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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

DIGGING DEEPER

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.”

DIGGING DEEPER

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.

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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.

