While leaders may desire or have been told that they must put certain structures into place in order to enhance their leadership capabilities, they may not know exactly what structures are needed, or the skills that are required for implementation. Authors Michael Fullan and Lyle Kirtman go beyond simply telling you what you need to put in place to enhance leadership—they detail the route to successful leadership.

Coherent School Leadership will show you how to combine the components of Fullan’s Coherence Framework (the Framework) with Kirtman’s 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders (the Competencies) to drive coherence—the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work and how it impacts the results desired for student achievement—to change the culture in schools from reactive to proactive. Fullan and Kirtman, whose work is based in practice, will

- Show you how to use specific competencies to drive coherence.
- Provide examples that show how other leaders have successfully created coherence.
- Guide you through the day-to-day distractions/stresses so that you can stay on course.
- Show you how to use the Competencies in relation to the Framework.

Taking a world view of the forces that could destabilize education and the work of coherence, Coherent School Leadership will show how proven frameworks such as the Framework and the Competencies can help you cope with even the most complex scenarios.
We’ve each spent more than three decades developing our own key theories of change—built from practice. For us, most insights come from close work through ongoing partnerships with those at all levels of the education system attempting to bring about positive change. Although a book that we wrote (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016) brought these ideas and insights about positive change management together, it didn’t do so at as deep a level as this book will. In this book, we will turn our attention to what we didn’t discuss previously—how to create coherence systems in today’s fragmented and reactive world of education. Here we will discuss how to create coherence in both structure and behaviors and equip leaders to continuously improve their craft to provide the learning environment that students need to be successful in a fast-paced, dynamic world.

Fullan and Quinn

Fullan’s latest consolidation of ideas can be found in Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Based on close work with schools, districts, and states over the past decade, Fullan
and Quinn concluded that organizations are most likely to suffer from fragmentation and overload when achieving focus was a problem. However, good focus is more than simple alignment; it must be supported by clarity and coherence. They defined coherence as “the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work and how it impacts the results desired for student achievement” (p. 1). In other words, it is fully and solely subjective.

People often confuse alignment—making sure things are in a logical order—with coherence—the emotional state of grasping the clear meaning of a phenomenon.

To make it more challenging, coherence, in order to be effective, must be shared (i.e., the group must have a clear sense of where they want to go and are going). This is what makes it difficult to achieve. With all the commotion and churn, people have to obtain a good, subjective sense of their work life and organization and, to a large degree, they must share it. Fullan and Quinn, through their work with school districts and state systems, concluded that coherence consists of four interactive components—focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability—and that leadership, which is at the core the framework, drills down and deals with the components individually and interactively (see Figure 1.1).

The first component of the Coherence Framework (the Framework)—focusing direction—is about vision and goals and consists of strategies to begin the coherence process. Developing the direction in practice requires purposefully cultivating collaborative cultures that begin to develop the essential capacities, at both the individual and collective levels, that will be needed going forward (the second component). The third component—deepening learning (the pedagogy or learning and teaching skills to engage and help students learn)—is at the heart of successful change.

They also found that traditional approaches to accountability (the fourth component), which emphasize tests and corrective action, were not effective at stimulating progress and that what worked was a focus on a few ambitious goals, collaborative work in relation to those goals, good engaging pedagogy, and accountability that developed within the group and, in turn, related to external accountability requirements.
Finally, Fullan and Quinn found that coherence is not static—not something that one can achieve and it's done—but is continuous. There are three things that make coherence continuous:

- People come and go in an organization and each personnel change represents a coherence-making challenge and opportunity;
- The environment or context constantly changes in unpredictable ways—new technologies, population shifts, the economy, the future of jobs, climate, diversity, global and regional conflict, and the like; and, hopefully,
- People in an organization get new ideas—they innovate or engage in continuous improvement.
Overall, practitioners loved the Framework. It seemed to provide an answer to the problem of what to do with so many pieces that did not hang together. But, like most things that seem to be too good to be true, it was! Practitioners asked, “How do we get and keep coherence if we don’t have it?” Although one could make some progress by working directly with the four components (the components) of the Framework, that was not enough. So, rather than focus solely on the components of coherence, Fullan and Quinn considered the skills and competencies that would be required to develop and maintain coherence. It was at this point that they decided to revisit Kirtman’s 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders and identify how to incorporate them into promoting organizational coherence and sustainable change.

**Kirtman**

The observation of highly effective leaders in action toward identifying the skills that were associated with their success led to the development of Kirtman’s 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders (the Competencies). The characteristics that the observed leaders shared were the ability to: challenge the status quo, build trust through clear communications and expectations, create a commonly owned plan for success, focus on team over self, maintain a high sense of urgency regarding change and sustainable results, commit to continuous improvement of self and the organization, and build external networks/partnerships—in effect, the competencies that constitute the leadership core of the Framework.

**Fullan and Kirtman: A Marriage of Frameworks**

The Competencies, as validated as they are, focused on the individual leader. There was a need for a solution that connected knowledge about individual leadership and organizational effectiveness. Hence, this book.

The Competencies do not “function” in the same manner—that is, some competencies “push” change and some “pull” change (see Figure 1.2).
Competency 7—Builds external networks/partnerships—cannot cleanly be categorized as a “push” or “pull” competency. In some instances, a partnership may involve bringing an external party into the school or district toward benefiting the school or district and in other instances, a partnership may be beneficial for both the external organization and the district.

We can then explicitly link the components of the Framework and the Competencies (see Figure 1.3).

We know from our work on leading change that effective change requires that the components of the Framework be combined with leadership competencies that both “push” and “pull.”

**FIGURE 1.2**

**Competencies That Push Change and Competencies That Pull Change**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies That PUSH Change</th>
<th>Competencies That PULL Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Challenges the status quo</td>
<td>3. Creates a commonly owned plan for success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Builds trust through clear communications and expectations</td>
<td>4. Focuses on team over self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Has a high sense of urgency for change and sustainable results</td>
<td>6. Is committed to continuous improvement of self and the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Builds external networks/partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note

Competency 7—Builds external networks/partnerships—cannot cleanly be categorized as a “push” or “pull” competency. In some instances, a partnership may involve bringing an external party into the school or district toward benefiting the school or district and in other instances, a partnership may be beneficial for both the external organization and the district.

A SCHOOL IN TROUBLE

An urban school in the northeast was declared underperforming based on the statewide assessment. The school was not improving with the compliance requirements of the state. The teachers felt defeated and were embarrassed to be associated with the school—the
lowest-performing school in the district. The superintendent suggested that the principal try a new approach to increase test scores. The principal used the Framework and focused on each of the components. The state provided guidance on setting clear direction for success based on data analysis. A focus on literacy was the core area for sustainable success.

**FIGURE I.3**

Linking the Components of the Framework and the Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coherence Framework Components</th>
<th>Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focusing direction</td>
<td>Challenges the status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating collaborative cultures</td>
<td>Builds trust through clear communications and expectations; focuses on team over self; creates a commonly owned plan for success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deepening learning</td>
<td>Builds external networks/partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing accountability</td>
<td>Is committed to continuous improvement of self and the organization; has a high sense of urgency for change and sustainable results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collaboration is where many districts go wrong. Many systems, ironically, mandate collaboration and adopt the strategy known as professional learning communities (PLCs). The Boston Consulting Group (BSG) conducted a study of teacher learning funded by the Gates Foundation and presented its findings in a report entitled *Teachers Know Best* (2014). The BSG found that although a high percentage of administrators valued PLCs as a strategy for improving schools, a much smaller percentage of teachers embraced PLCs. At the same time, when teachers were asked how they liked to learn, they named many of
the putative elements of PLCs—working with and learning from other teachers, examining student work together, and so on. What was happening in the case at hand was that the district—the urban northeast district—had a history of teachers working in silos. In fact, teachers of grades that were performing at expected levels did not want to participate in whole-school meetings.

When the state mandated collaboration, the message fell on unreceptive ears. It was only when the principal received a coach who helped her develop a more sophisticated approach to collaboration that a breakthrough occurred. In effect, the intervention began to integrate the organizational solution—the Framework—with the competency skill set—the Competencies. Essentially the intervention enabled the focus on a “push” competency—challenges the status quo (Competency 1)—to begin the change process. This required working with the principal’s leadership team on challenging the current practices in the school that were blocking success. The state’s focus on compliance—you must collaborate—was given secondary status. The principal, in order to get the needed support of the leadership team, needed to immediately bring to the fore a “pull” competency—she chose builds trust through clear communications and expectations (Competency 2). The principal was transparent regarding the data, concerns, the areas on which she needed to work in order to be a better leader, and how she needed her leadership team to help her.

The next competency employed to “pull in” the rest of the school—creates a commonly owned plan for success (Competency 3)—serves to mobilize the whole staff. In this particular case, the plan was facilitated by the principal and the assistant principal with strong input from her leadership team and team of teachers. This planning process began the true work of collaboration (Component two) and coherence. This collaborative planning process and the honest and open conversations that took place across the school shifted the accountability (Component four) focus from one driven by the state to a plan in which all staff took ownership.

A SCHOOL NO LONGER IN TROUBLE

The school’s student achievement increased by more than 50 percent in one year. The plan for success that was driven by the state was
now owned by the whole school. The accountability (Component four) was intrinsically driven. Today, the principal would say that the reason her school succeeded was not about curriculum and instruction, and certainly not about compliance, but that it was about a “pull” competency—*focuses on team over self* (Competency 4). She now had a leadership team with which to share the leadership load. Yes, the deeper learning (Component three) was critical. However, it received traction for sustainable improvement through collaboration and teamwork.

As we’ve shown, the combination of the components of the Framework and the Competencies is the route to success. We recommend using the Framework as the organizing mechanism and the Competencies as a checklist and guide to developing skills of individuals and the team. (If you choose to use Kirtman’s diagnostic instruments to build the Competencies, the components of the Framework must be the main organizer.)

**The Organization of This Book**

This book will go beyond typical leadership books that tell you what you need to put in place to enhance leadership. We will show you how to use specific competencies to drive coherence. We will provide examples that show how other leaders have successfully created coherence and used the leadership competencies to build sustainability. Although the examples provide models, you must extract what is relevant for your culture to begin this work. While our “how-to” steps will provide a platform, the order and magnitude of the steps will depend on your needs and your school community or district. The flow of the remaining chapters is as follows.

In *Chapter 2, The 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders in Action*, we will show you how to use the Competencies in relation to the Framework. This chapter will also provide leadership principles of the 21st century that will help you apply the Competencies. For example, in the past, challenging the status quo (Competency 1) tended to be more top-down. In today’s world of building capacity, the faculty/staff need to understand why the status quo is being challenged and be part of the continuous learning process.
Chapter 3, The Coherence Framework in Action, will explore what it would look like to have a truly coherent district. Would everyone be using all seven competencies? How does the behavior of the adults align with the behavior we expect from students? How does each component of the Framework look when it is in place? How does the district hire leaders who believe in and add to the skill base of coherence-making? Michael's international perspective allows us to bring international examples to our learning and application of best practices.

How can coherence stay on track despite systems overload, competing initiatives, day-to-day crises with student behavioral issues, adult personality conflicts, parent concerns, sudden budget cuts, school board personal agendas, tedious compliance requirements, and fragmentation that constantly destabilizes an organization? In Chapter 4, Implementation and Execution Is Key, we will discuss the often-neglected expansion of leadership to include management. As well, we will outline the steps to effectively implement change and improvement in a school or district to create sustainable results and show why effective implementation and often-neglected execution skills are key to forming the foundation for coherent leadership.

The concept of coherence is becoming more and more critical because the world is becoming more complex, and less and less predictable. This means that new leadership that can effectively work in the area of coherence-making is required. As mentioned previously, there are three things that make coherence continuous (people come and go in an organization, the environment or context changes in unpredictable ways, people in an organization get new ideas). In Chapter 5, Leadership for the Future, we will show that leaders of the future will need to become learners first, co-learners always, and learn to work interactively to forge the future through joint determination with those they lead. This chapter will consider forces that could both destabilize and integrate coherence in the future. We will take a world view of the forces that could destabilize education and the work of coherence—from the technology, political, pedagogy, and policy arenas—and that will help leaders stay ahead of the curve.

The net effect of this book will be to show how proven frameworks such as the Framework and the Competencies can help you cope with even the
most complex scenarios. Our work comes from practice. The fact that practice is going to become even more unpredictable and constantly disrupted means that leaders will need grounded frameworks that can help them both influence and learn from the new world that is currently unfolding. Be ready for ever-greater challenges. Learners make the best leaders—this is the causal direction you should strive for.
References


About the Authors

Michael Fullan, OC, is the former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto. He is co-leader of the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning global initiative (npdl.global). Recognized as a worldwide authority on educational reform, he advises policymakers and local leaders on how to achieve the moral purpose of all children learning. Fullan received the Order of Canada in December 2012. He holds honorary doctorates from several universities around the world.

Fullan is a prolific, award-winning author whose books have been published in many languages. His latest books are: The Principal: Three Keys for Maximizing Impact; Coherence: Putting the Right Drivers in Action (with Joanne Quinn); Deep Learning: Engage the World, Change the World (with Joanne Quinn and Joanne McEachen); Surreal Change: The Real Life of Transforming Public Education (autobiography); Core Governance (with Davis Campbell); and Nuance: Why Some Leaders Succeed and Others Fail. For more information on books, articles, and videos, please go to www.michaelfullan.ca.

Lyle Kirtman has been a leadership development consultant for more than 30 years. As CEO of Future Management Systems Inc., he has worked on developing leaders to increase results for students in 350 school districts in 15 states. Kirtman’s publications are influencing educators nationally and internationally. His books,
Leadership and Teams: The Missing Piece of the Educational Reform Puzzle and Leadership: Key Competencies for Whole System Change (Fullan) have influenced educational practice throughout the United States.

Kirtman’s focus on innovation in education is a key element of his presentations, keynotes, and publications. He was able to help former Governor Patrick in Massachusetts by chairing the Governor’s strategic planning task force on innovation in education. Kirtman brings a unique background to his leadership work in education through his consulting experience in the federal government (EPA), health care (Massachusetts General Hospital), universities (Harvard University), and in the corporate (Cisco Systems) and nonprofit (United Way) worlds. He has also worked as a senior administrator in the central office for the Boston Public Schools in the organizational development and leadership field for school operations.

Kirtman’s field-based research has already made major contributions to the educational leadership arena through his 7 Competencies for Highly Effective Leaders, the use of leadership assessments for self-reflection and hiring, and the importance of getting a C in compliance to increase focus on results for student achievement.

Kirtman earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the State University of New York (SUNY) and a master’s degree in counseling with a concentration in career development from SUNY and Fairfield University, Connecticut.
Related ASCD Resources

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Leading Change Together: Developing Educator Capacity Within Schools and Systems by Eleanor Drago-Severson, Jessica Blum-DeStefano (#117027)

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Changing the Way You Teach: Improving the Way Students Learn by Giselle Martin-Kniep and Joanne Picone-Zocchia (#108001)

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