we digest rather than merely hold. It entails the knower's understanding and some degree of commitment" (p. 120).

If you remember one thing about information, it is that it only becomes valuable in a *social context*.

> “Attending too closely to information overlooks the social context that helps people understand what that information might mean and why it matters” (p. 5).
>
> “[E]nvisioned change will not happen or will not be fruitful until people look beyond the simplicities of information and individuals to the complexities of learning, knowledge, judgement, communities, organizations, and institutions” (p. 213).

Incidentally, focusing on information rather than use is why sending individuals and even teams to external training by itself does not work. Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing changed individuals into unchanged environments. Rather, change leaders work on changing the context, helping create new settings conducive to learning and sharing that learning.

Most organizations have invested heavily in technology and possibly training, but hardly at all in knowledge sharing and creation. And when they do attempt to share and use new knowledge, they find it enormously difficult. Take the seemingly obvious notion of sharing best practices within an organization. Identifying the practices usually goes reasonably well, but when it comes to transferring and using the knowledge, the organization often flounders. Hewlett-Packard attempted “to raise quality levels around the globe by identifying and circulating the best practices within the firm” (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 123). The effort became so frustrating that it prompted Lew Platt, Chairman of Hewlett-Packard, to wryly observe, “if only we knew what we know at HP”, (cited in Brown & Duguid, p. 123).

I will not draw on examples from the business literature to demonstrate the role of knowledge in successful businesses (see Fullan, 2001a). Suffice it to say that the more successful businesses (compared to schools and LEAs, for example) have named knowledge sharing as an *explicit value* (as in KPMG) and created corresponding *mechanisms and incentives* to engage in it. They have valued both the 'giving' *and* the 'receiving' of knowledge as critical to improvement. The following figure summarizes this paradigm.

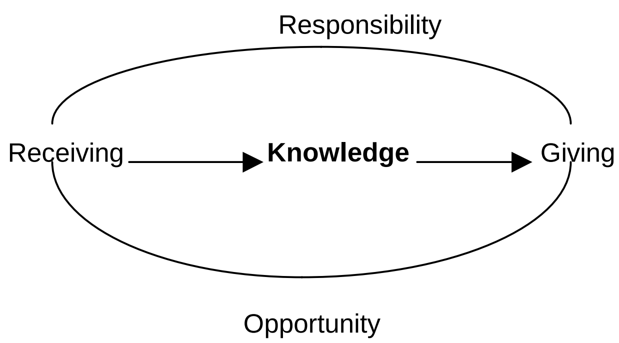


Figure 1: Knowledge-Sharing Paradigm

Examples from Education

It may seem that business organizations are paragons of knowledge creation and sharing, but it is likely that only a small minority are this good (and they don't necessarily sustain this level of goodness). Many of the same companies appear in different books, so the list seems longer than it actually is. Still, I would say that although the average company is about as bad as the average school system, when it comes to knowledge sharing, the best companies are better than the best school systems. There are proportionately more of them, and they are working more diligently on the task.

To take up the question of schools and LEAs, recent examples of success do focus on knowledge sharing (although regrettably they do not use the language). At the school level the developing of Professional Learning Communities that result in teacher development and greater learning is a case in point. Newmann, King & Young (2000) provide a clear example. They find that ‘school capacity’ was critical and that it was a function of five components: individual teacher knowledge, skills and dispositions, professional learning community (across teachers), program coherence, technical resources, and principal leadership. In other words, the role of the principal is to ‘cause’ the previous four components to get better and better on a continuous basis.

At the school level, there is no better example of information becoming knowledge through a social process than to observe ‘Assessment Literacy’ play itself out in a professional learning community. Assessment Literacy is the collective capacity of teachers and the principal to examine student performance data, make critical sense of it in the disaggregate, develop action plans based on the data, and to take action which is monitored (see Fullan, 2001b).

At the LEA level, Elmore and Burney’s (1999) case study of the turnaround in District 2 in New York City is a prime example of building a culture of knowledge sharing and action. We might as well be talking about Shell or Ford as Elmore and Burney describe the intervisitation strategy:

Intervisitation and Peer Networks

> District 2 [has] a heavy reliance on peer networks and visits to other sites, inside and outside the district, designed to bring teachers and principals into contact with exemplary practices.

Intervisitation, as it is called in the district, and peer consultations are routine parts of the district's daily life. Teachers often visit other classrooms in conjunction with consultants' visits, either to observe one of their peers teaching a lesson or a consultant teaching a demonstration lesson. And groups of teachers often visit another school, inside or outside the district, in preparation for the development of a new set of instructional practices. Usually principals initiate these outside visits and travel with teachers.

In addition, principals engage in intervisitations with peers in other schools. New principals are paired with "buddies" who are usually more senior administrators, and they often spend a day or two each month in their first two years in their buddy's school. Groups of teachers and principals working in district initiatives travel to other districts inside and outside the city to observe specific instructional practices. And monthly districtwide principals' meetings are held on site in schools, and often principals observe individual teachers in their peers' schools as part of a structured agenda for discussing some aspect of instructional improvement. Principals are encouraged to use visits and peer advising as management strategies for teachers within their buildings. A principal who is having trouble getting a particular teacher engaged in improvement might be advised by the district staff to pair that teacher with another teacher in the building or another building in the district. And principals themselves might be encouraged to consult with other principals on specific areas where they are having difficulties.

Intervisitations and peer advising as professional development activities tend to blend into the day-to-day management of the district. The district budgets resources to support about three hundred days of professional time to be allocated to intervisitation activities. Many such activities are not captured by these budgeted resources, since they occur informally among individuals on an ad hoc basis.

A specific example serves to illustrate how professional development and management blend together around peer advising and intervisitation. An elementary principal who is in the last year of her probationary period and is considered to be an exemplar by district personnel described offhandedly that throughout her probationary period, she had visited regularly with two other principals in the district. She is currently involved in a principals' support group that meets regularly with three other principals, and she provides support to her former assistant

> principal, who was recruited to take over another school as an interim acting principal. In addition this principal has led several groups of teachers from her school to observe teaching of reading and writing in university settings and in other schools in the city. She has attended summer staff development institutes in literacy and math with teachers from her school, and in the ensuing school year, she taught a series of demonstration lessons in the classrooms of teachers in her school to work out the complexities of implementing new instructional strategies. She speaks of these activities as part of her routine administrative responsibility as a principal rather than as specific profession development activities.
>
> Another example of how peer advising and intervisitation models come together in the routine business of the district is the monthly principals' conferences. Most districts have regularly scheduled meetings of principals, typically organized by elementary and secondary levels. These routine meetings usually deal primarily with administrative business and rarely with specific instructional issues. In District 2, in contrast, regular principals' meetings—frequently called principals' conferences—are primarily organized around instructional issues and only incidentally around routine administrative business, and they often take place in the schools. At one recent principals' conference which took place in a school, the meeting principals were asked to visit classrooms, observe demonstration lessons, and use a protocol to observe and analyze classroom practice. Another recent principals' conference convened at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The theme was the development and implementation of standards for evaluating students' academic work. The conference consisted of a brief introductory discussion of District 2's activities around standards by Alvarado; an overview of standards work by the standards coordinator, Denis Levine, and a principal, Frank DeStefano, who has taken a leadership role in developing standards in his school [Elmore & Burney, 1999, p. 278].

Other forms of systematic knowledge exchange are being carried out in several LEAs. Fink and Resnick's (2001) description of how principals across the district are developed as instructional leaders provides another compelling account. Five sets of interrelated strategies are used: nested learning communities, principal institutes, leadership for instruction (support and study groups), peer learning, and individual coaching. The effect is to produce large numbers of principals who are instructional leaders.

What are we to make of the recent surge in knowledge sharing and development? Basically, they represent baby steps in moving the teaching profession to one engaged in knowledge sharing with moral purpose. In the final two sections of the paper I place leadership in a broader and more fundamental perspective.

Principal as Leader in a Culture of Change (adapted from Fullan, 2002)

We are now beginning to discover that leaders who have deeper and more lasting impact provide more comprehensive leadership than focussing just on higher standards. Collins' (2001) study Good to Great examined 11 businesses that had a minimum of 15 years of sustained economic performance. Collins identified the Level 5 Executive Leader who "builds enduring greatness" in comparison to the Level 4 Effective Leader "who catalyses commitment to a compelling vision and higher performance standards."

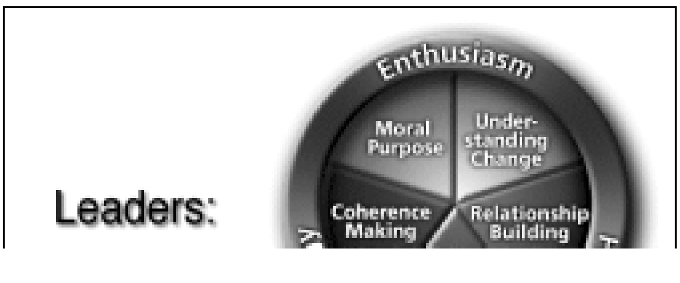
The Hay group has been analysing leadership including the characteristics of highly effective principals. In Australia, for example, they identified thirteen characteristics across four domains: Driving School Improvement; Delivering Through People; Building Commitment; and Creating an Educational Vision (the latter included analytical thinking; and Big Picture thinking) (Hay Group, 1999).

In England, Hay Management Consultants (2000) compared 200 highly effective principals, with 200 senior executives in business. They found that both groups were equally impressive and that “the role of headteacher is stretching, by comparison, to business.” The five domains of leadership they identified were: Teamwork and Developing Others; Drive and Confidence; Vision and Accountability; Influencing Tactics and Politics; and Thinking Styles (conceptual and analytical).

Similarly, Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) claim that emotionally intelligent leaders and emotionally intelligent organizations are essential in complex times. They identify 18 competencies around four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Such leaders are aware of their own emotional makeup, are sensitive and inspiring to others, and are able to deal with day-to-day problems as they work on more fundamental changes in the culture of the organization.

My point is that the principal of the future has to be much more attuned to the big picture, and much more sophisticated at conceptual thinking, and transforming the organization through people and teams. This, too, was my conclusion when I examined successful leadership for businesses and in school systems (Fullan, 2001a). If the goal is sustainable change in the knowledge society, business and education leaders have increasingly more in common. This convergence requires a new mind and action set for leading complex change. Figure 2 depicts this framework. It consists of personal characteristics of energy/enthusiasm and hope, and five core components of leadership: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing and coherence making.

Figure 2 Framework for Leadership



(From Fullan, 2001a)

I will not discuss each of the five core components of leadership here (see Fullan, 2001a). Rather, I focus on the relationship between moral purpose and leadership. In addition to the direct goal of making a difference in the lives of students, moral purpose plays a larger role in transforming and sustaining system change. Within the organization how leaders treat all others is also a component of moral purpose. At a larger level, moral purpose means acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the (social) environment. Let me be absolutely clear. The goal is system improvement (all schools in the district). This means that a school principal has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as he or she is about his/her own school. This is so because sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward. This commitment to the social environment is precisely what the best principals must have (incidentally, the strategies discussed by Fink and Resnick (2001) do indeed foster shared commitment among principals across the district).

Moral purpose means closing the gap between high performing schools and lower performing schools; high performing and lower performing students, by raising the level of achievement of all, while closing the gap. This is the only way for large scale, sustainable reform to occur — and it is moral purpose of the highest order.

I have already discussed the role of knowledge. To recap: The new work on knowledge creation and sharing is central to effective leadership. There are several deep insights here. One is that information (of which we have a glut) only becomes knowledge through a social process. This is why relationships and professional learning communities are essential. Another is that organizations must foster knowledge giving as well as knowledge seeking. We all endorse continuous learning when we say that individuals should constantly add to their knowledge base, but there will be little to add if people are not sharing. A norm of contributing one's knowledge to others is the key to continuous growth for all.

We must now link moral purpose and knowledge sharing. Hargreaves (in press) argues forcefully that the knowledge society can easily become amoral where selfishly seeking new ideas become the draw. For the knowledge society to thrive on a deep and continuous basis, it must have a moral compass. The knowledge society and moral purpose (social responsibility to others and the environment) need each other. It is easy to see why moral purpose will not go very far without knowledge, but I am also saying that the knowledge society literally will not sustain itself without moral qualities. This is not just a value statement; substantively, the technical quality of knowledge and its usability will be superficial unless it is accompanied by social and moral depth.

Leadership and Sustainability

Those of us working on the development of leadership have increasingly turned our attention to sustainability — the likelihood that the overall system can continuously regenerate itself in an ever-improving direction. Because little attention has been paid to sustainability and because the 1990s represented a decade of neglect of supporting, developing and nurturing new leaders, the dearth of leadership has reached crisis proportions. Many states, foundations, and other agencies have made leadership development their number one priority.

My colleague, Andy Hargreaves, and I have been focussing particularly on the relationship between leadership and sustainability which we see as the way to large scale reform. Here I discuss four components of sustainability: (1) leadership and the (social) environment; (2) learning in context; (3) leaders at many levels and leadership succession; and (4) the development of the teaching profession. Here, in other words, I turn to the conditions — policies, programs, infrastructures — under which principals as leaders in a culture of change can be produced and sustained in large numbers.

Leadership and the (Social) Environment

The concept of sustainability was originally applied to concerns about the depletion of resources in the physical environment. Our concern is the depletion of resources in the social and moral environment (see also Hargreaves, in press). This is an abstract concept, so I want to be as practical as possible here. By the social/moral environment I include questions of ‘closing the gap’ of achievement between high and low performers; the development of all schools in the system; and ultimately, the link to the strength of democracy in society. Put directly, if individual leadership does not concern itself with the development of the social/moral environment (as well as the internal development of the school) not only will the system deteriorate but so will one’s own organization over time. There are strategies for cultivating such leadership which essentially involves focusing on the moral purpose of all leaders, while reinforcing it with interaction across leaders — interaction which monitors performance (including closing the gap of achievement) and engages in problem-solving activities therein.

Learning in Context

Attempting to recruit and reward good performance is helpful to the organization, but is not the main point. Providing good training is useful but that, too, is a limited strategy. Elmore (2000:25) makes a similar observation:

> What’s missing in this view [focusing on talented individuals] is any recognition that improvement is more a function of learning to do the right thing in the setting where you work (my emphasis).

Learning in context, for example, occurs when principals are members of intervisitation study teams in a district in which they examine real problems and their solutions as they evolve in their own systems. Learning out of context takes place when principals go to a workshop or conference. The latter can be valuable as an input to further development but it is not the kind of applied learning that really makes a difference.

Learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, is the learning with the greatest payoff because it is more specific (literally applied to the situation) and because it is social (thereby developing shared and collective knowledge and commitments). Learning in context is developing leadership and improving the system as you go. This kind of learning is designed to simultaneously improve the organization and the (social/moral) context. Learning in context is related to sustainability because it improves the system in a way that establishes conditions conducive to continuous development. These conditions include: opportunities to learn from others on-the-job; the daily fostering of current and future leaders; the selective retention of good ideas and best practices; the explicit monitoring of performance, and the like.

Leaders at Many Levels/Leadership Succession

The organization cannot flourish (or at least not for long) by the actions of the top leader alone. The commitment necessary for sustainable improvement must be nurtured up close in the dailiness of organizational behavior, and for that to happen there needs to be many leaders around us. There needs to be leaders at many levels. Learning in context helps to produce such leaders. Furthermore, for leaders to be able to deal with complex problems (what Heifitz (1994) calls Leadership Without Easy Answers) they need at least ten years of cumulative development on the job. Leadership for many, over time, accomplishes just that in a built-in way. In this sense, ultimately your leadership in a culture of sustained change will be judged as effective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you leave behind.

This brings us to leadership succession. As Hargreaves says “Nothing fails to succeed like succession.” Or the shorter, “Nothing fails like succession.” There have been massive numbers of studies of leadership, but little attention to succession. Succession is more likely if there are many leaders at many levels, but also must be addressed in its own right. Organizations at all levels must set their sights on continuous improvement, and for that they must nurture, cultivate, and appoint successive leaders who are moving in a sustained direction.

The good news for most of us is that charismatic leaders are a liability for sustained improvement. Collins’ (2001) compared 11 companies with long-term financial performance profiles (a minimum of 15 continuous years) with other companies that made short-term shifts from good to great, but failed to sustain their gains:

> Larger-than-life, celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside are negatively correlated with taking a company from good to great. Ten of eleven good-to-great-CEOs came from inside the company, whereas the comparison companies tried outside CEOs six times more often (Collins, 2001:10, emphasis in original).

Leaders who built enduring greatness were not high profile, flashy performers, but rather were “individuals who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will” (p. 21). Sustainability depends on many leaders, and thus, the qualities of leadership must be attainable by many, not just a few.

The Teaching Profession

There is a growing shortage of teachers around the world, and the sustainability worry is not the massive exodus associated with demographics, but whether or not we can attract and retain a high quality teaching force. Heroic principals can help compensate for limits in the profession, but by definition such principals will be in the minority. More fundamentally, we will not have quality principals on any scale until we have quality teachers on a large scale, both for reasons of getting the job done, and in light of the fact that quality teachers (on a large scale) form the pool for appointing quality principals (on a large scale).

Once again, individualistic strategies (signing bonuses, pay hikes, etc) will not work, unless the conditions of work are conducive to continuous development and prideful accomplishment. This is decidedly not the case now, and until improving the working conditions of teachers is addressed we have no chance of accomplishing large scale, let alone sustainable, improvement.

In England and Wales, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2001) just completed a Teacher Workload Study for the government. Among other things, they found that principals and teachers work more intensive weeks (but not necessarily more intensive years) than other comparable managers and professionals. In any case, they conclude that if the government is to transform the teaching force that:

> "an essential strand will be to reduce teacher workload, foster increased teacher ownership, and create the capacity to manage change in a sustainable way that can lay the foundation for improved school and pupil performance in the future (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2001:2)

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss what this will entail. My point is that principal leadership is an instrument of this transformation (of the working conditions of teachers), but more to the point of sustainability, the principalship is a beneficiary because we will only get quality principals across the board when we have quality teachers across the board.

In conclusion, knowledge sharing must be seen in relation to the overall development of the intellectual and moral aspects of the teaching profession, and indeed to the fundamental transformation of the profession itself, and correspondingly of the cultures of school systems. The principal as instructional leader has taken us only so far in the quest for continuous improvement. We now must raise our sights and focus on principals as leaders in a culture of change and the associated conditions that will make this possible on a large scale. This will require system wide efforts at the level of schools, communities and districts, as well as radically more enlightened policies and incentives at the level of the state. Sustainability depends on it.

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